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While chapter 3 explored how the concept of “engagement” is helping redefine audience measurement, chapter 4 is focused on how the shifting relations between media producers and their audiences are transforming the concept of meaningful participation. Consider two quotes that represent a larger discourse proclaiming the end of media “consumption” as it’s historically been described:

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. (Shirky 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. [...] 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?* (Rosen 2006)

The “consumers,” the argument goes, are becoming producers.

Not so fast, warn José Van Dijck and David Nieborg (2009). Their essay “Wikinomics and Its Discontents” dissects and critiques recent Web 2.0 manifestos (including, full disclosure, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* [Jenkins 2006b]) that describe

WHAT CONSTITUTES MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION?

fundamental shifts in the economic and cultural logics shaping the media landscape. Citing a 2007 Forrester survey of U.S. adults online which found that 52 percent of people online were “inactives” and only 13 percent 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” (861). 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” (861)? They find the shift away from “audiences” or “consumers” toward “users” profoundly misleading, since the latter term merges passive (“merely clicking”) and active (“blogging and uploading videos”) modes of engagement, making it unclear exactly what “use” is.

However, as we detailed in chapter 3, we think audiences do important work beyond what is being narrowly defined as “production” here—that some of these processes marked as “less active” involve substantial labor that potentially provides value according to both commercial and noncommercial logic. Even though we are excited about lowering the barriers of entry to cultural production, we should not assume that audience activities involving greater media production skills are necessarily more valuable and meaningful to other audience members or to cultural producers than are acts of debate or collective interpretation—or that media properties which drive more technical forms of audience creation and participation are somehow more engaging than content that generates discussion and sharing is. As people push DIY media making as the be-all and end-all of participatory culture, they risk reducing other kinds of participation—the evaluation, appraisal, critique, and recirculation of material—to “consumptive behavior by a different name.”

Unlike Rosen, we believe that there are still people who are primarily *just* “listening to” and “watching” media produced by others. However, like Yochai Benkler (2006), we argue that even those who are “just” reading, listening, or watching do so differently in a world where they

recognize their potential to contribute to broader conversations about that content than in a world where they are locked out of meaningful participation. (More on this later.)

Van Dijck and Nieborg may also underestimate some changes in cultural production by focusing on data that only include adults. A 2007 survey by the Pew Center for the Internet & American Life (Lenhart et al.) found that 64 percent of U.S. teens online had produced media, with 39 percent circulating that content beyond friends and family. Over the past five years, Pew has seen dramatic increases in youth media production (more than 10 percent), suggesting a trend toward increasingly active participation.¹

Van Dijck and Nieborg are correct, though, that this is not yet—and may never be—a world where every reader is already a writer and every audience already “the people formerly known as.” An individual who “productively” responds to one media property, brand, or cause may be a “passive” listener to many others; activity and passivity are not permanent descriptions of any individual. And we respect Matt Hills’s warning that, at times, the concept of “cultural producer” has been “pushed to do too much work” in the hopes of “removing the taint of consumption and consumerism” (2002, 30). Throughout this book, then, we want neither to overstate the prevalence of many active audience behaviors nor to discount forms of engagement too often labeled as “passive.”

This clash between a view which sees networked communication as fundamentally altering the nature of audienceship (“the people formerly known as the audience”) and as changing nothing significant about existing structures (“consumptive behavior by a different name”) is one of a series of competing frames (lurking versus legitimate peripheral participation; resistance versus participation; audiences versus publics; participation versus collaboration, hearing versus listening; consumers versus co-creators) which are shaping our understanding of online participation during this transitional moment. These various binaries come from many different disciplines and perspectives, including marketing research, cultural studies, political science, education, anthropology, and digital studies, suggesting a persistent difficulty for defining what constitutes meaningful participation across many

different fields. Throughout this chapter, we will struggle between conflicting and perhaps contradictory pulls—between a corporate conception of participation (which includes within it a promise of making companies more responsive to the needs and desires of their “consumers”) and a political conception of participation (which focuses on the desire for us all to exercise greater power over the decisions which impact the quality of our everyday lives as citizens). We will not be able to resolve these tensions here—the uneasy relationship between capitalism and expanded communication capacity remains a vexing one which theorists of all stripes are confronting through their work. We are trying to resist any easy mapping of one onto the other, yet they have been deeply intertwined in our everyday ways of talking about the “digital revolution.” Both concepts of participation are at stake in the restructuring of the media ecology that has taken place over the past two decades. And both are worth keeping in focus as we examine what changes and what remains the same in a culture in which grassroots practices of circulation are exerting greater impact on the kinds of media content we encounter and the relationships which exist within and between networked publics.

Lurking versus Peripheral Participation

As illustrated by Van Dijck and Nieborg’s critiques of Web 2.0, it has become commonplace for skeptics to assert 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 via a pyramid of participation, which shows how the population of users narrows as you reach activities that demand more time, money, resources, skills, and passion. As an example, consider the way Bradley Horowitz described how Yahoo! modeled audience participation in its Yahoo! Groups service:

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. (2006)

Such models frequently depict media production as the highest form of audience participation, dismissing many people as “inactive” and seeing audience members as having fairly fixed positions so that changes between those positions are seen as significant. One widely spread representation of Horowitz’s pyramid went so far as to label the 90 percent who were not actively producing content as “lurkers,” suggesting they drew on the community without contributing back. There are multiple alternative models offering more nuanced ways to think about participation (see, for instance, Hayes 2007; Bartle 2003), with the more sophisticated models mapping the ecology of interactions between different participants, rather than constructing the hierarchies implicit in the pyramid structure.

While these models help us visualize a complex process, we already know that users don’t adhere permanently to any one of these roles and often behave in different ways within various communities. Game designer Raph Koster notes, with reference to gaming, that “everyone is a creator”: “The question is ‘of what.’ Everyone has a sphere where they feel comfortable exerting agency—maybe it’s their work, maybe it’s raising their children, maybe it’s collecting stamps. Outside of that sphere, most people are creators only within carefully limited circumstances; most people cannot draw, but anyone can color inside lines, or trace” (2006; emphasis in original). Moreover, seeing participation as a model with increasing levels of more intense engagement masks the degree to which all participants work together in an economy operating under some combination of market and nonmarket logic, with various audiences performing tasks that support one another. From this perspective, a “lurker” provides value to people sharing commentary or producing multimedia content by expanding the audience and potentially motivating their work, while critics and curators generate value for those who are creating material and perhaps for

one another. Critics provide ideas about which content to value, and curators provide critics with easy access to the texts being examined.

Educators have long studied how members of communities of practice learn from and sustain each other's participation. Their research suggests that people initially learn through "lurking" or observing from the margins, that certain basic activities may represent stepping-stones toward greater engagement, and that key individuals help to motivate others' advancement. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger describe this process as "legitimate peripheral participation," noting that newcomers will integrate much more quickly if they are able to observe and learn from more skilled participants (1991, 29). In an oft-cited example, they describe how apprentices are often asked to sweep the shop, giving them access to the establishment's ongoing operations and a chance to see others apply their advanced skills across a range of different transactions. Lave and Wenger note, "As a place in which one moves toward more-intensive participation, peripherality is an empowering position. As a place in which one is kept from participating more fully—often legitimately, from the broader perspective of society at large—it is a disempowering position" (36).

This reframing forces us to pay more attention to the "scaffolding" that different communities provide for participation but also asks us to recognize that "lurkers" may choose to "lurk" for many different reasons. As Susan Bryant, Andrea Forte, and Amy Bruckman write in an account of how one learns to be a Wikipedian, "Through peripheral activities, novices become acquainted with the tasks, vocabulary, and organizing principles of the community. Gradually, as newcomers become oldtimers, their participation takes forms that are more and more central to the functioning of the community" (2005, 2). The Wikipedia community has a strong interest in expanding its ranks and recruiting new members, and they proceed at their work in ways that make it easier for people to become more engaged.²

We contrast this strong scaffolding with the conditions of production that surround mass media, where an elite few have the skills, knowledge, and motivations required to make meaningful contributions and where most of us remain observers. The processes of more skilled participants are hidden from public view in order to protect

the “magic” and “mystique” of professional media making. Yochai Benkler says digital tools “enable anyone, anywhere, to go through his or her practical life, observing the social environment through new eyes—the eyes of someone who could actually interject a thought, a criticism, or a concern into the public debate. Individuals become less passive and thus more engaged observers of social spaces that could potentially become subjects for political conversation” (2006, 11). We believe “lurkers” experience the content of these conversations differently, even if they never actually contribute, because of their awareness of their potential capacity to participate and their recognition of lower barriers to contribution (though we recognize, as we discuss later in this chapter, that participation is not an option equally available to all). And, if that’s the case, it points toward fundamental shifts in the audience’s position. Many cultures are becoming more participatory (in relative terms) than previous configurations of media power.

