

SPREADABILITY

IF IT DOESN'T
SPREAD,
IT'S
DEAD

Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace

by Henry Jenkins, Xiaochang Li, and Ana Domb Krauskopf
with Joshua Green



CONVERGENCE CULTURE CONSORTIUM
COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES AT MIT

CMS

MIT
Massachusetts
Institute of
Technology

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Use of the terms “viral” and “memes” by those in the marketing, advertising and media industries may be creating more confusion than clarity. Both these terms rely on a biological metaphor to explain the way media content moves through cultures, a metaphor that confuses the actual power relations between producers, properties, brands, and consumers. Both have been used so loosely they can refer to everything from word-of-mouth marketing efforts to remix videos to popular content in ways that don’t help us understand the nature of these different activities and the potential relationships between them. Both terms seek to explain the process of cultural transmission but do so in such a way they strip aside the social and cultural contexts in which ideas circulate, and the human choices which determine which ideas get replicated.

Talking about memes and viral media places an emphasis on the replication of the original idea, which fails to consider the everyday reality of communication — that ideas get transformed, repurposed, or distorted as they pass from hand to hand, a process which has been accelerated as we move into network culture. Arguably, those ideas which survive are those which can be most easily appropriated and reworked by a range of different communities. In focusing on the involuntary transmission of ideas by unaware consumers, these models allow advertisers and media producers to hold onto an inflated sense of their own power to shape the communication process, even as unruly behavior by consumers becomes a source of great anxiety within the media industry. A close look at particular examples of Internet “memes” or “viruses” highlight the ways they have mutated as they have traveled through an increasingly participatory culture.

Given these limitations, we are proposing an alternative model which we think better accounts for how and why media content circulates at the present time, the idea of **spreadable media**.

A spreadable model emphasizes the activity of consumers — or what Grant McCracken calls “multipliers” — in shaping the circulation of media content, often expanding potential meanings and opening up brands to unanticipated new markets. Rather than emphasizing the direct replication of “memes,” a spreadable model assumes that the **repurposing and transformation of media content adds value**, allowing media content to be localized to diverse contexts of use. This notion of spreadability is intended as a contrast to older models of stickiness which emphasize **centralized control over distribution and attempts to maintain ‘purity’ of message**.

SCHEMA COMPARING SPREADABILITY VS. STICKINESS

- **Stickiness seeks to attract and hold the attention of site visitors; Spreadability seeks to motivate and facilitate the efforts of fans and enthusiasts to “spread” the word.**
- **Stickiness depends on concentrating the attention of all interested parties on a specific site or through a specific channel; spreadability seeks to expand consumer awareness by dispersing the content across many potential points of contact.**
- **Stickiness depends on creating a unified consumer experience as consumers enter into branded spaces; spreadability depends on creating a diversified experience as brands enter into the spaces where people already live and interact.**
- **Stickiness depends on prestructured interactivity to shape visitor experiences; spreadability relies on open-ended participation as diversely motivated but deeply engaged consumers retrofit content to the contours of different niche communities.**
- **Stickiness typically tracks the migrations of individual consumers within a site; Spreadability maps the flow of ideas through social networks.**
- **Under stickiness, a sales force markets to consumers; under spreadability, grassroots intermediaries become advocates for brands.**
- **Stickiness is a logical outgrowth of the shift from broadcasting’s push model to the web’s pull model; spreadability restores some aspects of the push model through relying on consumers to circulate the content within their own communities.**
- **Under stickiness, producers, marketers, and consumers are separate and distinct roles; spreadability depends on increased collaboration across and even a blurring of the distinction between these roles.**
- **Stickiness depends on a finite number of channels for communicating with consumers; spreadability takes for granted an almost infinite number of often localized and many times temporary networks through which media content circulates.**

FIVE FACTORS THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR SPREADABLE MEDIA

- On a technical level, *widgetization* makes it much easier for us to bring branded media content into our own spaces.
- *Plentitude* – the fragmentation and diversification of cultural life – provides the cultural context which requires a much stronger match between consumer interest and the available content, thus creating a space which might support niche media and which would demand the customization of mass media content to local particulars.
- The *Long Tail* model reflects a rethinking of business plans to reflect the risks and opportunities that emerge from this fragmentation and localization of the mass media marketplace.
- *Online social networks* provide mechanisms which allow trusted recommendations to spread across different but intersecting communities of interest, which blur the boundaries between virtual and real world social interactions, and which allow consumers to assert stronger social ties with brands, stars, and media properties.
- *Participatory culture* allows consumers to take media in their own hands, not simply selecting content from the menu of available options, but also producing their own media, often in explicit response to previously circulating materials.

