

5

Spreadable Media How Audiences Create Value and Meaning in a Networked Economy

Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins

Every time a new consumer joins this media landscape, a new producer joins as well because the same equipment – phones, computers – lets you consume and produce. It is as if when you bought a book they threw in the printing press for free. It's like you have a phone that can turn into a radio if you pushed the right buttons.

Clay Shirky, TED conference (2005)

The people formerly known as the audience wish to inform media people of our existence, and of a shift in power that goes with the platform shift you've all heard about. Think of passengers on your ship who got a boat of their own. The writing readers. The viewers who picked up a camera. The formerly atomized listeners who with modest effort can connect with each other and gain the means to speak – to the world, as it were. Now we understand that met with ringing statements like these many media people want to cry out in the name of reason herself: If all would speak who shall be left to listen? Can you at least tell us that?

Jay Rosen (2006)

By now, we've all heard the news – trumpeted to us via blogs and tweets – that web 2.0 has set us free! Powerful new production tools and distribution channels are enabling the mute to speak and the invisible to be seen, are realizing long-deferred hopes for a more participatory culture, embodying the “technologies of freedom” predicted so many years ago by Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1970/2000) and Ithiel de Sola Pool (1984), fulfilling John Fiske's (1994) claims about ongoing

“technostruggles” between “the people” and “the power bloc.” In short, all of our dreams are coming true.

Not so fast, warn Jose Van Dijck and David Nieborg in their essay, “Wikinomics and Its Discontents” (2009). They dissect and critique recent web 2.0 manifestos (including Jenkins 2006) that describe fundamental shifts in the economic and cultural logics shaping the media landscape. Citing a Forrester survey of American adult online consumers which found that 52 percent were “inactives” and only 13 were “actual creators” of so-called user-generated content, Van Dijck and Nieborg conclude, “The active participation and creation of digital content seems to be much less relevant than the crowds they attract.... Mass creativity, by and large, is consumptive behavior by a different name” (p. 855). What, they ask, has changed – if anything – in a world where “the majority of users are in fact those who watch or download content contributed by others” and where this segment of “spectators and inactives” represents the most “appealing demographic to site owners and advertisers” (Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009, p. 861). They find the shift away from a language of *audiences* or *consumers* and toward *users* profoundly misleading, since the latter term merges passive (“merely clicking”) and active (“blogging and uploading videos”) modes of engagement.

In this chapter, we will do what academics do best – complicate things. In particular, we are going to complicate the recurring fantasy of a world without “gatekeepers” or “audiences.” We also want to complicate arguments that the “digital revolution” has amounted to little more than a rebranding and repackaging of consumer culture. Rather than seeing the changes the internet has wrought as transforming audiences into producers and “setting them free” from the tyranny of one-way chains of communication, we argue these changes are shifting how we value audiences, how we understand what audiences do, and how they fit into the networks of capital, both economic and cultural, that constitute the current media landscape.

Even though we are excited about the prospect of lowering the barriers of entry to cultural production, we think audiences do important work as audiences and not simply as producers. We believe that forms of participation closer to “merely clicking” than to “blogging and uploading videos” still reflect a changed relationship between media makers and their audiences. Unlike Rosen, we believe that there are still people who are “listening” and “watching” the media produced by others, but, like Yochai Benkler (2006), we argue that they listen and watch differently in a world where they know they have the potential to contribute than in a world where they are locked out of active meaningful participation.

In focusing on adult populations, Van Dijck and Nieborg may underestimate some changes in cultural production. A 2007 survey by the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life found that 64 percent of American teens online had produced media, with 39 percent circulating that content beyond friends and family (Lenhart et al. 2007). Over the past five years, Pew has seen dramatic increases in youth media production (more than 10 percent), suggesting that the trend is

toward more and more active participation, not toward a return to more traditional patterns of consumption. Yet, Van Dijck and Nieborg are right that we do not yet – and may never – live in a world where every reader is already a writer, every consumer already a producer, and every audience already Rosen’s “people formerly known as.” Indeed, we respect Matt Hills’s (2002) warning that, at times in our efforts to redeem fans from the old mass culture critiques, the concept of “cultural producer” has been “pushed to do too much work” in the hopes of “removing the taint of consumption and consumerism” (p. 30).

On the other hand, there is a risk of making DIY media making the be-all and end-all of participatory culture, reducing other kinds of participation – those involving evaluating, appraising, critiquing, and recirculating content – to “consumptive behavior by a different name.” This is a particular risk of the “ladder of participation” models prepared by groups such as Forrester, which put more dramatic and visible modes of production higher up the scale. In doing so, such hierarchies ascribe greater “participation” to those who create cultural artifacts, seeing their fellow participants as less engaged and suggesting that those who engage in no productivity are “inactives” and “lurkers.”

Yet, as Van Dijck and Nieborg rightly point out, every mouse click or video view is logged and even these inactive lurkers are ultimately (unwillingly?) generating data to refine content delivery systems or recommendation engines, and ultimately drive up the popularity of online media businesses. The emergence of social networks transforms each of these everyday acts of consumption, giving them greater public visibility, increasing their social dimensions, and ultimately expanding their economic and cultural impact.