A Brief History of Participatory Culture

Current debates about participatory culture emerge from a much longer history of attempts to generate alternative platforms for grassroots communication. Consider the development of the Amateur Press Association in the middle of the nineteenth century, which saw young people hand set, type, and print their own publications about culture, politics, and daily life and mail them through elaborate circuits which resemble what are now labeled “social networks” (Petrik 1992). Consider how this same community was among the first adopters of amateur radio in the early part of the twentieth century (Douglas 1989). Consider the efforts of alternative political communities, such as the African American community’s creation of its own press in reaction to mainstream news coverage on issues it cared about or its own movies in response to the 1915 release of *The Birth of a Nation*. Consider the emergence of amateur camera clubs in the nineteenth century or the growth of home movie production in the twentieth century (Zimmerman 1995). And consider how various minority groups have used the concept of “consumer activism” and tactics such as boycotts and buycotts to struggle for greater social and legal equality (Cohen 2003). Participatory culture, in other words, has a

history—indeed, multiple histories—much larger than the life span of specific technologies or commercial platforms.

As early as 1932, Bertolt Brecht imagined the transformation of radio from a technology supporting passive mass audiences to a medium of collective participation:

Radio is one sided when it should be two. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life [...] if it knew how to receive as well as transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. ([1932] 1986, 53)

In the U.S. radio context, Brecht's vision came its closest to fruition in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when transmitters were as apt to be in the hands of scout troops, church groups, and schools as they were the hands of department stores and other commercial interests (Douglas 1989). "We the People" eventually lost the battle for radio, with ham operators and "pirate" stations on the periphery of most people's experiences with the medium. The public retained some aspects of Brecht's model in the space carved out for community radio among local AM stations and in some public radio endeavors. However, in an era of personalized mp3 players and "curated" satellite radio, the prominence of these public alternatives to mainstream commercial radio continues to diminish. Ham radio operators are viewed today as nostalgic for an outdated technology. Indeed, the only notable remnant of Brecht's call for two-way communication is the longstanding U.S. CB culture, built on the radio communication devices most commonly associated with truck drivers who communicate on the road with one another using pseudonyms or "handles," the avatars of the open road.³

Brecht's agenda was revisited by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who, in 1970, similarly predicted the emergence of a much more participatory media culture, one in which the means of cultural production and circulation will be "in the hands of the masses themselves" ([1970] 2000,

69). From this starting point, Enzensberger seeks to understand why the public has persistently failed to embrace the participatory potentials of communication technologies. Change, he argues, would come about not by altering the technological infrastructure, since the public was not taking advantage of already existing opportunities, but rather through shifting the social and cultural practices around media and overcoming economic and political obstacles to fuller participation. For Enzensberger, the solution was not simply putting production in the hands of isolated individuals but rather promoting new kinds of publics which might adopt “aggressive forms of publicity” which allowed for the meaningful sharing of media content and enabled “mobilization.”

As Aaron Delwiche (2012, 16) notes, Enzensberger’s essay needs to be understood as part of a much larger conversation about the potentials of participatory culture, new media technologies, and their relationships to democratic citizenship, a theme which runs through many of the key documents of 1970s counterculture. For example, the Port Huron Statement—issued by Students for a Democratic Society several years prior, in 1962—coupled the demand that a citizen should have a say in those “social decisions determining the quality and directions of his life” with the call to “provide media” for citizens’ “common participation” in key deliberations (12). Delwiche points out that this counterculture discourse sought to distinguish between the potentials of technologies and the way their previous uses had been shaped by the “technocratic” structures of dominant institutions (12). The hope was that, if the public could expand its access to new channels and processes of communication, they might use them as a tool through which to fight for a more democratic culture. Fred Turner (2008) has shown how these ideas, in turn, exerted a powerful influence over cybercultural developments in the past few decades, highlighting the importance of mapping these earlier ruminations on cultural and political participation to the types of developments this book documents.

Today’s era of online communication demonstrates some decisive steps in the directions Brecht and Enzensberger advocated, expanding access to the means of cultural production (through ease-of-access-and-use tools) and to cultural circulation within and across diverse communities. Brecht’s conception of a world where listeners become

“suppliers” of material for other listeners has been more fully realized in the digital era than radio ever achieved. Podcasting, for example, has returned the radio format—if not the technology—to a more participatory medium, allowing many different groups to produce and circulate radiolike content.⁴

We should acknowledge that, for many of these writers just discussed, changing the structure of media ownership was central to their analysis of what needed to take place before we could achieve a more participatory culture. But these authors also assumed that greater public access to tools for cultural production/circulation and to core information about how society works would simultaneously result from and create shifts in ownership structures. From that perspective, the current moment, when media concentration remains alongside an expansion in the communicative capacities of everyday people, is paradoxical. To understand it, we may need to separate out different kinds of control over channels of communication. We might, for example, distinguish between the kinds of information control exerted by television networks (which tightly program all the content they distribute) and telecommunications companies (which determine who has access to bandwidth and how much priority is given to different uses of the system but holds little editorial oversight, or liability, for the content shared through their technologies). The shift of the dominant means of communication from broadcast to digital may in the process loosen the grip of corporate control over many types of content, resulting in the active circulation of a greater diversity of perspectives. And yet, as these gains are made, struggles will only intensify over questions of access—particularly for net neutrality—making debates about corporate constraints on access to networks, and the uses of them, ever more crucial.

Resistance versus Participation

As suggested by the quotes from Shirky and Rosen at the beginning of this chapter, the gains made in expanding access to media platforms in a digital world are often painted as resistance to mainstream media industries. For instance, industry voices, activists, and bloggers alike have frequently described the rising power of “the blogosphere” as

a challenge to journalists and commercial media, speaking of the diminishing authority of “big media” or the threat these free media sources pose to “legacy” institutions and practices. However, just as pundits have made the mistake of prioritizing audience activities on the basis of the level of technological skill involved, many likewise incorrectly read grassroots media creation solely as a force of opposition or revolution against commercial media. Instead, something more complex is occurring.

This focus on “resistance” is consistent with language deployed by writers in the critical and cultural studies traditions since the 1980s. Today, academics are much more likely to talk about politics based on “participation,” reflecting a world where more media power rests in the hands of citizens and audience members, even if the mass media holds a privileged voice in the flow of information. Syntax tells us all something key about these two models. We are resistant *to* something; that is, we are organized in opposition *to* a dominant power. We participate *in* something, that is, participation is organized *in and through* social collectivities and connectivities. Corporate thinkers have also embraced a focus on participation, though they often want to see what we are participating in as some kind of “market” (potential or actual) for their goods and services. At the same time, others have used the concept of “participation” to describe the civic behaviors of publics (concepts we’ll be covering in greater detail shortly). Both accounts start from the assumption that participants feel a greater investment in the institutions and practices of networked culture: they are less likely to try to overturn something which has given them greater stakes in the outcome.

Within advertising circles, the kinds of participation desired by companies are often discussed in terms of “brand communities.” Companies have been interested in the idea that the audiences they court form strong social bonds through common affinity for a brand, because, hopefully, these affective relations mean increased customer loyalty at a time when brand attachments are viewed as less stable than they have been in previous generations. Many marketers frame this concept as indicating corporate ownership over specific groups of people, reading the “community” as largely reactive to the machinations of the brand.

On the other hand, critics worry that such brand communities can become simple vehicles for promoting particular corporate messages, a vehicle solely for granting the company access to and credibility with members' friends and families.

In many cases, though, companies do not "create" brand communities. Rather, they "court" existing communities whose broad interests predispose them toward the kinds of conversations the company seeks to facilitate. In a few cases, perhaps this idea of communities built around a company fits, broadly speaking—enthusiasts for Harley-Davidson, John Deere, and Apple have developed strong ties to these respective companies and their products. However, what usually happens within these "brand communities" is more complicated than that.

First, to read these communities only as reactive enthusiasts for a company obscures potential conflicts these groups may have with the brand. Just as soap opera fans regularly declare ownership of "their show" and are vocal about the direction they think the producers should take, members of "brand communities" are often vocal about customer service issues and critical about business decisions the company makes, feeling that their passionate support of a company's products makes them an active stakeholder in the brand. Brand communities can thus play a policing role. They might enthusiastically support a brand when it serves them, but they are also just as likely to call for changes in corporate behavior or products when they think a company is acting in ways contrary to its customers' interests.