The focus on spreadable media requires greater attention be paid to the social relations between media producers and consumers. There are significant differences between what motivates consumers to spread content and what motivates producers to seek the circulation of their brands. These differences can be understood in terms of the contrast between **commodity culture** and the **gift economy**. Drawing on ideas from Lewis Hyde and Grant McCracken, we outline the defining traits of these two systems of exchange.

For media properties to move from the commodity culture in which it is produced to the gift economy through which it circulates and has value, it must pass through a point where “value” gets transformed into “worth”, where what has a price becomes priceless, where economic investment gives way to sentimental investment. Recognizing this takes place, and understanding how this occurs, is crucial to understanding what motivates consumers to “spread” advertising and other media content within their social networks. When people pass along content, they are not doing so as paid employees motivated by economic gain; they are **doing so as members of social communities involved in activities which are meaningful to them** on either an individual or social level.

Those texts which spread the furthest and most rapidly show signs of what John Fiske calls the “producerly”: their structures are

open ended enough to allow diverse communities to appropriate them and deploy them to express local meanings and interpretations. For this to occur, the producers have to give up a certain degree of control over their messages as well as over the contexts in which they circulate. Under this model, cultural materials, such as advertisements, become the raw materials which community members use to express shared meanings or to reaffirm social ties with each other. It is their openness to such reworking which allows these cultural goods to function as “gifts” and thus to acquire “worth” within particular social contexts.

The role of the consumer or audience is in flux in this era of spreadable media. Consumers help to produce meaning around advertisements; they help to spread messages. Sometimes they are fans, sometimes critics. We are struggling to come up with a meaningful vocabulary to talk about these new sets of relationships. At the same time, we need to adopt a range of different models for describing the new kinds of communities which are emerging within a networked culture. Media spreads in different ways through **Pools** (organized around a shared goal or interest), **Webs** (organized through interlocking social ties), and **Hubs** (organized around a dominant personality); the spread of media is also impacted through different kinds of barriers of entry into communities which can encourage stronger or weaker social ties, greater or less participation, or more or less opportunities to exchange media with others.

We need to develop a better understanding of how the **circulation of information enhances people's sense of affiliation within communities.** Researchers have found, for example, that the circulation of rumors serve symbolic or expressive functions far beyond the credibility of the information they contain.

COMMUNITY EFFECTS OF INFORMATION CIRCULATION

- To bolster camaraderie and articulate the (presumably shared) experiences and values that identify oneself as belong to a particular community (“bolstering their identity”)
- To gather information and explain difficult to understand events or circumstances.
- To establish the boundaries of an “in-group”.

FOUR BASIC FACTORS ATTRIBUTED TO SPREADABILITY

- they contain absurd humor or parody;
- they pose puzzles or enigmas which encourage us to seek out other information
- they are incomplete without our active participation
- they express themes of community and nostalgia which are central themes of the gift economy.

argument: Tenets of Competing Economic Orders for Producers versus Consumers

Commodity Culture

Contractual Arrangements
Reckoned Transactions
Dynamic Social Relations
Motivated by Financial Gain
Economic Value
Fantasy: Freedom, Individuality and Transformation
Everything can be Bought and Sold

Gift Economy

Social Norms
Reciprocity
Dynamic Circulation of Goods
Motivated by Status and Reputation
Sentimental Worth
Fantasy: Nostalgia, Community, Continuity, Tradition
Not all gifts can be accepted

We are still in a transitional moment as the era of stickiness gives way to the age of spreadability, making it difficult to make broad recommendations for how specific companies should respond to the potentials and risks involved in this more decentralized model for delivering branded content. In the near future, many companies are going to be reluctant to give up the perceived ability to lock down content and control consumer's attention as represented in the old stickiness model. Other companies will embrace spreadability as a way of getting their brands in front of new consumers and lowering the cost of advertising campaigns.

BUSINESS ADVANTAGES OF EMBRACING SPREADABILITY STRATEGIES

- **Spreadability may help to expand and intensify consumer awareness of a new and emerging brand or transform their perceptions of an existing brand, re-affirming its central place in their lives.**
- **Spreadability may expand the range of potential markets for a brand by introducing it, at low costs and low risks, to niches that previously were not part of its market.**
- **Spreadability may intensify consumer loyalty by increasing emotional attachment to the brand or media franchise.**
- **Spreadability may expand the shelf life of existing media content by creating new ways of interacting with it and it may even rebuild or reshape the market for a dormant brand.**

In the short run, companies need to be clear on which model they are using and why. Where companies want to distribute messages which are targeted at the general population and which are time sensitive in nature, broadcast-based models of distribution are difficult to beat. Business models are still emerging around the distribution of spreadable media content, with the primary ones currently involving advertising support, subscriptions, or direct payment. In the short run, companies are apt to embrace hybrid strategies, relying on broadcast and stickiness models for some purposes, experimenting with spreadable media for specific purposes or audiences. Those companies which remain completely locked down will increasingly find it difficult to reach digitally-connected younger consumers who want to be able to take the media they want where they want it.