At its core, this chapter is about how value and worth get appraised and ascribed through circulation. We don’t mean the kinds of circulation basically concerned with consumers as receptacles for content both mass produced and mass distributed. The consumer is an eyeball in front of the screen (in television terms), a butt in the seats (in film or sports terms), or whatever other body part media companies hope to grab next. Instead, we are concerned with a far more participatory and much messier understanding of circulation; what happens when a large number of people make active decisions to pass along an image, song, or bit of video that has taken their fancy to various friends, family members, or larger social networks? Increasingly, all of us – media “producers” and consumers alike – are also media appraisers and distributors.

We are proposing the concept of “spreadable” media¹ as a way to understand how contemporary audience practices produce value. *Spreadability* represents an alternative to now widely deployed metaphors which describe how audiences engage with content. Some, like viral media or memes, also seek to explain how media circulates. Others, such as “stickiness,” hold onto the perceived value in aggregating eyeballs to a particular location. All three of these concepts, however, underestimate audience members’ active agency in shaping what messages spread, the routes they take, and the communities they reach. Spreadability stresses the

technical affordances that make it easier to circulate some kinds of media content than others, the social networks that link people together through the exchange of meaningful bytes, and the diverse motives that drive people to share media.

How Susan Spread

The strange case of Susan Boyle, the Scottish village matron who rose to sudden fame and became a top-level recording star primarily on the basis of pass-along content, aptly illustrates spreadability at work. If nothing else, Boyle now supercedes hipster rock groups like Arctic Monkeys and OK Go as the poster child for so-called viral media. But the Boyle case also illustrates how the collective choices of audiences make content culturally meaningful, socially fungible, and economically valuable.

Thirty-two million viewers tuned in to watch the 2009 season finale of *American Idol*, making it one of the most highly viewed two-hour blocks on broadcast television that year. By contrast, the original Susan Boyle video, depicting her initial performance on *Britain's Got Talent*, was streamed more than 86 million times on YouTube (at the time of this writing). But these are figures reflecting the viewership of the original upload only; YouTube is a place where success often encourages duplication. Indeed, a cursory glance showed more than 75 different uploaded copies of Boyle's audition performance of the song "I Dreamed a Dream," available on the service and uploaded by users from Brazil, Japan, the United States, the Netherlands, and various parts of the United Kingdom. There are edited copies, high-definition copies, and copies with closed captioning and subtitles in various languages. Many of these versions have themselves been viewed millions of times. And this scan considers only YouTube alone, ignoring the other large online video sharing platforms such as Chinese site Tudou (where a quick glance shows at least 43 copies), or Dailymotion (where there are 20 easily found copies of her first audition video). No matter how you look at it, the viewership of the Susan Boyle video dwarfs that of the highest-rated show on American broadcast television.

American Idol embodies how television was being reconceptualized during an earlier moment of media convergence (Jenkins 2006). This television show has driven viewers across multiple media platforms, with content designed to sustain the interests of casual and dedicated viewers alike, and its voting mechanism constitutes an explicit invitation for viewer participation. *American Idol* has remained one of the highest-rated series on American television for the better part of a decade and has become a global franchise with its format duplicated everywhere from Australia to India, from Scandinavia to the Arab world.

Britain's Got Talent is, in many regards, *Idol's* sister program: it is created by the same production company (FremantleMedia), also featuring prickly judge Simon Cowell and following a somewhat similar mechanic in winnowing down amateur

contestants.² Further, the episodes break down into bite-sized chunks, melodramatic mini-dramas that can be appreciated outside of the program's larger framework. *Britain's Got Talent*, however, has a particular penchant for the Cinderella story, featuring unlikely – in this case, eccentric and middle-aged – contestants with remarkable abilities who finally gain recognition. This scenario worked the previous season around Paul Potts, a gap-toothed opera singer from a working-class background. The Susan Boyle video introduced a character, set up ridiculing expectations, swept the rug out from under those expectations with a spectacular performance of a popular West End song, and then showed viewers the reactions of both judges and audience. It was content ready-made to spread.

While Boyle's performance was broadcast in Great Britain, it was not offered commercially to viewers in the United States and the many other parts of the world. Despite this, once it surfaced online the video's circulation and discussion occurred at a feverish pace: we were seeing broadcast content with grassroots circulation. Boyle's entry into the American market was shaped by the conscious decisions of millions of everyday people who choose to pass her video along to friends, families, workmates, and fellow fans.

We can't reduce Boyle to a by-product of the old broadcast model. The Susan Boyle phenomenon would not have played out the same way if there wasn't YouTube, if there weren't online social networks, if there wasn't Twitter. YouTube makes it easy to embed content on blogs or Facebook, services such as Bit.ly allow supporters to reduce the length of a URL to something that will fit in a tweet, and Twitter allows them to alert their social networks. Rather than focus on individual technologies and their effects, however, our focus is on the integrated system of participatory channels. Susan also spread because the participating public has collectively and individually become literate about social networking, because we are linked to more people and have more regular contact with them, and because we now often interact with each other through sharing meaningful bits of media content.

The most popular YouTube version reached 2.5 million views in the first 72 hours and reached 103 million views on 20 different websites within the first nine days of its release. Meanwhile, Boyle's Wikipedia page attracted nearly half a million views within the first week. What allowed the Susan Boyle video to travel so far so fast was that it could travel so far so fast. Most of the people who saw and decided to pass the video along enjoyed a sense of discovery. They could anticipate sharing Boyle's performance with people who probably hadn't seen it already, precisely because the content was not yet on commercial television. The fans found Susan Boyle before the networks did, and there was an infrastructure in place – across multiple communication systems – that allowed anyone to share this content with minimal effort.