Second, brands may find themselves at the center of a social group if and when they become a symbol for longstanding cultural affiliations. Motorcycle culture predated Harley's "brand community." Apple didn't invent technology enthusiasts, and John Deere didn't create an agrarian society. Rather, these brands generated deep affinity with socially connected audiences inasmuch as they understood a culture that already existed and demonstrated that understanding through the marketing, design, and focus of their products.

Given efforts by companies to forge such active and affective ties with their audiences, critics legitimately fear a blanket celebration of participation, especially if divorced from discussions of what people are participating in and who benefits from their participation. Mark

Andrejevic, for example, argues that “the simple equation of participation with empowerment serves to reinforce the marketing strategies of corporate culture” (2008, 43), while political theorist Jodi Dean talks about “publicity without publics” (2002, 173), suggesting that the expanded communication capacity enjoyed by new media participants does not necessarily result in the kinds of thinking, debating communities envisioned by traditional understandings of the public sphere. While the notion of the “active reader” was associated with the “resistance” model—responding to earlier theories of media manipulation which assumed the passive absorption of ideological messages—the notion of audience “activity” and “sovereignty” has been absorbed into Web 2.0 business models, requiring us to develop a more refined vocabulary for thinking about the reality of power relations between companies and their audiences. (For a consideration of the strategies by which television producers actively solicit audience participation, see Columbia College Chicago television professor Sharon Marie Ross’s essay in our enhanced book.)

We agree that companies have sometimes cynically exploited the public’s desire to “participate” in ways which serve commercial ends while ceding very little control to those who participate; companies rarely embrace more participatory practices out of purely altruistic motives. Rather, participation functions as a means of increasing audience engagement, along the lines discussed in chapter 3. But audiences are not simply pawns for commercial interests or political elites; their shared identities and collective communication capacity allow them to speak out about their perceived interests.

Many of the communities we are discussing here have histories prior to the current digital communication and have asserted values, politics, identities, and practices that exist outside the digital platforms through which their activities are currently being conducted. Their collective interests involve shaping representations, asserting meanings and values, altering terms of service and conditions of labor, and deploying the platforms toward larger movements for social change. They often are making calculations about the acceptable trade-offs between the value that companies extract from them and the benefits they gain through their use of corporate tools and platforms. Most

of these groups would argue that they have gained communication capacity through online networks, even though they are frustrated by some of the more exploitative aspects of their engagement with these companies. Often, they are publics and not simply audiences.

Audiences versus Publics

In Daniel Dayan's usage, *audiences* are produced through acts of measurement and surveillance, usually unaware of how the traces they leave can be calibrated by the media industries. Meanwhile, *publics* often actively direct attention onto messages they value: "A public not only offers attention, it calls for attention" (Dayan 2005, 52). Publics, Sonia Livingstone tells us, are "held to be collectivities, more than the sum of their parts, while audiences by contrast are merely aggregates of individuals" (2005, 25). Dayan arrives at a very similar conclusion: "A public is not simply a spectator in plural, a sum of spectators, an addition. It is a coherent entity whose nature is collective; an ensemble characterized by shared sociability, shared identity and some sense of that identity" (2005, 46).

Deploying these terms, we might usefully distinguish—as others have—between "fans," understood as individuals who have a passionate relationship to a particular media franchise, and "fandoms," whose members consciously identify as part of a larger community to which they feel some degree of commitment and loyalty. Individual fans can be thought of as parts of audiences, while fandoms start to demonstrate some traits of publics, bound together through their "shared sociality" and "shared identity." Fandoms seek to direct the attention of the media industries and, in the process, shape their decisions—a goal they pursue with varying degrees of success.

Fandoms are one type of collectivity (in that they are acting as communities rather than as individuals) and connectivity (in that their power is amplified through their access to networked communications) whose presence is being felt in contemporary culture. Members of minority or subcultural communities, various kinds of activist and DIY groups, and different affinity groups are also linked through shared "sociality" and "identity" and are also seeking to "direct attention" through their actions online. Much of the rest of this chapter

will be spent exploring different models that account for these developing forms of social experience and the kinds of collective power they exert over their communication environment.

Thinking about audiences as publics may give us a new lens through which to understand media fandom. Take, as an example, soap opera fans. While some viewers watch in isolation, the daily broadcast of soaps, with no off-season, facilitates rituals of sharing and debate among family and friends during or after episodes. Such “gossip” (Brown 1990) has become a vibrant source of audience participation in a genre whose plots often focus on town “gossip.” Soap fans have long used new technologies to expand the scope of these processes—they have pushed from personal conversations to organized letter-writing campaigns, from the organization of fan clubs to the development of a fan press, from online discussion boards to increasing use of blogs and podcasts (Ford 2008a). The rise of digital platforms has only amplified and widened the scope of the activities of this already socially networked and participatory audience. Further, online forums and digital production practices (such as uploading and remixing program content) have become popular among soap fans chiefly when they facilitate the primary “work” of soap audiences: debating, critiquing, and so on (Webb 2011). Thus, one could argue, fan “production” remains a supplementary activity to what soap opera audiences have been doing since the 1930s. (For more on the historical relations between soap fans, producers, and texts, see Miami University sociology professor C. Lee Harrington’s essay in our enhanced book.)

In this environment, the soap text acts as a resource for audiences to build relationships, often engaging in critical debates that move beyond situations on the show to people’s personal lives or else larger moral, political, religious, or civic issues—especially as soap operas have tackled “social issues.” In summer 2006, for instance, *As the World Turns* featured a storyline about the coming out of teenager Luke Snyder, focusing for the next several years on the reactions of Luke’s family and his attempts to manage life in the midwestern U.S. as a gay young adult. In the process, the story generated a variety of active debates among fans. Some gay male soap opera fans began discussing the coming-out storyline in gay chat forums, introducing

a new community of viewers to *As the World Turns* (a “surplus audience”). Many used the show to mediate issues of the contemporary gay male identity in the U.S. and media representation of gay characters. Eventually, as Roger Newcomb (2011) discusses, many gay fans protested the story’s trajectory, particularly upset at a lack of physical intimacy shown on-screen between Luke and his boyfriend because of what they perceived as network/producer concerns about potential reactions from socially conservative audiences. The fan pressure led to an increase in the couple’s on-screen kissing, but the degree to which Luke was allowed to show affection and intimacy remained a focus until the show’s 2010 cancellation.

Meanwhile, as longtime *As the World Turns* fans discussed the story in online soap opera forums, conversations delved into viewers’ own perspectives and questions about homosexuality. On Michael Gill’s Media Domain, for instance, discussion shifted from Luke’s coming out to questions about whether sexual preference was genetically or environmentally determined. The question led to detailed and passionate personal responses. Posters shared stories of gay friends who had been molested as children and who had themselves wondered if the event helped shape their sexual identity; gay siblings who said they knew they were gay from an early age or who were raised in otherwise heterosexual families; and an aunt who had experimented with homosexuality but ultimately settled into a long-term heterosexual relationship. An openly gay fan shared her personal stories and views. Another board regular gathered and shared research from a variety of medical sources. While the discussion linked back to the text as the thread moved along, the storyline acted as a catalyst for a fan community with diverse social and political views to discuss issues of great social importance in (largely) civil ways, in part because these fans had developed longstanding social relationships. Such discussions illustrate how fan communities often take on several key aspects of publics, complicating any model that would paint these fans as passive audiences. Instead, a media text becomes material that drives active community discussion and debate at the intersection between popular culture and civic discourse—conversations that might lead to community activism or social change.

Some activist groups seek to transform audiences into networked publics with which they might work in promoting their causes. One such group is Brave New Films, a media production company established by progressive documentary producer Robert Greenwall (*Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism; Iraq for Sale; Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*). Greenwall was an early adopter of Netflix as an alternative distributor of his content, thus using the commercial service as a low-cost way for his supporters to host house parties “in churches, schools, bowling allies, pizza parties, wherever there was a screen” (Greenwall 2010). Greenwall asked fans not simply to show his films but also to discuss them—inserting the videos into ongoing conversations within communities and tapping social network sites/tools (especially Meetup.com) to rally audiences. In some cases, he linked multiple house parties together with live webcasts where the producer answered questions.