MEDIA AND THE MEME INTRODUCTION:

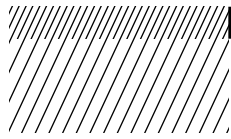
Definitions of ‘viral’ media suffer from being both too limiting and too all-encompassing. The term ‘viral’ has been used to describe so many related but ultimately distinct practices — ranging from Word-of-Mouth marketing to video mash-ups and remixes posted to YouTube — that just what counts as viral is unclear. It is invoked in discussions about buzz marketing and building brand recognition while also popping up in discussions about guerilla marketing, exploiting social networks, and mobilizing consumers and distributors. Needless, the concept of viral distribution is useful for understanding the emergence of a spreadable media landscape. Ultimately, however, viral media is a flawed way to think about distributing content through informal or ad-hoc networks of consumers.

In this section, we will explore the roots of the concept of viral media, looking at the concept of the “media viruses” and its ties to the theory of the “meme”. The reliance on a potent biological metaphor to describe the process of communication reflects a particular set of assumptions about the power relations between producers, texts, and consumers which may obscure the realities these terms seek to explain. The metaphor of “infection” reduces consumers to the involuntary “hosts” of media viruses, while holding onto the idea that media producers can design “killer” texts which can ensure circulation by being injected directly into the cultural “bloodstream.” While attractive, such a notion doesn’t reflect the complexity of cultural and communicative processes. A continued dependency on terms based in biological phenomena dramatically limits our ability

to adequately describe viral (media?) as a complex system of social, technological, textual, and economic practices and relations.

In the following, we will outline the limits of these two analogies as part of making the case for the importance of adopting a new model for thinking about the grassroots circulation of content in the current media landscape. In the end, we are going to propose that these concepts be retired in favor of a new framework — Spreadable Media.

But first, onward to the laboratory!



Definitional Fuzziness

In the Spring of 2007, the Comparative Media Studies Program invited practitioners from two “alternative advertising” agencies to share with us their understandings of the nature of viral media. The resulting discussion eloquently demonstrates the confusion about what viral media might be, about what it is good for, and why it’s worth thinking about. One panelist began by suggesting viral media referred to situations “where the marketing messaging was powerful enough that it spread through the population like a virus,” a suggestion the properties of viral media lie in the message itself, or perhaps in those who crafted that message. The second, on the other hand, described viral media in terms of the activity of consumers: “Anything you think is cool enough to send to your friends, that’s viral.” Later in the same exchange, he suggested “Viral, just by definition, is something that gets passed around by people.”

As the discussion continued, it became clearer and clearer that viral media, like art and pornography, lies in the eye of the beholder. No one knew for sure why any given message “turned viral,” though there was lots of talk about “designing the DNA” of viral properties and being “organic” to the communities through which messages circulated. To some degree, it seemed the strength of a viral message depends on “how easy is it to pass”, suggesting viralness has something to do with the technical properties of the medium, yet quickly we were also told that it had to do with whether the message fit into the ongoing conversations of the community: “If you’re getting a ton of negative comments, maybe you’re not talking about it in the right place.” And so it went.

By the end of the exchange, no one — not the speakers nor the students — could sort out what was meant by “viral media” or what metrics should be deployed to measure its success. This kind of definitional fuzziness makes it increasingly difficult to approach

Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediaspace. The “protein shell” of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style or even a pop hero – as long as it can catch our attention. Any one of these media virus shells will search out the receptive nooks and crannies in popular culture and stick on anywhere it is noticed. Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of *ideological code* – not genes, but a conceptual equivalent we now call “memes” (Rushkoff, 1994, p.9-10, emphasis his).

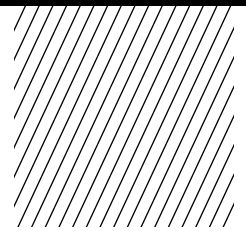


the process analytically. Without certainty about what set of practices the term refers to, it is impossible to attempt to understand how and why such practices work.

As already noted, the reliance on a biological metaphor to explain the way communication takes place — through practices of ‘infection’ — represents the first difficulty with the notion of viral media. The attraction of the infection metaphor is two-fold:

INFECTION METAPHOR

- It reduces consumers, often the most unpredictable variable in the sender-message-receiver frame, to involuntary “hosts” of media viruses;
- While holding onto the idea that media producers can design “killer” texts which can ensure circulation by being injected directly into the cultural “bloodstream.”