Choosing to spread media involves a series of socially embedded decisions: that the content is worth watching; that it is worth sharing with others; that the content might interest specific people we know; that the best way to spread that content is

through a specific channel of communication; and, often, that the content should be circulated with a particular message attached. However, even if no message is attached at all, just receiving a piece of media content from someone we know gives the text a range of new potential meanings. As we listen, read, or view that material, we think about not only what the producers might have meant but also what the person who sent it our way was trying to communicate.

Going Viral

The top-down hierarchies of the broadcast era now coexist with a diverse network of platforms offering grassroots participation. As marketers and media companies struggle to make sense of their role in this transformed media landscape, the idea that media content might “go viral” – spreading through audiences, not via purposeful sharing but by infecting person after person who comes into contact with it – has emerged as a popular cultural logic. Viral media captures the speed with which new ideas circulate, while at the same time seeming to account for the perceived randomness and unpredictability of the things which pique the public imagination – be they videos of cats playing keyboards or Photoshopped pictures of world leaders. The promise is simple, if deceptive – create a media virus and watch it infect the public.

In the marketing world, the viral media analogy can be traced in part back to the success of Hotmail, which, by automatically appending to every message a short invitation for recipients to sign up for the service, grew with exponential success.³ Steve Jurvetson and Tim Draper (1997), whose venture capital firm had invested in the company, wrote that Hotmail had spread like a virus. Eric Ransdell, in a 1999 piece for *Fast Company*, wrote, “The email service has spread around the world with the ferocity of an epidemic. By passing along emails with a clear (but inoffensive) marketing message, current users were infecting potential users. And the rate of infection increased rather than decreased as time went on.”

Significantly, Jurvetson and company suggest the spread of Hotmail *resembled* a biological epidemic, not that the medium actually *was* a virus. Rushkoff’s book *Media Virus* (1994) does, however, advance such a proposition. Rushkoff describes media texts as Trojan horses, packages that surreptitiously bring messages into our minds: “These media events are not *like* viruses. They *are* viruses,” the only intention of which is “to spread its own code as far and wide as possible – from cell to cell and from organism to organism” (p. 9; emphasis in original). There is an implicit and often explicit proposition that this spread of ideas and messages can occur without the user’s consent and perhaps against their conscious resistance: people are duped into passing a hidden agenda while circulating compelling content. Rushkoff describes contemporary culture as a “datasphere” or “mediaspace” – “a new territory for human interaction, economic expansion, and especially social

and political machination” (p. 4) – that has arisen because of the rapid expansion of communication and media technologies. And it is through this interconnected system that viral media spread:

Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But, instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediaspace. The ‘protein shell’ of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style or even a pop hero – as long as it can catch our attention. Any one of these media virus shells will search out the receptive nooks and crannies in popular culture and stick on anywhere it is noticed. Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of *ideological code* – not genes, but a conceptual equivalent we now call “memes.” (pp. 9–10; emphasis in original)

Rushkoff links this still emerging concept of viral media to the famed British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’s notion of the “meme,” which Dawkins introduces in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Dawkins proposes the meme as the cultural equivalent to the gene – the smallest evolutionary unit. He proposes, “Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission,” (p. 189) and,

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (p. 192)

For advertisers and those in the creative industries, this is an especially attractive idea: create a designer germ, and turn the hapless public into the unknowing carriers of your message. In a moment when the meme pool – the cultural soup which Dawkins describes as the site where memes grow – is overflowing with ideas, being able to create or harness a meme allows an advertiser to ride participatory culture. At its heart, this idea absents human beings (and their agency) from our understanding of how content spreads. While Dawkins stresses that memes (like genes) aren’t wholly independent agents, such notions often describe such content as “self-replicating.”

As we saw in the Boyle example, people make conscious choices about what media they are passing along as well as the forms and forums within which they circulate them. Audiences have shown a remarkable ability to turn advertising slogans and jingles against their originating companies. They do so by writing fan fiction or editing fanvids, but they also do so by forwarding a clip along to their mates with an ironic comment or even simply a smiley face. Talk of “memes” and “media viruses” gave a false sense of security at a time when the old attention economy is in flux and in the face of widespread uncertainty about what might motivate audience engagement in this new context. Such terms promise a pseudo-scientific model of audience behavior, one which keeps power firmly in

the hands of media producers. In practice, they mystify the process, obscuring the complex factors now shaping the creation of value through the circulation of content within these new social networks.

The concept of “spreadability” preserves what was useful about the earlier models – the idea that the movement of messages from person to person, and from community to community, over time increases their effectiveness and expands their impact. This new “spreadable” model allows us to avoid the language of “infection” and “self-replication” which overestimates the power of media companies and underestimates the agency of audiences. In this emerging model, audiences play an active role in “spreading” content: their choices, their investments, and their actions determine what gets valued.

Spreadability assumes a world where mass content gets repositioned as it enters different niche communities. When material is produced according to a one-size-fits-all model, it necessarily imperfectly fits the needs of any given audience. As content spreads, then, it gets remade, either literally through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively via its insertion into ongoing conversations and interactions. Such repurposing doesn’t necessarily blunt or distort the original communicator’s goals. Rather, it may allow the message to reach new constituencies where it would otherwise have gone unheard. Yet by the same token, it is also not necessarily reproduced uncritically, since people have their own varied agendas for spreading the content. No longer “hosts” or “carriers,” consumers become grassroots curators and advocates for personally and socially meaningful materials. Under these conditions, media content which remains fixed in location and static in form doesn’t generate public interest and thus drops out of these ongoing conversations. In short, if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead!