A longtime television producer now running a nonprofit organization, Greenwall was more invested in getting the word out than in capturing revenue, though he uses the web to attract donations to help support future productions. Speaking about *Outfoxed*, his critique of Fox News, Greenwall told the *Boston Globe*, “You have my permission to give it away. This film is meant to be a tool, so you will take it and do with it what you will” (Gorman 2003). Greenwall found audiences who share his cause, many of whom have an active distrust and disdain for commercial interests. Brave New Films constructs itself as a grassroots alternative to concentrated media.

Increasingly, Greenwall's team shares its videos through social network sites such as Facebook, encouraging “friends” to remix and circulate the content. During one of Brave New Films' campaigns, the staff pushed their members to see if they could grow their Facebook community, looking to ensure the Facebook page for *Rethink Afghanistan* had more “fans” than the Department of Defense's own community site. In the process, the company encouraged participants to think of themselves as part of a networked public that could spread the word to its dispersed members. The group has also developed Cuéntame, a Facebook page focused on Latin issues. Here, the Brave New Films team courts interest both through campaigns focused on explicitly political concerns (such as the Tea Party movement's clashes

with the NAACP or the protests surrounding Arizona's immigration law) and more cultural interests (linking their progressive platform to discussions about pop stars or the World Cup).

As Chuck Tyron (2009) notes, Brave New Films has long used the flexibility that digital distribution offers to continuously update its documentaries. Frustrated when a film focusing on Tom Delay's ethics was rendered moot after the congressional leader was forced to resign, the team now rolls out feature-length documentaries in ten-minute chunks via the web, capitalizing on their immediacy and topicality before incorporating them into longer works.

Greenwall's approach is consistent with what Jessica Clark (2009) has described as "public media 2.0." Rejecting a paternalistic notion of "public service media" in favor of one where "public media" refers to media that mobilizes and facilitates publics, Clark argues that giving publics greater control over the circulation of media may deepen their 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 feeds, 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.

In similar fashion to our spreadability model, Clark describes how such works offer resources to sustain public conversations, how audience members intensify 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. Since the public can only engage with content if they can find it among the plethora of available options, it's becoming increasingly important to use such texts as calls to action to gather such publics or else to develop material which can sustain or engage existing communities.

While Greenwall's group has welcomed people making video responses to, and remixes of, his films, "participation" is not just

limited to media creation. The acts of curation, conversation, and circulation that help spread his progressive messages are understood as part of the political process. Undeniably a public, Greenwall's supporters also demonstrate many behaviors and attitudes often associated with fan communities, including the desire to connect with the producer to gain early access to eagerly anticipated material.

The complexities of these relationships might be suggested by the experience of fan activist group Racebending (Lopez 2011). The group consisted initially of the most passionate fans of the Nickelodeon animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, a program noted for its multinational and multiracial cast of characters. Though they come from imaginary ethnicities, the iconography of the program associates the fictional civilizations represented on the program with various East Asian and Inuit cultures. This imagined multiculturalism was central to fans' engagement. When fans heard that a proposed live-action feature film version would cast all white actors in the core roles—a rumor later confirmed by casting calls seen as explicitly preferring Caucasian performers—they rallied against what they saw as a betrayal of the values they associated with the original property. They drew on a variety of the approaches fan communities have taken to put pressure on the film's writer, director, and producer, M. Night Shyamalan—himself Indian American. Fans joined forces with other activist groups dedicated to tackling Hollywood's discrimination and challenging screen representations of people of color, such as the theater group East West Players and the media advocacy group Media Action Network for Asian Americans. Lori Kido Lopez notes, "Some of the organization's strongest and most effective tactics rely on the skills developed as members of the fan community: honing their arguments through community discussions, producing and editing multimedia creations, educating themselves about every facet of their issue, and relying on their trusted networks to provide a database of information" (2011, 432).

This story looks different if interpreted in terms of audience resistance to the feature film or fans' loyalty to the original animated series. Here, the franchise's most ardent supporters are also its harshest critics. While the producers of the original animated series did not publicly challenge Paramount's decisions, the fans felt strongly that

their grassroots activities were protecting the integrity of the original vision, even as they called for a boycott. Racebending members spoke as fans and endorsed some commercially produced content; they generated their own videos, often through remixing commercial texts; they sought to reverse unwelcome producer decisions; and they organized a boycott. Each of these behaviors implies a somewhat different relationship between this active audience and (some of) the producers, as both aggressively pursued their own converging and diverging interests.

While the film producers have sought to dismiss the impact of the protest on their casting decisions, the fans were successful in reshaping the discursive context of the film's release, forcing the producers to repeatedly respond to questions and challenges about their racial politics and ensuring that the erasure of ethnic difference was anything but invisible. When the same group of fans raised awareness of a similar whitewashing of an Asian American character in a proposed film adaptation of the *Runaways* comics series, Disney and Marvel moved quickly to reverse their casting call and reassure the group that the casting would be race appropriate. The group's investments as fans have given them a powerful position from which to challenge corporate interests.

Participation versus Collaboration

Drawing on popular representations of characters seeking to negotiate a space for themselves between occupying regimes and resistance movements, Derek Johnson has suggested a move away from metaphors of "warfare" or "resistance" and toward "collaboration," a more morally complex relationship in which collaborators may "have taken up subject positions within an oppressive power structure, seeing it as the best means of serving their individual interests" and ultimately of creating new opportunities and tools "for others to challenge the rules of an occupied social order" (2010).

Johnson's notion of "collaboration" may be less comfortable to corporate and public interests alike, because it calls attention to the messy, uncertain, and contradictory relationships between the two. Participating within a fan or brand community may or may not be a way of influencing the culture and may or may not be a way of

intensifying audience engagement with the property or brand. Collaborators are complicit with the dominant regimes of power, yet they often also use their incorporation into that system to redirect its energies or reroute its resources. At the same time, companies often have to tolerate behaviors that may have once been seen as resistant or transgressive if they want to court the participation of these networked communities.

Mary L. Gray, in her work on queer youth living in the rural U.S., proposes the concept of “boundary publics” — “iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that circulate across the outskirts and through the center(s) of a more recognized and validated public sphere” (2009, 92–93). Gray explains that such groups may form anywhere people temporarily occupy a space owned and operated by others to engage in serious conversations for their own purposes. Gray discusses, for example, queer youths in a small Kentucky town who gathered in the aisles of Walmart in the wee hours of the morning — cross-dressing, flirting, and engaging in other social behaviors prohibited in other public spaces within that community. As she describes it, the store became a site of struggle when the youth confronted gay bashers, and participants were forced to decide whether to defend or abandon their turf.

The use of commercial spaces for political gathering is not historically unique. Classically, the Habermasian (1962) conception of the public sphere emphasized the independence of such spaces from both government and corporate interests. As Nancy Fraser reminds us, Jürgen Habermas argued that the public sphere “is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling” (1990, 57). Yet, as Tom Standage documents, the coffeehouses that Habermas used to illustrate his conception of the public sphere were, after all, commercial establishments, often organized around themes or topics which allowed them to bring together desired publics who might wish to use them as their base of operations (2006, 151–165). The proprietors supplied meeting spaces and resources (pamphlets, magazines, newspapers) to sustain conversations and customers. But, ultimately, the coffeehouses were in the business of selling coffee. The coffeehouses might be considered branded spaces that worked in

ways surprisingly similar to the spaces being constructed and sold by Web 2.0 companies.

We certainly want to be attentive, as John Edward Campbell (2009) has advocated, to the way such establishments negotiate between competing (and sometimes conflicting) understandings of participants as customers and as citizens. Campbell points to ways “affinity portals” associated with minority groups, such as PlanetOut or BlackPlanet, often have to downplay controversial issues that might make them less hospitable to brands. In many cases, though, these establishments—despite their commercial aims—also function as spaces where participants can step outside of their fixed roles and engage in meaningful conversations, identifying shared interests, mutual desires, and collective identities.

In order to accept this more morally complex account of collaboration, it’s crucial to move beyond seeing the relations between producers and their audiences as a zero-sum game. Andrejevic moves us in this direction with his critiques of Henry Jenkins’s metaphor of “poaching” (1992) in relation to participants on the fan discussion site Television Without Pity (TWoP). Referring to a passage from Michel de Certeau describing readers as moving across “lands belonging to someone else, [. . .] fields they did not write” (1984, 174), Andrejevic argues,

The metaphor breaks down in the transition from fields to texts: the consumption of crops is exclusive (or, as economists put it, “rival”), the productive consumption of texts is not. Far from “despoiling” the television texts through their practices, TWoPers enrich them, not just for themselves but for those who economically benefit from the “added value” produced by the labor of viewers. (2008, 42)

As we’ve suggested throughout this book, the owners of those fields do not always welcome and value such contributions and may see them as a threat to their own creative and economic control over those fields. Nevertheless, Andrejevic is right to argue against a binary opposition between “complicit passivity and subversive participation” (43). He points out that the “workplace” where fans labor may at the same time “be a site of community and personal satisfaction and one of economic

exploitation" (43). Indeed, fan labor may be exploited for the profit of the "owners," even as fans also benefit from what they create. Such is the nature of collaboration in the belly of the media beast.