Douglas Rushkoff’s 1994 book *Media Virus* may not have invented the term “viral media”, but his ideas eloquently describe the way these texts are popularly held to behave. The media virus, Rushkoff argues, is a Trojan horse, that surreptitiously bring messages into our homes — messages can be encoded into a form people are compelled to pass along and share, allowing the embedded meanings, buried inside like DNA, to “infect” and spread, like a pathogen. There is an implicit and often explicit proposition that this spread of ideas and messages can occur not only without the user’s consent, but perhaps actively against it, requiring that people be duped into passing a hidden agenda while circulating compelling content. Douglas Rushkoff insists he is not using the term “as a metaphor. These media events are not like viruses. They are viruses . . . (such as) the common cold, and perhaps even AIDS” (Rushkoff, 1994, p.9).

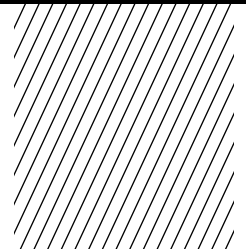
The “hidden agenda” and “embedded meanings” Rushkoff mentions are the brand messages buried at the heart of viral videos, the promotional elements in videos featuring Mentos (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKoBoMHVBvM>) exploding out of soda bottles, or Gorillas playing the drumline of *In the Air Tonight* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHjieD6CTYs>). The media virus

proposition is that these marketing messages — messages consumers may normally avoid, approach skeptically, or disregard altogether — are hidden by the “protein shell” of compelling media properties. Nestled within interesting bits of content, these messages are snuck into the heads of consumers, or willfully passed between them.

These messages, Rushkoff and others suggest, constitute “memes”, conceived by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 as a sort of evolutionary version of the gene. Dawkins was looking for a way to explain cultural evolution, imagining it as a biological system. What genes are to genetics, he suggested, memes would be to culture. Like the gene, the meme is driven to self-create, and is possessed of three important characteristics:

MEME CHARACTERISTICS

- **Fidelity** – memes have the ability to retain their informational content as they pass from mind to mind;
- **Fecundity** – memes possess the power to induce copies of themselves;
- **Longevity** – memes that survive longer have a better chance of being copied.



The meme, then, is “a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds” (Brodie, 1996, p.32). They are the ideas at the center of virally spread events, some coherent, self-replicating idea which moves from person-to-person, from mind-to-mind, duplicating itself as it goes.

Language seems to ‘evolve’ by non-genetic means and at a rate which is orders of magnitude faster than genetic evolution. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 1976, p.189).

Dawkins remained vague about the granularity of this concept, seeing it as an all-purpose unit which could explain everything from politics to fashion. Each of these fields are comprised of good ideas, good ideas which, in order to survive, attach themselves to media virii — funny, catchy, compelling bits of content — as a vehicle to infect new minds with copies of themselves.

Though imagined long before the rise of the Internet and the Web, the idea of the meme has been widely embraced as a way of talking about the rapid dispersion of information and the widespread circulation of concepts which characterize the digital era. It has been a particularly attractive way to think about the rise of Internet fads like the LOLcats or Soulja Boy, fads considered seemingly trivial or meaningless. The content which circulates in such a fashion is seen as simplistic, fragmentary, and essentially meaningless, though it may shape our beliefs and actions in significant ways. *Wired* magazine (Miller, 2007, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/15.03/snackminifesto.html>) recently summed it up as a culture of “media snacks”:

We now devour our pop culture the same way we enjoy candy and chips – in conveniently packaged bite-size nuggets made to be munched easily with increased frequency and maximum speed. This is snack culture – and boy, is it tasty (not to mention addictive).

This description of snacks implies that they are without nutritional value, trivial or meaningless aspect of our culture, a time waste. And if this meaningless content is self-replicating then consumers are “irrational,” and unable to escape their infection. Yet these models — the idea of the meme and the media virus, of self-replicating ideas hidden in attractive, catchy ideas we are helpless to resist — is a problematic way to understand cultural practices. We want to suggest that these materials travel through the web

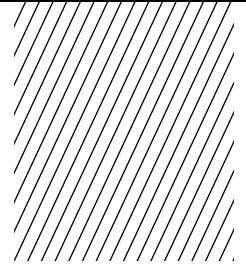
We are all susceptible to the pull of viral ideas. Like mass hysteria. Or a tune that gets into your head that you keep on humming all day until you spread it to someone else. Jokes. Urban Legends. Crackpot religions. Marxism. No matter how smart we get, there is always this deep irrational part that makes us potential hosts for self-replicating information. (Neil Stephenson, Snow Crash, 1992, p.399)

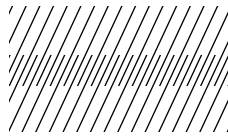


because they are meaningful to the people who spread them. At the most fundamental level, such an approach misunderstands the way content spreads, which is namely, through the active practices of people. As such, we would like to suggest:

SPREADABILITY IS AN ACTIVE PRACTICE

- That “memes” do not self-replicate;
- That people are not “susceptible” to this viral media;
- That viral media and Internet memes are not nutritionally bereft, meaningless ‘snacks’.