Spreadability Made Simple

Let’s identify some basic characteristics of the spreadable media model.

First, spreadability seeks to *motivate and facilitate* the efforts of fans and enthusiasts to “spread” the word. Contrary to speculation that the Boyle phenomenon would be short-lived, the release of her initial album, *I Dream a Dream* (Columbia Records), months later generated record advance sales, surpassing the Beatles and Whitney Houston on Amazon’s charts (Lapowsky 2009). In fact, Boyle sold more than 700,000 copies in her first week of release, swamping 2009 *American Idol* winner Adam Lambert with the largest opening week sales of any album released that year, and she remained in the top ranks for several months. As Columbia Records chair Steve Barnett explained, “The reason that this record really did what it did, was that people wanted to get it and own it, to feel like they’re a part of it” (Sisario 2009). Barnett’s comments suggest the deeper investment audiences often feel toward performers they helped to discover and promote.

Second, spreadability seeks to expand audience awareness by *dispersing the content* across many potential points of contact. Susan Boyle would have reached nowhere close to as many viewers if ITV or FremantleMedia had locked down the content, rather than allowing Boyle's video to come at us through every available participatory channel. Most of us would have had no clue that *Britain's Got Talent* was on the air, let alone that there was a fascinating personal drama to be experienced, if Boyle's video had not spread throughout our social networks.

Third, spreadability depends on creating a *diversified experience* as brands enter into the spaces where people already live and interact. As the Susan Boyle video was circulated, its footage was inserted into all kinds of ongoing conversations. Because of Boyle's explicit acknowledgment of Christianity, she became the focus of online prayer circles. Science blogs discussed how someone with that body could produce such a sound. Karaoke singers debated her technique and reported on an incident when she was thrown out of a karaoke bar because she was now seen as a professional performer. Reality television blogs debated whether her success would have been possible on US television given the rules of *American Idol* which exclude people her age from competing. Fashion blogs critiqued and dissected her makeover for subsequent television appearances. Boyle's video circulated because she was meaningful on many different levels, and, after a while, all of this started to "go meta," so that people were spreading Susan's videos to talk about how fast they were spreading.

Fourth, spreadability maps the flow of ideas through *social networks*. Boyle's circulation represents the expanded communication power which now rests in the hands of communities of participants defined around a wide array of different interests and affiliations. Mizuko Ito et al. (2009) draw an important distinction between friendship-based and interest-based networks. Participants are motivated by different goals depending on which kind of online community we are describing. In the case of Boyle, some people were passing her along as a gesture of friendship (something like a Facebook gift), while others attached her to their pet interest (religion, motherhood, Karaoke, science, reality television, British culture, and so forth).

Under spreadability, grassroots intermediaries become advocates for brands and evangelists for content. By *grassroots intermediaries*, we mean unauthorized and self-appointed parties who actively shape the flow of messages within their community, often becoming strong advocates for brands, performers, and franchises.

Fifth, spreadability restores some aspects of the *push model* through relying on audiences to circulate the content within their own communities. A spreadable message comes to us: we don't have to seek it out. Most of us probably encountered the Boyle video because someone sent a link or embedded it in their Facebook feed or their blog. The Boyle video came to us in the middle of other social exchanges, much as an advertisement comes at us as part of the flow of television content. Yet, there's a difference – when an advertisement is pushed at us, it feels like an intrusion or an interruption. When we receive spreadable media content

from a discerning friend, we often welcome it because it has been framed in regard to the interests that drew us to that network in the first place.

Sixth, spreadability depends on *increased collaboration* across and even a blurring of the distinction between economic and noneconomic exchanges. While the circulation of the Boyle video no doubt created the market for her album, it was not authorized by the production company or network. Boyle stars in a British program which had no commercial distribution in the United States. Americans couldn't turn on a television network – cable or broadcast – and watch the next installment of *Britain's Got Talent*. They couldn't go on Hulu and stream that content. And they couldn't go on iTunes and buy episodes. Market demand was dramatically outpacing supply. A potential US audience could, however, consume illegal downloads of the series via various torrents, video-sharing sites, or fan distribution sites, which could circulate the content without negotiating international deals. In some cases, socially networked advertisers and content providers may actively solicit our participation, but the public is participating now, whether producers, networks, or brands want us to or not. The result is an ongoing negotiation around what forms of participation are acceptable and how much the public is willing to tolerate constraints on their participation.

And, finally, spreadability takes for granted an almost infinite number of often *localized and many times temporary networks*, through which media content circulates. The broadcast mind-set assumes one-to-many communication; the spreadability paradigm assumes that compelling content will circulate through any and all available channels, moving us from peripheral awareness to active engagement. What some marketers are calling transmedia planning seeks to coordinate the dispersal of this information by systematically tapping a broad range of media channels, but the same process is at play at the grassroots level, with or without active coordination.