We all should approach these emerging structures and practices with healthy skepticism, weighing carefully different bids for our participation. The rapid expansion of participatory culture is an ongoing challenge: communities grow faster than their capacity to socialize their norms and expectations, and this accelerated scale makes it hard to maintain the intimacy and coherence of earlier forms of participatory culture. Members are tempted on all sides to embrace practices which don't necessarily align with their own interests; and, yes, participation often involves some degree of imbrication into commercial logics. But, likewise, networked participation also forces media companies and brands to be more responsive to their audiences. Networked communities can "call out" companies they collectively perceive as acting counter to the community's interests, and their access to tools of mobilization and publicity means they can inflict some real damage.

Hearing versus Listening

Much of the rhetoric around Web 2.0 seeks to conflate the active practices of collaboration and public deliberation with the more passive role of traditional audiences. Tim O'Reilly demonstrates this tendency in his 2005 essay "What Is Web 2.0?" and his 2009 essay, with John Battelle, "Web Squared: Web 2.0 Five Years On." Both pieces discuss the need for an "architecture of participation," which O'Reilly (2005) initially characterizes as "a built-in ethic of cooperation" in which the company acts as "an intelligent broker, connecting the edges to each other and harnessing the power of the users themselves." O'Reilly obscures some important differences between aggregation and deliberation, evading the core issue of whether Web 2.0 companies value participation because of the content consciously submitted or because of the data unknowingly shed.

While still using the concepts interchangeably, O'Reilly and Battelle's 2009 report shows far less interest in collective deliberation than in the aggregation of user data: the "managing, understanding, and responding to massive amounts of user-generated data in real time.

[. . .] Our phones and cameras are being turned into eyes and ears for applications; motion and location sensors tell where we are, what we're looking at, and how fast we're moving. Data is being collected, presented, and acted upon in real time. The scale of participation has increased by orders of magnitude." If there is intelligence that emerges from this system, it is machine intelligence and not the social intelligence of participants. Much as the media industries have long sought ways to "passively" measure audience engagement, fearing the "subjectivity" which occurs when audiences become co-creators of audience data, the Web 2.0 paradigm—for all of its empowering rhetoric—increasingly rests on the passive collection of user preferences.

O'Reilly and Battelle are celebrating what Mark Andrejevic (2007) has critiqued as a new culture of surveillance which transforms users into data sets rather than engaging with them as complex cultural beings. Valuing participants solely as data returns audiences to a state of imagined "passivity" rather than acknowledging them as publics, with the capacity to reshape the companies with which they interact. At the heart of our spreadable media model is the idea that audience members are more than data, that their collective discussions and deliberations—and their active involvement in appraising and circulating content—are generative.

While O'Reilly and Battelle minimize the social and qualitative nature of deliberative models, corporate communicators and advertisers are similarly plagued by a focus on "return on investment" that relies on broadcast-era models of measurement. The types of astroturfing described in chapter 1 prioritize easily quantifiable measures (e.g., numbers of views, numbers of followers, numbers of fans) over more qualitative measures of audience engagement and participation. Further, as brands seek to "track" what their audiences say about them, these monitoring programs often lean disproportionately toward aggregation, perpetuating Andrejevic's culture of surveillance that too often views audience members as little more than data points.

This reliance on quantitative measures leads to marketing strategies that define success by what's easiest to count (echoing the limitations of the stickiness model discussed in the introduction and the challenges of measurement facing the television industry detailed in chapter 3).

Measurement is especially important not just for determining *whether* an initiative was successful but in defining *what* constitutes success. Ilya Vedrashko—head of research and development for advertising agency Hill Holliday—examines in his essay in the enhanced book why the advertising industry has had difficulty incorporating a spreadable media approach into their marketing initiatives. He finds that companies and agencies often venture into participatory spaces to ask their traditional questions of “Who is there?” and “How many of them are there?” rather than soliciting new insights and forming new relationships.

Such approaches not only assign little value to audience engagement; they also can lead companies to design so-called strategies that actually have little strategy at all, to enter online communities or platforms without understanding the context of that community or putting thought into how, or why, audiences might want to interact with the company and its content. Sam Ford writes that such media practices lead to “one social media fad after another” (2010e). Describing the “shiny new object” mentality that companies took toward virtual world Second Life, he writes that the “vast majority had satisfied their goals just by being there and were shocked by the lukewarm response. Unfortunately, the takeaway from Second Life wasn’t to question the strategy that took companies there in the first place.” Instead, companies have taken the same “gee whiz” approach to Facebook fan pages, mobile applications, and location-based services.

To avoid such fallacies, companies must move from a culture of just “hearing” what audiences are saying to one that prioritizes “listening” to what audiences have to say. On an interpersonal level, we all understand the core difference between “hearing” and “listening.” Hearing is the physical act of receiving a message; listening is an active process of waiting for, concentrating on, and responding to a message. Yet, as companies talk about “listening,” the term has fallen into the same trap as many otherwise useful words, given the buzzword-driven nature of marketing rhetoric. The marketing/public relations version of listening often refers to little more than quantitative monitoring—the “who is there?” and “how many of them are there?” sorts of questions that Vedrashko refers to. Such quantitative monitoring has likely become

the focus because, as is often the case when measuring people (see Ang 1991), it is easiest to do when the people are removed from the process. Quantifying comments and online discussion and semantically filtering them to determine sentiment promises a more consistent measure because the accuracy of gathering data is easier to ascertain and test, the failures of such tools are problems that can conceivably be fixed technologically, and companies can easily hire a platform (a “hearing aid,” if you will) to aggregate that data (Ford 2010a).

While companies have spent considerable time perfecting data gathering, on the one hand, and getting corporate messaging out through their “social media touchpoints,” on the other, many have not put as much emphasis on connecting what they say with what they hear. In *Chief Culture Officer* (2009), Grant McCracken calls on corporations to become “living” and “breathing” entities. While companies have become adept at exhaling their messaging, they are not so good at inhaling what their audiences are saying about them or the issues they are communicating about. Given how many companies are gasping aggregated audience data, we might imagine them on life support, relying on mechanical devices to inhale outside perspectives, their intakes narrowed to only those messages the company already knows how to suck in (Ford 2010a). From the corporate perspective, the more “listening” can resemble survey results, the better. (Or, if companies want qualitative insights, they turn to focus groups—closed, artificial environments with agendas under company control.) We do not mean to imply that such research has no place. However, we believe that turning the active conversations of communities into aggregated data (and thus turning publics into passive audiences) strips these groups of their agency and rejects their capacity for participation.

Ultimately, listening demands an active response: not just gathering data but doing something about it. Such action might include reaching out in response to what audiences are talking about: thanking them for their enthusiasm, offering support or additional resources, addressing concerns, and correcting misconceptions. In other cases, it might lead, rather, to internal changes: addressing the needs of unexpected surplus audiences, the pleas of lead and retro users, the cultural patterns among the communities the company most wants

to reach, or points of contention or misunderstanding that can be addressed through altering communication or business practice.

One of the most daunting reasons companies have concentrated primarily on hearing is that they are not really organized to listen effectively. Media and marketing scholars have long battled to keep audiences from being painted as one passive whole. In that same spirit, we must be careful not to describe organizations as a single, unified entity. Often, the marketing functions of a company have little, if any, connection to IT, legal, or customer service. Each of these divisions reports to a different part of corporate leadership and resides on a different campus; their leaders may only be vague acquaintances.

To the customer, all these touchpoints constitute “one brand.” Yet, internally, this fractured communication represents contradictory logics and competing measures of success with little internal alignment or collaboration. For instance, while marketing departments are charged and measured by how many ways they can “engage” the customer—or, at the very least, collect their “impressions” across various platforms—customer service departments are often measured by how quickly they can disengage with the customer, by metrics of efficiency (how many calls can be answered in an hour, for example).

At one time, these internal “silos” (the popular term to describe this problem in the corporate world) could exist separately because customers had fewer opportunities to speak outside the carefully orchestrated mechanisms of feedback a company provided. Today, however, when a brand asks audiences to collaborate in a contest to create “user-generated content” or facilitates the customization and spreading of “official” material, are these activities still within the purview of an advertising division or owned by public relations?