People and The Problem of Agency

Central to the difficulties of both the meme and the media virus is a particular confusion about the role people play in passing along these media products. From the start, memetics has suffered from a confusion about the nature of agency. Unlike genetic features, culture is not in any meaningful sense self-replicating — it relies on people to propel, develop and sustain it. The term ‘culture’ originates from metaphors of agriculture: the analogy was of cultivating the human mind much as one cultivates the land; Culture thus represents the assertion of human will and agency upon nature. As such, cultures are not something that happen *to* us, cultures are something we collectively *create*. Certainly any individual can be influenced by the culture which surrounds them, by the fashion, media, speech and ideas that fill their daily life, but individuals make their own contributions to their cultures through the choices which they make. The language of memetics, however, strips aside the concept of human agency.

Processes of cultural adaptation are more complex than the notion of meme circulation makes out. Indeed, theories for understanding cultural uptake must consider two factors not closely considered by memetics: *human choice* and the *medium* through which these ideas are circulated. A model of memetics makes sense when trying to understand culture as a biological system, but the reality is that every day humans create and circulate many more ideas than are actually likely to gain any deep traction within a culture. Over time, only a much smaller number of phrases, concepts, images, or stories survive. This winnowing down of cultural options is the

Dawkins writes not about how “people acquire ideas” but about how “ideas acquire people.”



product not of the strength of particular ideas but of many, many individual choices as people decide what ideas to reference, which to share with each other, decisions based on a range of different agendas and interests far beyond how compelling individual ideas may be. Few of the ideas get transmitted in anything like their original form: humans adapt, transform, rework them on the fly in response to a range of different local circumstances and personal needs. Stripping aside the human motives and choices that shape this process reveals little about the spread of these concepts.

By the same token, ideas circulate differently in and through different media. Some media allow for the more or less direct transmission of these ideas in something close to their original form — as when a video gets replayed many times — while others necessarily encourage much more rapid transformations — as occurs when we play a game of “telephone” and each person passing along a message changes it in some way. So, it makes little sense to talk about “memes” as an all-purpose unit of thought without regard to the medium and processes of cultural transmission being described. Indeed, discussing the emergence of Internet memes, education researchers Michael Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007) suggest Dawkins’ notion of memetic ‘fidelity’ needs to be done away with altogether. Defining the Internet meme as the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea, presented as a written text, image, language, “‘move’ or some unit of cultural “stuff”, Knobel and Lankshear suggest adaptation is central to the propagation of memes, completely failing to maintain the fidelity Dawkins describes:

Many of the online memes in this study were not passed on entirely ‘intact’ in that the meme ‘vehicle’ was changed, modified, mixed with other referential and expressive resources, and regularly given idiosyncratic spins by participants. . . . A concept like ‘replicability’ therefore needs to include remixing as an important practice associated with many successful online memes, where remixing includes modifying, bricolaging, splicing, reordering, superimposing, etc., original and

other images, sounds, films, music, talk, and so on.
(Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, p.208–209)

Their argument is particularly revealing as a way to think about just what comprises the object at the heart of the Internet meme. The recent “LOLcat” Internet meme, built so heavily upon remixing and appropriation, is a good case study to illustrate the role of remixing in Internet memes. “LOLcats” are pictures of animals, most commonly cats, with digitally superimposed text for humorous effect. Officially referred to as “image macros,” the pictures often feature “LOLspeak”, a type of broken English that enhances the amusing tone of the juxtaposition. On websites such as icanhascheezburger.com, users are invited to upload their own “LOLcats” which are then shared throughout the web.

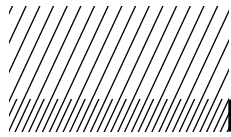
Over time, different contributors have stretched the “LOLcat” idea in many different directions which would not have been anticipated by the original posters — including a whole strand of images centering around Walruses and buckets, the use of “LOLspeak” to translate religious texts (LOLbible) or represent complex theoretical arguments, the use of similar image macros to engage with Emo culture, philosophy (loltheorists), and dogs (LOLdogs, see: ihasahotdog.com).