Looking at the way Susan Boyle spread around the Internet (and the globe), we can see the complex modes of audience-ship that emerge within participatory culture. It isn't simply that Susan Boyle is an amateur who has become a producer – indeed, her performance on *Britain's Got Talent* falls well within a traditional framework for the production of a particular type of television (the talent quest), and in the end, she becomes a recording star because a record company offered her a contract based on her media exposure. But the value of Boyle as a performer emerged through many different types of audience behaviors as people forged connections through and spoke to the world about what they were “consuming.”

Understanding Appraisal

So, all of this begs the question: is spreadability “consumptive behavior by a different name,” to return to Van Dijck and Nieborg's critique of participatory culture? From one point of view, what we have described here is still very much consumption and

not production. These audience members might have created a great number of things – blog posts, Tweets, YouTube comments, emails, and fan groups on Facebook – but mostly they were appraising and evaluating content produced by others.

While we often use the concept of *appraisal* in an economic sense to talk about the relative exchange value of different objects, the same term gets used to discuss processes of curation. For instance, appraisals performed in archives or museums may be just as concerned with the historical, cultural, or symbolic value of an artifact, and often with whether the artifact is worth preserving for future generations, as it is with the item's monetary value. Here, museums and archives may be reluctant to take gifts donated by the general public if the costs of preserving an artifact exceed its symbolic worth or cultural significance. As we talk about the various forms of grassroots appraisal, we need to recognize the ways that these two notions – assessing economic value and determining cultural or sentimental worth – are increasingly connected, as the artifact (whether a physical object or a media clip) travels through different kinds of exchanges involving groups who are applying different systems of evaluation and who may be pursuing fundamentally divergent goals and interests.

Our distinction between value and worth comes from Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift* (1983). Hyde sees commodity culture and the gift economy as alternative systems for measuring the merits of a transaction. He writes, "A commodity has value.... A gift has worth" (p. 78). By *value*, Hyde primarily means "exchange value," a rate at which goods and services can be exchanged for money. Such exchanges are measurable and quantifiable because they represent agreed upon standards and measurements. By *worth*, he means those qualities we associate with things on which "you can't put a price." Sometimes, we refer to what he is calling "worth" as sentimental or symbolic value. It is not an estimate of what the thing costs but rather what it means to us. Worth is thus variable, even among those who participate within the same community – even among those in the same family – hence the complex negotiations which occur around possessions when a beloved member of a family passes away.

In that sense, *worth* is closely aligned with *meaning* as it has been discussed in cultural studies – the meaning of a cultural transaction cannot be reduced to the exchange of value between producer and consumer, but also has to do with what the cultural good allows them to say about themselves and what it allows them to say to the world. We capture something of "worth" when we talk about consumers making "emotional investments" in the television programs they watch or claiming a sense of "ownership" over a media property.

So, as consumers appraise media content, they are involved in a complex set of negotiations between commodities and gifts, value and worth. The decision to share the content with our friends transforms it into a form of gift, which enters us into a system of reciprocal social relations. We are not simply creating meaning based on what the content says; we are also creating meaning through the exchange of that content, which constitutes and reaffirms our interconnections with others in our

network. This is true even if we are sharing content we have purchased as a commodity, just as we have all had the experience of buying a consumer good at a store in a commercial transaction and giving it to a family member as a gift. As Hyde notes,

The boundary can be permeable.... Put generally, within certain limits what has been given us as a gift may be sold in the marketplace and what has been earned in the marketplace may be given as gift. Within certain limits, gift wealth can be rationalized and market wealth can be eroticized. (1983, pp. 357–358)

Hyde's use of the word *eroticized* here is especially evocative, meant to refer to the ways that the exchange of goods gains emotional intensity as it mediates between participants. In the current media landscape, the same content often circulates both illegally and legally, and may be both available for purchase and free for the taking; we weigh a range of economic and social factors each time we decide whether to pay or not for the media we consume and share with others.

Historically, of course, these decisions were private and individualized – the work of “choosy shoppers.” Robert Kozinets notes, however, the emergence of “communities of consumption” as these once private decisions are taking place with social networks, noting “groups of consumers with similar interests actively seek and exchange information about prices, quality, manufacturers, retailers, company ethics, company history, product history, and other consumer-related characteristics” (1999, p. 10). Kozinets argues that commercial transactions are increasingly being policed by what such consumption communities are willing to tolerate, and shaped by their norms and values:

Loyal customers are creating their tastes together as a community. This is a revolutionary change. Online, consumers evaluate quality together. They negotiate consumption standards. Moderating product meanings, they brand and rebrand together. Individuals place great weight on the judgment of their fellow community of consumption members.... Collective responses temper individual reception of marketing communications.... Organizations of consumers can make successful demands on marketers that individual consumers cannot. (1999, p. 12)

Just as the decision about what kind of computer or car to buy may now be shaped by the evolving consensus of a consumption community, the decision about what television content to watch is shaped by the emerging norms of our social networks, whether those organized around fan communities or those around other kinds of social identities: religious groups, racial and ethnic groups, political groups, and other interest-driven networks assert their own sense of what kinds of media content are meaningful and valuable.

The kinds of appraisals conducted on YouTube are much closer to those performed by curators at museums, archives, and libraries than those performed by dealers in antiques or secondhand books. Whether uploading to YouTube is an act of gift giving is a separate question given the range of hopes and expectations which surround these contributions, including many involving economic gain and some involving

social advancement. At the local level, consumers appraise this content often trying to figure out who is circulating it and with what goals as they decide which content to watch and to spread through their social networks. The dispersal of the content allows us to track shifts in attention and interest with greater sociocultural depth than would have been possible in an era of traditional broadcasting where we might count the number of eyeballs watching a program but not map its integration into social interactions. Some content circulates within a clearly defined and relatively confined niche where it aligns with localized interests, while other content (the Boyle video, for example) may spread across a range of different interest groups and niches, suggesting material which has a much more generalized interest within the culture.