Such questions are more than just semantics. Corporate infrastructure has created rigid disciplinary divides among these various departments, not only in scope of work but—perhaps most importantly—in budget. Who “owns” the customer relationship within a company is ultimately a question of who remains relevant and who keeps their job. And, as corporate communicators throughout an organization adjust to a digital age, the tensions and fault lines between departments

shape how brands react to the ethos and practices of what we're calling spreadable media.

Certainly, various divisions of an organization might best be served to provide somewhat different functions in this media environment—advertisers, for instance, might listen to build, sustain, and make more relevant their marketing campaign; public relations professionals to build relationships and make the company responsive to conversations happening beyond the company's marketing; customer service to proactively respond to issues people are having with a company's products or services (Ford 2010b). However, listening to the audience is a goal and activity all these departments might share, one which might provide a central point on which to forge new means of internal communication and collaboration.

Most frustrating of all is that many companies don't truly listen because their leadership doesn't want to. Just as media makers often want to stay within the illusion of a broadcast world, where audiences could more easily be relegated to being passive individuals rather than understood as networked publics, corporate leaders live in a less complicated world when they can simplify how their customers are understood (hence the preference for hearing over listening).

Nevertheless, debates are taking place in every corporate boardroom between prohibitionists who wish to tightly control their intellectual properties and collaborationists who wish to build new relations with their audiences (Jenkins 2006b). As Erica Rand suggests in *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (1995), there are collaborators inside many companies working to liberalize policies, to enable alternative meanings, or otherwise to shift their relationship with their audiences. They may do so not because they want to "liberate" their audiences but rather because they see these concessions to the public as good business logic, or else their personal and professional ethics demand this shift.

For these collaborators, shifting from hearing to listening is important because of the potential benefits that can be achieved through listening and responding to audiences. As an illustration, take this example from the sports gaming community. Fans found that the *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08* game from EA Sports had a glitch in it wherein a player (playing as the eponymous Tiger Woods) could walk out onto

a water hazard and take a shot. Levinator25 was one of those fans, among several, who not only discovered the mistake but uploaded a YouTube video of their performing the shot in the game. When it was time to promote *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 09*, agency Wieden+Kennedy uploaded a 30-second video which begins with handheld footage of a computer showing Levinator25's video, followed by titles that read:

Levinator25,
You seem to think your Jesus Shot
video was a glitch in the game.

The spot then features the “real” Tiger Woods hitting his ball into a water hazard. Woods surveys the ball (which is sitting on a lily pad), removes his shoes and socks, and walks out on top of the water to take his shot. The ad ends with two sentences—“It’s not a glitch. He’s just that good.”—appearing over footage of Woods walking back across the water to the shore.

The ad was posted not as a standalone video but as a “response” on YouTube to Levinator25’s upload. Such an approach meant that W+K, EA Sports, and Woods made their commercial part of the community conversation that was already happening, demonstrating that they were paying attention and listening to the community of fans interested in their games. Such processes can lead to opportunities for companies to respond to their audiences in ways the audiences want and need and in ways that fit the conversations audiences are already having, where they are having them, in appropriate ways—if the company really listens to and understands the community to which it is reaching out.

However, listening practices are also crucial because the illusion of the broadcast world has been shattered. Not proactively listening to what customers or other groups are saying about a company’s brand means not answering a customer service problem before it becomes a public relations issue or not addressing a concern people have raised with a company’s messaging or business practice until it has already damaged the brand’s reputation. In other words, listening efforts are important for the company’s bottom line not just because they provide

a foundation for building positive relationships with audiences but also because they help avoid the types of crises which are becoming increasingly likely when companies ignore what people are saying about them or their products.⁵

For example, beginning in late 2009, Domino's Pizza dumped its traditional marketing in favor of listening to and addressing what people actually said about their pizza: that it wasn't very good. Rather than continue to ignore this reality, Domino's addressed it head-on, announcing publicly that it was committing itself to providing better pizza and asking its customers to help in this endeavor. The company reacted to online conversations about its new pizzas, solicited feedback, and committed to continue addressing issues people still had with Domino's. It asked audiences to document and send in any bad experience they had with the brand and ran a national advertising campaign highlighting what it had done wrong, apologizing, and pledging to fix the problem.

A more participatory media environment focuses not only on better understanding and prioritizing the ways media audiences participate but likewise the activities that media industries and brands must participate in if they want to continue to thrive. In other words, top-down corporate concepts of "alignment" should be replaced by companies who constantly listen to their audiences and who recalibrate their infrastructure to make the company more attuned to address what those audiences want and need.

Everyday Patterns of Co-Creation

If some companies are still learning how to "listen" and respond, networked culture is giving rise to more elaborate (and in some cases, radical) forms of co-creation and "produsage" which further revise our understanding of the relations between companies and audiences. We might consider these practices as collaboration in a different sense—that is, working together to achieve something that the participants could not achieve on their own. In our enhanced book, Ana Domb, director of the Interaction Design Program at Universidad Veritas in Costa Rica, describes the complex forms of participation which have grown up around the Brazilian popular music form *Tecnobrega*.

Her suggestive case study examines the roles various parties play in sustaining the production and circulation of recorded sound in a context where many dominant ideas about intellectual property have been suspended. As Domb suggests, these various participants—some amateur, some commercial, some occupying the borderlines between the two—form a value network; their activities are mutually sustaining, each contributing to the value of the overall experience.

Within this model, audiences are valued not only as customers within a commercial transaction—as purchasers of recorded music, event tickets, or branded merchandise—but also as active multipliers who contribute symbolic value to the Tecnobrega community. Tecnobrega is a musical subculture organized around thousands of large parties a month, where DJs pilot sophisticated and spectacular sound systems with hydraulic platforms and pyrotechnic effects. Equally crucial to this subculture, however, are the audiences, who organize themselves into “*equipas*, teams of friends that attend the parties and concerts together.” As Domb describes it, the *equipas* create value through their promotional activities: circulating music, promoting shows and their favorite acts, creating content (commissioning and composing songs, inventing dances, etc.), and elevating the DJ’s status in the community through public displays of fandom. These roles are significant for the success of the Tecnobrega scene at large. While many of these behaviors have been increasingly normalized as the activities of engaged fans, the Tecnobrega context is illuminating because this audience role is embraced as a means of sustaining music production in ways which may not be accounted for in conventional understandings of “audiences” or even “fandoms.”

Through examining social network sites, collective ventures such as free and open-source software, and collaborative online spaces such as Wikipedia and Slashdot, Axel Bruns (2008) offers a framework for understanding the different roles audience members play in a networked society. Importantly for our discussion, Bruns argues for a more fluid category of participation that he labels “produsage”—a merging of “production” and “usage,” undertaken by “producers” through collaborative processes of creation and re-creation. Built on technical affordances that encourage iterative approaches to tasks, fluid roles and a lack of hierarchy, shared rather than owned material, and

granular approaches to problem solving, network society encourages collaboration on projects by a “hive” community (18–19). This community creates through an “ongoing, perpetually unfinished, iterative, and evolutionary process of gradual development of the informational resources shared by the community” (20).

The blurring of roles that Bruns discusses aptly describes the participation of Tecnobrega’s superfans, who act “not simply as passive consumers, but active users, with some of them participating more strongly with a focus only on their own personal use, some of them participating more strongly in ways which are inherently constructive, and productive of social networks and communal content” (2008, 23). Read through Bruns’s framework, the activities of Tecnobrega audiences in generating crowd interest, promoting shows, distributing recordings through social network sites, and even begging DJs for recognition at parties, means those fans can be seen as significant creators of the experience they, and other more casual audiences, are enjoying as “the audience.” Domb recognizes that the returns Tecnobrega audiences enjoy come as much from members of other *equipes* as from the musicians and the event promoters.

And, given that the actions of effective *equipe* members are rewarded by social status (that is, the more popular your *equipe* is, the higher you are regarded within the community and the greater your celebrity profile), it could be argued Tecnobrega rewards through communal evaluation, as Bruns identifies. These parallels are not altogether unexpected—Bruns notes that practices similar to produsage can be identified in older DIY and enthusiast communities (2008, 390). Tecnobrega is a process, not a product—an ongoing scene, not a singular event. Like other kinds of produsage, the fans’ activity is never finished (27–28). One concert ends, and they begin planning for the next.