So just what is the “meme” at the centre of this Internet meme? What is the idea that is replicated? More than the content of the pictures, the “meme” at the heart of this Internet phenomenon is the structure of the picture itself—the juxtaposition, broken English, and particularly the use of irreverent humor. Given the meme lies in the structure, however — how to throw the pot rather than the pot itself — then it is inherently based on not replication than adaptation, the very viability of the meme itself is dependent on the ability for the idea to be adapted in a variety of different ways. In this sense, then, it is somewhat hard to see how contained within this structure is a “message” waiting to occupy unsuspecting minds.

The re-use, remixing and adaptation of the LOLcat idea instead suggest that the spread and replication of this form of cultural production is not due to the especially compelling nature of the LOLcat idea but the fact it can be used to make meaning. A similar situation can be seen in the case of the “Crank Dat” song by Soulja Boy, which some have described as one of the most successful Internet memes of 2007. Soulja Boy, originally an obscure amateur performer in Atlanta, produced a music video for his first song “Crank Dat”, which he uploaded to video sharing sites such as YouTube. Soulja Boy then encouraged his fans to appropriate, remix, and reperform the song, spreading it through social networks, YouTube, and the blogosphere, in the hopes of gaining greater visibility for himself and his music.

Along the way, Crank Dat got performed countless times by very different communities — from white suburban kids to black ballet dancers, from football teams to MIT graduate students. The video was used as the basis for “mash up” videos featuring characters as diverse as *Winnie the Pooh* and *Dora the Explorer*. People added their own steps, lyrics, themes, and images to the videos they made. As the song circulated, Soulja Boy’s reputation grew — he scored a record contract, and emerged as a top recording artist. — in part as a consequence of his understanding of the mechanisms by which cultural content circulates within a participatory culture.

The success of “Crank Dat” cannot be explained as the slavish emulation of the dance by fans, as the self-replication of a “compelling” idea. Rather, “Crank Dat” spread the way dance crazes have always spread – through the processes of learning and adaptation by which people learn to dance. As Kevin Driscoll discussed at the C3 Partners’ Retreat in May 2008, watching others dance to learn steps and refining these steps so they express local experience or variation are crucial to dance itself. Similarly, the adaptation of the LOLcat form to different situations — theory, puppies, politicians — constitute processes of meaning making, as people use tools at their disposal to explain the world around them.



From Viral to Spreadability

It is not hard to understand why the idea of both memes and the media virus would be attractive to marketers. If the right meme was deployed, theory suggests it would successfully acquire people, reaching more and more possible consumers as it does. Similarly, Rushkoff's notion of "viral" circulation appeals to advertisers because it allows them to give up control over little more than the specific path of dissemination. In this scenario, they are cast as purposeful agent zeros, unleashing a message that spreads through its own volition, the instructions of replication imbedded in the DNA of the campaign.

But if the rising anxieties over brand equity, appropriation of content, miscommunication, lack of communication, and the ultimate value of viral campaigns is any indication, many advertisers are well aware that this model of "viral" media, which doesn't account for individual or social agency, does not accurately reflect the present media landscape. The idea of the "media virus" breaks down because people are making conscious choices about what media they are passing along and about the forms within which they are circulating it. As we saw in the discussion of the LOLcat meme above, the core message may be manipulated or turned against the original authors as it spreads across the internet. Consumers have shown a remarkable ability to turn advertising slogans and jingles against the companies that originated them. Fans have hijacked popular stories to express profoundly different interpretations than those of their authors.

Metaphors of "viral media" and "memes" emerged during a period of transition in the relationship between consumers and producers: first, this terminology reflected a shift away from the push-based model of the broadcast era towards the pull-based model of the early internet (characterized by talk of "stickiness"); second, the terminology maintained use value as we moved from an era of

personalized media towards the increasingly communal practices associated with the rise of social networks and the emergence of what industry guru Tim O'Reilly (2005) identified as "the architecture of participation."

It is somewhat ironic that the idea of the media virus emerged at the same time as a shift towards greater acknowledgment of consumers as participants in meaning making within the networked media space. Shenja van der Graaf, in her 2003 article "Viral Experiences: Do You Trust Your Friends?" maintains "the main feature of viral marketing is that it heavily depends on interconnected peers. Viral Marketing is therefore inherently social" (van der Graaf, 2003, p.8). van der Graaf uses "viral" to describe a condition of movement and distribution of content that is linked to network behavior, and cites participation within a socially networked system as a central requirement of "viral" behavior.