Are these transactions valuable within consumer capitalism? Yes and no. Increasingly, companies are seeking to monitor (though some would describe it as surveillance) these networked transactions as they seek to better anticipate what kinds of content consumers value, how much value they put on it, and in what contexts they are willing to pay for content. The issue of audience “engagement” has become a vital question as some branches of the entertainment industry experience what they perceive as a crisis point in their relations to consumers. In his book *Democratizing Innovation*, Eric Von Hippel (2005) talks about “lead users,” early adapters and adopters whose decisions help manufacturers anticipate future uses or identify potential bugs or flaws in a newly issued product. At the same time, Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) have described a process of “retro-branding,” as nostalgia-seeking consumers sift back through what much of the culture has left behind, identifying materials which still have worth and, perhaps, value. More and more, these networked acts of reappraisal are also fueling decisions about what kinds of content to produce and distribute and identifying potential markets for goods that their corporate owners may have otherwise abandoned as worthless.

Here, we are describing how value and meaning gets generated around what Raymond Williams (1977) might describe as the “residual,” that is, materials “formed in the past, but ... still [potentially] active in the cultural process” (p. 40). Just as *appraisal* has cultural as well as economic meanings, the term *residual* also works on both levels. In accounting, residual value is another term for *salvage value*, the value which remains with an asset after it has been fully depreciated. In the entertainment industry, a residual is a form of profit sharing through which talent continues to receive compensation when their work gets recirculated or reperformed in supplemental markets. In both uses, then, *residual* refers to economic value which is generated through the afterlife of material objects and media performances. These multiple meanings of residual suggest that the ongoing sentimental attachment and cultural interest in these goods may still generate profit on the initial investments long after their initial exchange and uses have started to vanish from our memories.

On the other hand, corporations are threatened by their loss of control over cultural circulation, often describing unauthorized sharing in morally charged terms as “theft” or “piracy,” and as “disruptive” of existing economic logics (such as those which might roll out content at different paces in different markets or specify

different prices for different consumption niches). In the case of the Boyle video, the initial phase of distribution, as we've suggested, failed to generate revenue the production company or network could capture. It increased Boyle's visibility and, in the long run, inspired the audience that has purchased her albums at extraordinary rates, but there must have been some gnashing of teeth in closed-door meetings as executives had to decide whether to allow the video to circulate or to try to shut it down. If contemporary media audiences are reappraising content, industry practices, economic terms, and legal standards which shape their consumption, media industries are reappraising their historic relations with consumers and the economic and legal practices which allowed them to measure and monetize attention.

The Ecology of Media Consumption

Major commercial producers are having trouble adjusting their economic models to take advantage of alternatives to broadcast distribution, because they don't know how to value the work audiences perform when they are not simply "consuming" content. No wonder, talk of the media viruses has been embraced by professional media producers – it preserves the illusion that they can master some arcane process and design a self-propagating consumable. But the term's popularity indicates corporate struggles to understand the new roles audiences perform within the dynamic networks of distribution and circulation. To understand the rapid success of Susan Boyle as a product of audiences enmeshed in social and cultural practices of meaning making from and via media content, rather than as the acts of bodies "infected" with a media virus, requires a re-evaluation of the way value flows through the media landscape, a re-evaluation which requires more than collapsing the lines between producers and consumers.

Models which emerge from researching social networks and online culture, such as Axel Bruns's (2007) "produsage," offer a useful alternative. Bruns's model is borne out of studies of the collaborative construction of online sites such as online news services such as Slashdot and the Wikipedia, as well as social-networking platforms such as MySpace and Facebook. *Produser* merges *producer* and *user*. He argues that increasingly users are generating the content they enjoy and constructing the networks through which it circulates. Online content sharing sites like Flickr or YouTube are co-created and mutually sustained through participants' use of these platforms – through contributing content, making certain content popular, and creating links between different parts of these networks (Bruns 2007). "Produsage" provides, he argues, for "the possibility of having producer/consumer relationships reversed and duplicated to the point where multiple such relationships describe the interconnection between any two nodes in the network," seeing audiences as active agents appraising, distributing, advertising, contextualizing, packaging, and critiquing content for others within their networks.

Built on a user subjectivity that suggests a more active participant than the audience subjectivity of the broadcast media (Marshall 2009), Bruns's model is perhaps not completely translatable as a model for understanding broadcast audience behavior. But it does provide us with a starting point for mapping the various roles participants play in the value chain of media production. As the Boyle example suggests, audience members are using the media content at their disposal to forge connections with each other, to mediate social relations, and to make meaning of the world around them. Audience members, both individually and collectively, exert agency in the spreadability model. They are not infected with media messages; they select material that matters to them from the much broader array of media content on offer (which now includes user-generated as well as industrially produced materials). They do not simply pass along static content; they transform or recontextualize the content so that it better serves their own social and expressive needs. Content does not remain in fixed borders but rather circulates in unpredicted and often unpredictable directions, not the product of top-down design but rather the result of a multitude of local decisions within diverse cultural spaces. "Consumers" do not simply consume; they recommend content they like to their friends, who recommend it to their friends, who recommend it on down the line. Nothing spreads widely in the new digital economy unless it engages and serves the interests of both audiences and producers. Otherwise, the circulation gets blocked by one side or the other, either through corporations constructing roadblocks (legal or technical) upon its spread or through audiences refusing to circulate content which fails to interest them.