Practices of liking, recommending, and passing along texts are especially apparent in places that leverage attention, such as YouTube, where, Bruns argues, “produsage values” have triumphed over “production values” (2008, 255). There, Bruns notes, producers play curatorial and promotional roles, selecting and promoting content and creating metadata, improving the prospects of the material being found by future users. In doing so, he argues that these “producerly”

audiences are more likely to select for salience and resonance, undermining traditional media producers who have long relied on high production values to distinguish themselves from grassroots and independent media producers. Increasingly, everyone is making media as part of the normal response to reading/listening/viewing rather than out of a desire to be media producers in training.

Such active audience practices are particularly noticeable, for example, in the popularization of dance crazes. In our enhanced book, Kevin Driscoll—doctoral student at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism—looks at what might be learned from the online video phenomenon of staging dance routines based on Soulja Boy's 2007 "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" video. DeAndre Way, a high school student from rural Mississippi recording music as Soulja Boy Tell 'Em, became something of an overnight sensation in summer 2007 with his track "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)." Way's track was one of a number of "snap" tracks posted to music-sharing site Soundclick. As Driscoll explains, snap is a southern hip-hop genre that deviates "the most from the conventional hip-hop template. Snap's minimal drum programming and repetitive lyrics destabilized unquestioned hip-hop norms such as the value of complex wordplay and the use of funk and soul samples." Way was one of a small number of snap artists posting to Soundclick, each of them reworking a few common elements to create his own version of Crank Dat. Important to snap and the Crank Dat variation is dancing, a feature that distinguishes it from some other genres of hip-hop. Soulja Boy used his blog and social networking profiles to actively encourage fans to perform and build on his performance, to produce and share videos which remixed his song. This approach drove thousands of song downloads and millions of views for his MySpace blog, contributing to his signing a contract with a major record label within three months.

It is tempting to read Soulja Boy's success as the tale of a talented producer crafting a catchy song and designing an easily imitable dance which was then pushed out to the widest possible audience through YouTube. But, as Driscoll notes, the success of Soulja Boy had more to do with the way DeAndre Way engaged audiences to remix and reperform his content, providing "multiple points of entry," as Driscoll puts it:

For a particular cultural artifact to spread, its expressive potential must be accessible across seemingly disparate audiences. The Cash Camp clique demonstrated, through their idiosyncratic clothes, slang, dancing, and southern accents, multiple points of entry into the “Crank Dat” phenomenon. And Soulja Boy, by debuting his song as the soundtrack to another group’s homemade dance video, implicitly invited viewers to create further variations. The audiences that took up this invitation kept only the elements they found relevant. They felt free to create new dance steps, to rework the audio, to alter the video, and to introduce their own symbols of local significance.

Way encouraged audience transformation of his piece, asking people to speak back and say something unique through “Crank Dat.” Through this process, Soulja Boy acted as “curator, cheerleader, and embodied symbol for the collective ‘Crank Dat’ phenomenon,” according to Driscoll, encouraging rather than seeking legal action against fans who wanted to build on his own creations. As he explains in the song lyrics, “Y’all can’t do it like me / so don’t do it like me.” At each stage, the performer prompted and rewarded audience participation within a genre which has, as Driscoll points out, strong traditions of appropriation, transformation, performativity, and (local) identity expression.

The versions, interpretations, adaptations, and mash-ups fans created around “Crank Dat” are examples of audience practices that were already widespread on YouTube. Regardless of YouTube’s much publicized tagline inviting users to “Broadcast Themselves,” communication and dialogue rather than broadcasting and self-branding account for a significant amount of the site’s activity. Its architecture allows users to link an uploaded video to an existing one as a “response” and, in the process, to become a direct part of the original video’s circulation. Even the most green vloggers acknowledge their viewers by responding to comments in videos, inviting people to write in, and offering shout-outs that acknowledge other users of the service (Burgess and Green 2009; Lange 2009). Jean Burgess argues, “YouTube is in itself a social network site; one in which videos (rather than “friending”) are the primary medium of social connection between participants” (2008, 102).

Furthermore, Burgess suggests that certain videos “act as a hub for further creative activity by a wide range of participants” (2008, 102). These videos are mimicked, copied, mashed up, responded to, emulated, and re-created. They may not be, quantitatively, the “most popular” videos, but they may become more deeply embedded in popular memory through their repetition and variation. These are often the videos identified as “memes”—such as Way’s “Crank Dat” or Tay Zonday’s hugely popular YouTube music video for the song “Chocolate Rain.” Discussing the storm of creativity that the latter video inspired, Burgess notes that “Chocolate Rain”—much like “Crank Dat”—featured various ways for audiences to imitate or remix, from the unique baritone vocals to Zonday’s idiosyncratic performance and the video’s “liner notes”—style subtitles.

Bruns’s notion of produsage suggests that those who produce their own video responses retain their roles as audiences, even while they create and publish content. The same can be said of the people who help to spread these videos and who talk up Soulja Boy. YouTube is one space where we can all watch audiences do the work of being an audience member: the labor of making meaning, of connecting media with their lived realities and their personal and interpersonal identities.

YouTube is driven in part by the clip and the quote—the short grab or edited selection from other media texts. Such videos are evidence of audiences engaging with and appraising content, using it as a resource to express their personal identities and shared interests. Many industry leaders, however, view these mundane practices as significant threats. For instance, Brian Grazer, producer of *8 Mile*, said of a mash-up of his film and *Napoleon Dynamite*, “It bothers me artistically. Here’s this thing where you have no control; they are chopping it up and putting your memories in a blender” (quoted in Holson 2007). Meanwhile, Medialink Worldwide CEO and president Laurence Moskowitz said of copyright infringement in 2007 that “the genie has to be put back in the bottle, or the entire economics of the entertainment industry on a global basis are subject to ruinous counterfeiting” (quoted in Whitney 2007). Both statements point toward the media industries’ conflation of blatant piracy—the reproduction of a work in full for some degree of commercial gain—and a variety of fan activities that

comment on, critique, recommend, or make new creative statements using some portion of an existing work.

These are the kinds of practices John Hartley describes as “redaction”—the production of “new material by a process of editing existing content” (2008, 112). While quoting has become an accepted form of the circulation of printed material online (blogs regularly quote from and then link back to one another, for instance), many companies are not yet equipped to embrace the value generated through audiovisual quotes or other forms of transformative work as a means of incorporating their material into larger, ongoing conversations.

In a world where if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead, if it can’t be quoted, it might not mean anything. The social practices of spreadable media necessitate material that is quotable—providing easy ways for audiences to be able to excerpt from that material and to share those excerpts with others—and grabbable—providing the technological functions which make that content easily portable and sharable. The ability to easily embed videos from the site into other online forums has been key to YouTube’s success. Such grabbability is often a key factor in how material spreads. For example, Emma F. Webb (2011) has explored how online videos are often used as a reference point or illustration in soap opera fan discussions and critiques. These appropriations are not simply produced by audiences; they are generating audiences through heightening popular awareness of the programs being quoted and, more importantly, sustaining audiences through fueling ongoing conversations.

The Problem of Unequal Participation

The gains made in making the communication environment more participatory for some people have not been the inevitable consequence of the introduction of new digital technologies and networked communications. They emerge from the choices made, and which continue to be made, about how new tools and platforms are deployed. A 2006 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart et al. 2007) found that people in households that earned \$75,000 or more per year were three times more likely to produce and share Internet content than those whose annual household income was less than \$30,000. These inequalities keep expanding: as low-income

U.S. residents have gained access to networked computers through schools and public libraries, their wealthier counterparts have gained access to broadband and enjoy unlimited access from their homes (Livingstone and Bober 2005).

Wikipedians talk about “systemic bias,” that is, the ways that the content creation in their grassroots project is limited and unbalanced by the demographics of who participates and who doesn’t. The issue of systematic bias has long been discussed amongst Wikipedians, but this bias shapes all “Web 2.0” platforms. It matters when more Asian American contributors have risen to the top ranks on YouTube than African Americans or when user-moderated sites lack mechanisms that promote diversity of perspectives. In each of these cases, the affordances of these platforms may seem neutral in their design but not in their effects because technological “fixes” cannot overcome other factors that shape the relative access of different groups to cultural and communicative power. Limited online participation may reflect a lack of disposable time, especially among those who lack digital access in the workplace, just as it reflects a lack of disposable income (Seiter 2008). Thus, this lack of participation might persist when one has technical access but not the skills and cultural knowledge required to fully take part. Further, those who do not know anyone who uses the Internet to engage in participatory culture practices may lack meaningful role models to inspire their own use of the technologies and platforms.⁶

Changes in these inequalities are unlikely to come from corporations focusing on “underserved markets,” an approach which presumes that the primary drivers of the new media landscape are economic and that we should be courted as customers first rather than as community members. Nor will it come from public service projects designed to ensure access to technologies but not training for the skills required to meaningfully participate. Obtaining Internet access for public schools and libraries in the United States was touted as helping to close the “digital divide” during the presidency of Bill Clinton, but governmental policy at all levels has sought to significantly limit access to social network sites and video-sharing platforms or to impose mandatory filters on web content rather than developing skills for negotiating these spaces.