Each step along this process made media companies more dependent upon the active engagement of their consumers and increased the urgency of understanding how and why cultural content circulates. Talk of "memes" and "media viruses" gave a false sense of security at a time when the old attention economy was in flux, resulting in widespread uncertainty about what might motivate consumer "engagement" in this new context. Such terms promised a pseudo-scientific model for thinking about consumer behavior, one which kept power firmly in the hands of media producers. In practice, they simply mystified the process, limiting the industry's ability to understand the complex factors which now shape the creation of value through the circulation of content within these new social networks.

It is our belief that the confusion wrapped up in the concepts of "memes" and "viruses" are not going to be easily resolved. As we have seen, the terms are at once too encompassing and too limiting; they introduce false assumptions about how culture operate; they distort the power relations between producers and consumers at a time when media companies and brands need to learn to respect the increasingly empowered roles which their users are playing in the circulation and production of meaning around their products. Given these limits, these words mislead more than they clarify and thus they need to be retired.

PART ONE SPREADABLE AND STICKY PARADIGMS

For that reason, we are proposing an alternative terminology, one which we think allows us to construct a more effective model that might inform future strategies. Rather than speaking about “viral media,” we prefer to think of media as spreadable. Spreadability as a concept describes how the properties of the media environment, texts, audiences, and business models work together to enable easy and widespread circulation of mutually meaningful content within a networked culture. Talking about spreadability invites us to ask four basic questions:

KEY QUESTIONS

- What aspects of the contemporary media environment support the spread of media across different communities?
- How do consumers create value for themselves and for companies through their spread of media?
- What properties of content make it more likely to be spread?
- How do companies benefit from the spread of their content?

The concept of “spreadability” preserves much of what was useful about the earlier models — the idea that the movement of messages from person to person, from community to community, over time increases their effectiveness, and expands their impact. It recognizes the ways that later theorists such as van der Graaf or Knoebel and Lankshear have revised the earliest, relatively static and passive conceptions of “memes” and “viruses” to reflect the realities of the new social web, while suggesting this emerging paradigm is so substantively different from the initial conceptualizations as to require a new terminology. This new “spreadable” model allows us to avoid metaphors of “infection” and “contamination” which over-estimate the power of media companies and underestimate the agency of consumers. In so far as these metaphors distort the actual

factors shaping the spread of media content in a networked culture, they result in less than fully effective campaigns.

In this emerging model, consumers play an active role in “spreading” content rather than being the passive carriers of viral media: their choices, their investments, their actions determine what gets valued in the new mediascape. Re-centering the discussion on choices consumers make, rather than choices media companies make, forces advertising and entertainment companies to pay closer attention to consumer’s motivations and thus to design content which better aligns with their interests; it will also allow companies to adopt policies which sustain rather than repress this desire to help circulate relevant material throughout their social networks.

While older models of “memes” and “media viruses” focused attention on how ideas replicate and propagate, a spreadability model assumes that value originates as much through the act of transformation as through direct circulation. Spreadability assumes a world where mass content gets repositioned as it enters into a range of different niche communities. When material is produced according to a one-size-fits-all model, it necessarily imperfectly fits the needs of any given group of consumers. As content spreads, then, it gets remade — either literally through various forms of sampling and remixing — or figuratively via its insertion into ongoing conversations and interactions.

Such repurposing doesn’t necessarily blunt or distort the goals of the original communicator. Rather, it may allow the message to reach new constituencies where it would otherwise have gone unheard. C3 affiliated researcher Grant McCracken (2005) points towards such a model when he suggests that the word *consumer* should be replaced by a new term, *multiplier*, to reflect the fact consumers expand the potential meanings that get attached to a brand by inserting it into a range of unpredicted contexts of use.

There is something in the term that invites us to ask whether the product, brand, innovation, campaign does actually give the “multiplier” anything he can, er, multiply. . . . Furthermore, “multipliers” also bids us ask, down the road, whether indeed the product, brand,

innovation actually produced anything in the world. Did the multipliers multiply it, or is it still just sitting there? Finally, the term multiplier may help marketers acknowledge more forthrightly that whether our work is a success is in fact out of our control. All we can do is to invite the multiplier to participate in the construction of the brand by putting it to work for their own purposes in their own world. When we called them “consumers” we could think of our creations as an end game and their responses as an end state. The term “multiplier” or something like it makes it clear that we depend on them to complete the work.

We might compare these brand “multipliers” to the “lead users” (Von Hippel, 2006) which we have discussed in other white papers: lead users (Ford, 2006) enable user innovation, helping to find and fix flaws, identify new markets, or model new uses of manufactured goods once they have shipped to market; these “multipliers” perform some of this same work for cultural goods, taking them places and deploying them in ways that would not have been envisioned by the people who produced them. Some of those uses will be tangential to the goals of the media companies; some may generate alternative sources of profit; some may expand the potential audience for entertainment properties or open the brand message to new interpretations and uses.