As we noted in the introduction, Van Dijck and Neuborg relied on a Forrester Report which sought to classify and evaluate different forms of participation, suggesting that the most active contributors represent a very small percentage of the user base for any web 2.0 platform. Most often within the industry, this insight is represented as a pyramid of participation, which shows how the population of users narrows as you reach activities which demand more time, money, resources, skills, and passion. Bradley Horowitz (2006) has described how his company modeled consumer participation in Yahoo Groups:

1% of the user population might start a group (or a thread within a group). 10% of the user population might participate actively, and actually author content whether starting a thread or responding to a thread-in-progress. 100% of the user population benefits from the activities of the above groups (lurkers)... We don't need to convert 100% of the audience into "active" participants to have a thriving product that benefits tens of millions of users. In fact, there are many reasons why you wouldn't want to do this. The hurdles that users cross as they transition from lurkers to synthesizers to creators are also filters that can eliminate noise from signal.

Such a model is consistent with Van Dijck and Neuborg's account, seeing production as the highest form of consumer participation, and seeing consumers as having more or less fixed positions. As we have seen, what gets read as less demanding

forms of participation may still generate of new values, meanings, relationships, and circuits of circulation and distribution.

The game designer and theorist Richard Bartle (2003) has proposed a much more “dynamic” and “ecological” model to talk about how participants with very different motives and modes of play interact within massively multiplayer game worlds. Bartle broke players down into Achievers (who “like doing things that achieve defined goals”), Socializers (who are interested in interacting with other players), Explorers (who seek to expand their knowledge of how the virtual world works), and Killers (“who want to dominate others”). What gave his account its nuance, though, was the ways he understands the interplay between these different modes of participation – often the activities of one group provided the preconditions for the pleasures sought by others. Sometimes these groups competed, sometimes they collaborated, but it would be difficult to label one group as passive and the other active or to describe one form of activity as more, or less, valuable than another. Moreover, any individual player might shift their status, might adopt new goals and roles, or might embrace new forms of participation in the course of their engagement with the game world. Sometimes a player is performing; sometimes she is the audience. Similarly, we might imagine an *ecology of spreadable media*, where consumers are curators, critics, commentators, distributors, fans, and producers, facilitating each other’s engagement and participation.

Consumption Politics

Spreadability may look threatening to corporate rights holders who seek to monetize the eyeballs who access their content, yet it may be more attractive to groups of all kinds – churches, educators, nonprofit groups, political organizations, campaigns, and advertisers – which seek to lower the friction of circulation and thus allow their messages to reach larger publics. Consider, for example, the case of Brave New Films, the group established by progressive documentary producer Robert Greenwald (*OutFoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism*; *Iraq for Sale*; and *Walmart: The High Cost of Low Price*). Greenwald created his films as tools for activist mobilization, early on embracing Netflix as an alternative distributor of his content and encouraging his supporters to host what he calls “house parties” where the videos are publicly displayed and discussed “in churches, schools, bowling allies, pizza parties, wherever there was a screen” (Greenwald, director’s commentary, Brave New Films boxed set).

Greenwald encouraged his supporters not simply to show his films but also to discuss them – inserting the videos into ongoing conversations within the community, and tapping social networks to rally the audience. He was more invested in getting the word out than in capturing revenue, though he uses the web to attract donations to help support the production of subsequent titles. Increasingly,

Greenwall's team are sharing their videos through social-networking sites such as Facebook and encouraging young followers to remix and recirculate their content.

Greenwall's approach is consistent with what Jessica Clark and Pat Aufderheide (2009) have written about as "public media 2.0." The term *public media*, Clarke and Aufderheide argue, refers to media which mobilize and facilitate publics. Clark and Aufderheide describe how giving publics greater control over the circulation of media may enable their deeper investment:

Rather than passively waiting for content to be delivered as in the broadcast days users are actively seeking out and comparing media on important issues, through search engines, recommendations, video on demand, interactive program guides, news feed and niche sites. This is placing pressure on many makers to convert their content so that it's not only accessible across an array of platforms and devices, but properly formatted and tagged so that it is more likely to be discovered. (2009, p. 6)

Sounding like our spreadability model, their report discusses the ways such content offers resources to sustain public conversations, how consumers deepen their involvement through acts of curation and circulation, and how spreading the word may help prepare them to take action around the issues being discussed.

Our goal here is not to reopen longstanding debates about the similarities between publics and audiences. Our point is simply that we have no trouble describing a range of actions that help increase the visibility of such political messages as civic participation. We place a value on the person who accesses a Brave New Film video and organizes a house party, but we also recognize the value of people who attend, participate in the discussion, make a contribution, or help spread the word about what they heard. Their value does not come simply from producing films and videos – though Greenwall's group certainly welcomes video responses that help sustain the conversations they have started. Acts of curation, conversation, and circulation also help spread his progressive messages and thus are understood as part of the political process, so why should we see consumption as valuable only when it becomes production rather than when it alters the discursive contexts or shifts the circulation of media messages?