Many of the most powerful efforts to broaden participation have instead come from communities working together to overcome constraints on their communication capacities. Sasha Costanza-Chock (2010), for instance, has described the emergence of new media strategies and tactics among Latin groups in Southern California as “transmedia mobilization,” a strategy which taps into any and all available media platforms to spread its message. Historically, these immigrant rights activists have courted coverage through Anglo mass media with limited success: their message was often marginalized or distorted. The rise of ethnic broadcast media in California, especially Spanish-language radio and television, has granted these immigrant rights groups broader but still centralized access to the channels of communication.

While the *Locutores*—the hosts of Spanish-language talk-radio programs—still play the greatest role in mobilizing immigrant rights supporters to participate in protest marches, Costanza-Chock notes a growing deployment of social media and participatory practices, especially among younger activists but spreading across the movement as activists have come to recognize the ways that such digital practices can lower costs and expand their reach. As he explains, “Transmedia mobilization thus marks a transition in the role of movement communicators from content creation to aggregation, curation, remix and circulation of rich media texts through networked movement formations” (2010).

Transmedia mobilization takes advantage of the community’s latent communications capabilities. Costanza-Chock describes how immigrants in Los Angeles had been early adopters of video cameras, collectively recording major community events—such as festivals, weddings, funerals, and concerts—and mailing the tapes back to their hometowns as a way of sustaining family and community ties across geographic distances. More recently, the use of video-sharing sites online has supplemented the physical shipping of tapes. These same practices get deployed when immigrant rights activists record and upload footage of protests or talks by community leaders about their struggles. (Many of these digital skills are then passed informally between friends and co-workers, while young people who have acquired new media literacies through schools end up teaching their parents and grandparents.)

As the value of transmedia mobilization has become clearer, many traditional activist and labor groups in the U.S. have begun providing training in new media skills to their memberships, often in the service of producing media that may spread their messages into other segments of the community. For example, Costanza-Chock documents a project called Radio Tijeras which trained garment workers in audio production practices (2010, 174). Participants created newscasts, recorded poems, generated public service announcements, and captured oral history. They mixed their own productions with popular music in creating *discos volantes* (CD audio magazines) to be distributed inside downtown Los Angeles garment sweatshops. More generally, participation in the production and circulation of movement messages strengthens ties and heightens engagement within the cause, allowing participants a greater sense of ownership over what was produced and a greater sense of involvement in the outcome.

The message may spread through Facebook pages and Twitter postings, talk radio and audio magazines, street art and oratory. Often, the same content gets repurposed or remixed as it travels across platforms. Hybrid systems of communication, especially those between higher- and lower-tech media, bridge literacy gaps in immigrant communities. To cite a historical example, Jewish immigrants working in sweatshops in New York at the turn of the twentieth century would hire someone to read books, newspapers, and magazines aloud to them while they worked (Howe and Libo 1983). Turning to a more recent example, bloggers in Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon War created compelling drawings and graphics which could be printed out and posted by digitally connected supporters in Lebanese immigrant communities around the world, thus conveying their message to people who might lack both digital access and media literacy skills required to follow the blogs themselves (Jenkins 2006a).

There is a strong tradition in policy literature about the developing world of talking about “appropriate technologies”—that is, technologies which accommodate the skills and needs of local populations, are sustainable, respect their environments, and take full advantage of the affordances of often limited technical infrastructures and resources. Many times, these practices straddle media, often bridging between

diverse populations while ensuring the communication of core messages. Such practices frequently involve the interplay between low- and high-tech cultures, such as that which John Fiske (1994) describes in his work on the ways pirate radio functioned in the African American and immigrant communities of Los Angeles in the wake of the 1992 L.A. riots. In that instance, participants used grassroots media to contest dominant media framings of the uprisings and to question police authority, in the process often reading aloud and debating printed accounts which might not have been accessible to the entire community. Costanza-Chock's more recent account of immigrant rights activism suggests that a similarly hybrid system of communication continues to function within Los Angeles, challenging and supplementing mass-media representations through more locally constructed and participatory forms of messaging.

Yet it is telling that Costanza-Chock, in his study, describes many of these communication practices as remaining within the Latin immigrant community. Participants in the immigrant rights movement, he argues, believe that they have little chance of reaching Anglo audiences or that they will find little support there, given the demagogic anti-immigrant rhetoric which runs through some English-language television and talk-radio programs. While these groups sometimes use social media to find common cause with other immigrant populations who are engaged in similar struggles, they frequently receive little or no response from mainstream media that could help them reach and persuade Anglo audiences about the justness of their cause. Thus, we find in the immigrant rights movement a rich example of how media texts spread (across generations, across platforms, across national borders) and when and why they do not (across ideological and class divides, across language barriers, and especially across the closed minds of many people outside the movement).

Meanwhile, other researchers have found that online social networks can be as much if not more segregated than social networks in the physical world. As danah boyd (2011) and S. Craig Watkins (2010) have documented, Facebook and other social network sites often operate as the digital equivalent of gated communities, protecting participants from online contact with people outside their social circle

as much as enabling easier and quicker communications with their friends and families. Both boyd and Watkins argue that people choose between Facebook and MySpace based on their economic aspirations and educational status, often using language heavily coded in class and racial terms to describe what they dislike about the other platform. Watkins compares this process to the “big sort,” which has reintroduced segregation in many U.S. cities through residential patterns.

How seriously we take these inequalities of access and opportunity depends very much on what we see as the value of participation. If, like some skeptics, we see participatory culture as “consumptive behavior by a different name,” then we should, as a former Federal Communications Commissioner suggested, see the digital divide as no more consequential than the gap in who owns fancy cars. If we see participatory culture, though, as a vital step toward the realization of a century-long struggle for grassroots communities to gain greater control over the means of cultural production and circulation—if we see participation as the work of publics and not simply of markets and audiences—then opportunities to expand participation are struggles we must actively embrace through our work, whether through efforts to lower economic and technical obstacles or to expand access to media literacies. (These debates become very real when low-income school districts struggle over whether to spend their sparse budgets on teachers, textbooks, or computers.) And, if we see the current moment as one of “collaboration” or co-creation—that is, if we see it as involving more complex relations between companies and audiences—we have all the more reason to expand the struggle over the terms of our participation. Our examples here (ranging from Tecnobrega in Brazil to “snap” videos on YouTube and the immigrant rights struggles in Los Angeles) all suggest ways that our public sphere has been enriched through the diversification of who has the means to create and share culture.

When we describe our culture as becoming more participatory, we are speaking in relative terms—participatory in relation to older systems of mass communication—and not in absolute terms. We do not and may never live in a society where every member is able to fully participate, where the lowest of the low has the same communicative capacity as the most powerful elites. Insofar as participation within

networked publics becomes a source of discursive and persuasive power—and insofar as the capacities to meaningfully participate online are linked to educational and economic opportunities—then the struggle over the right to participation is linked to core issues of social justice and equality.

As we've seen here, the nature of participation in the digital age is a complicated matter. For even those groups who have greater access to digital technologies and have mastered the skills to deploy them effectively toward their own end, our capacity to participate can be complicated by issues of who owns the platforms through which communication occurs and how their agendas shape how those tools can be deployed. And, even if we get our messages through, there is often a question of whether anyone is listening. None of this allows us to be complacent about the current conditions of networked communications, even if the expanded opportunities for participation give us reasons for hope and optimism.

What we are calling spreadability starts from an assumption that circulation constitutes one of the key forces shaping the media environment. It comes also from a belief that, if we can better understand the social and institutional factors that shape the nature of circulation, we may become more effective at putting alternative messages into circulation (a goal which brings us back to Enzensberger's talk of "aggressive forms of publicity"). This chapter has looked at the shapes that participation takes in societies increasingly using digital tools to communicate and gather. In chapter 5, we will argue that what spreads in this participatory environment is what John Fiske (1989b) might call the "producerly" texts which constitute resources that participatory communities deploy in their interactions with each other. In doing so, we move between a focus on the properties of the networked audience and the properties of texts which are increasingly being designed to spread through social network sites, whether by brands seeking to reach current or potential customers or by activists seeking to reach supporters.