We are describing shifts in the media landscape which are still taking shape, and it would be surprising if we fully understood their long-term implications. Neither of these models which see consumption as exploitation or as resistance fully account for this new media ecology. We see consumption as participation, with the understanding that participation carries multiple and perhaps even contradicting political valances.

Participants are certainly implicated in the cultural and economic systems through which they operate, just as they are implicated in the social networks through which they help to circulate content. In some cases, their actions further the interests of media companies, directly or indirectly creating value around one or another piece of media content they are helping to spread. The goal of many

media companies is not just to capture their eyeballs but also to harness their collective intelligence and tap their capacity to circulate messages.

Yet, we would be mistaken if we saw this as “consumptive behavior under a different name,” since even those actions which look and feel like classic consumption – localized acts of appraisal – may nevertheless operate differently when conducted through public and collaborative processes. Even the simple act of clicking a mouse may gain new significance when it is part of the meaning making and value negotiation that occur within a social network. Not all of the value is produced for the companies; these consumption communities increasingly work together to identify common interests and exert direct and indirect influence on the kinds of media being produced and distributed. There is a reason that media companies feel threatened by these kinds of practices which they cannot fully control and which may undercut their business models.

These same processes may make Susan Boyle into an international recording star and help Robert Greenwall organize his “house parties” in support of progressive causes. We should be less concerned with labeling these processes as progressive or reactionary, or exploitative or resistant, than in trying to understand how they operate and mapping their influence across a range of different contexts. This focus on the processes of circulation and appraisal may be as much a part of what audience research means in the twenty-first century as more traditional focuses on interpretation and appropriation have been for cultural studies over the past two decades.

Notes

- 1 This article builds on the spreadable media framework the authors have developed in collaboration with Sam Ford, Xiaochang Li, and Ana Domb. We are currently writing a book exploring these themes.
- 2 Of course, *American Idol* was itself based on the British talent show *Pop Idol*.
- 3 The service collected 1 million users in its first six months but swelled to 12 million subscribers by the time it was sold to Microsoft only 18 months later (Ransdell 1999).

References

- Bartle, R. 2003 *Designing Virtual Worlds*. New Riders, San Francisco.
- Benkler, Y. 2006 *The Wealth of Networks*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Brown, S., Kozinets, R.V. and Sherry, J.F. Jr. 2003 Teaching old brands new tricks: retro branding and the revival of brand meaning. *Journal of Marketing*, 67, July, pp. 19–33.
- Bruns, A. 2007 Prodisusage, generation C, and their effects on the democratic process. Paper delivered at the Media in Transitions 5 Conference, MIT, Cambridge, MA, April 27–29.
- Clark, J. and Aufderheide P. 2009 *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*. Center for Social Media, American University, Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/publications/public_media_2_0_dynamic_engaged_publics/

- Dawkins, R. 1976 *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- De Sola Pool, I. 1984 *Technologies of Freedom: On Free Speech in an Electronic Age*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Enzensberger, H.M. 2000 Constituents of a theory of the media. In P. Marris and S. Thornham, eds. *The Media Studies Reader*. New York University Press, New York. (Original work published in 1970)
- Fiske, J. 1994 *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Hills, M. 2002 *Fan Culture*. Routledge, London
- Horowitz, B. 2006 Creators, synthesizers, and consumers. *Elatable*, February 15. Retrieved from <http://blog.elatable.com/2006/02/creators-synthesizers-and-consumers.html>
- Hyde, L. 1983 *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. Vintage, New York.
- Ito, M., Baumer, S., Bittani, M., et al. 2009 *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning With New Media*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Jenkins, H. 2006 *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, New York.
- Jurvetson, S. and Draper, T. 1997 Viral marketing: viral marketing phenomenon explained. Draper Fisher Jurvetson's *Netscape Newsletter*, January 1.
- Kozinets, R.V. 1999 E-tribalized marketing? The strategic implications of virtual communities of consumption. *European Management Journal*, 17, 3, pp. 252–264.
- Lapowsky, I. 2009 Susan Boyle's upcoming debut album bigger than the Beatles and Whitney, hits no. 1 on Amazon list. *New York Daily News*, September 4. Retrieved from http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/2009/09/04/2009-09-04_susan_boyles_upcoming_debut_album_bigger_than_the_beatles_and_whitney_hits_no_1_.html
- Lenhart, A., Madden, M., Smith, A. and MacGill, A. 2007 Teens and social media. Pew Internet and American Life Project, December. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Teens-and-Social-Media.aspx>
- Marshall, P.D. 2009 New media as transformed media industry. In J. Holt and A. Perren, eds. *The Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*. Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, UK, pp. 81–89.
- Ransdell, E. 1999 Network effects. *Fast Company*, 27, August.
- Rosen, J. 2006 The people formerly known as the audience. *PressThink*, June 27. Retrieved from http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html
- Rushkoff, D. 1994 *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture*. Ballantine, New York.
- Shirky, C. 2005 Speech presented at TED conference. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history.html
- Sisario, B. 2009 Susan Boyle, top seller, shakes up CD trends. *New York Times*, December 1. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/03/arts/music/03sales.html>
- Van Dijck, J. and Nieborg, D. 2009 Wikinomics and its discontents: a critical analysis of web 2.0 business manifestos. *New Media Society*, 11, p. 855.
- Von Hippel, E. 2005 *Democratizing Innovation*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Williams, R. 1977 *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, New York.