Consumers in this model are not simply “hosts” or “carriers” of alien ideas, but rather grassroots advocates for materials which are personally and socially meaningful to them. They have filtered out content which they think has little relevance to their community, while focusing attention on material which they think has a special salience in this new context. Spreadability relies on the one true intelligent agent — the human mind — to cut through the clutter of a hyper-mediated culture and to facilitate the flow of valuable content across a fragmented marketplace. Under these conditions, media which remains fixed in its location and static in its form fails to generate sufficient public interest and thus drops out of these ongoing conversations.

Spreadable and Sticky – Two Models of Media Contact

We can understand what we mean by spreadability by way of a contrast with earlier notions of “stickiness.” A review of the top ten hits on Google for “stickiness” offers us a fairly consistent sense of the word’s current functional definition. The term “sticky” first and foremost refers to websites which “grab and hold the attention of your visitor” (Merridian, n.d.). Some writers argue that “(customers will) come back and buy more goods, get more advice, and see more ads” (Sanchez, n.d.). Most others measure stickiness in terms of how long the visitor stays on a single visit or how many different pages the visitors looks at in the course of their stay.

Stickiness reflected the assumptions of personalized media: its central unit is the individual consumer. As one writer explains, “Measuring stickiness means that you’ll have to track what individuals do, not just mass movements on your site. So you’ll have to have them register or place cookies on their computers if you really want to know that much detail.” (Nemeth-Johannes, n.d.) And stickiness is associated with pre-structured interactivity rather than open-ended participation with games, quizzes, and polls seen as devices for attracting and holding the interests of consumers.

This emphasis on “stickiness” was closely associated with the ongoing discussion of “push vs. pull” technologies: stickiness reflects anxiety about attracting and holding viewer interest in a world where consumers have to actively seek out the content they desire. Under the stickiness model, value comes either through charging for access to information (through some kind of subscription or service fee), by selling merchandise to consumers through some kind of e-commerce catalog, or by selling the eyeballs of site visitors to some outside party, most often to advertisers.

Sites such as Amazon or eBay represent the triumph of this “stickiness” model — both sites depend greatly on the return of highly committed and strongly motivated consumers and upon multiple

We can reduce this concept of spreadable media to the simple axiom: If it doesn't spread, it's dead!



A website is “sticky” in the same way a roach motel is sticky: it entices us inside and then holds us for as long as possible, ideally never allowing us to escape again.

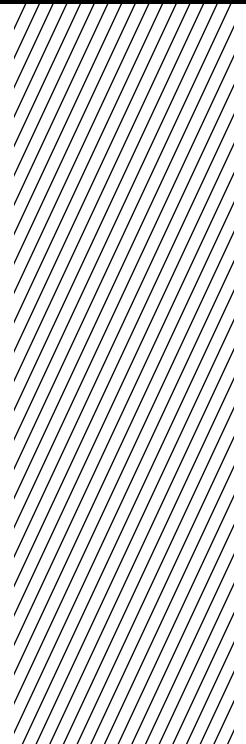


transactions per visit. Yet, even these sites depend on word-of-mouth referrals from satisfied customers, who more often than not discuss their interactions in other contexts, thus helping “spread” the word to potential visitors. As early as 1996 Amazon launched its highly successful affiliate marketing program, which offers designated ‘Associates’ as much as ten percent in referral fees for purchases made by visitors they helped to attract to retailer’s sites. Consumers are encouraged to link their homepages or blogs back to Amazon, providing incentives for them to help increase their community’s awareness of the site’s products and services.

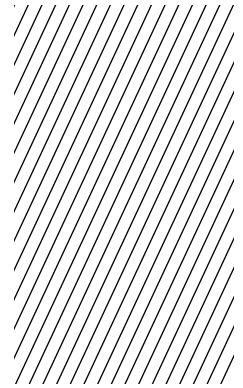
This program reflects the core insight that different books would be of interest within different communities, that people were more likely to buy books when they were recommended by people they already trusted in other contexts, and that discussion of books emerged organically in the midst of a range of other conversations and interactions. The Associates program, thus, reflects the value which comes in “spreading” one’s message across a range of niche communities rather than seeking simply to attract and hold the attention of site visitors.

NINE CORE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN STICKINESS AND SPREADABILITY

- **Stickiness seeks to attract and hold the attention of site visitors; Spreadability seeks to motivate and facilitate the efforts of fans and enthusiasts to “spread” the word.**
- **Stickiness depends on concentrating the attention of all interested parties on a specific site or through a specific channel; spreadability seeks to expand consumer awareness by dispersing the content across many potential points of contact.**
- **Stickiness depends on creating a unified consumer experience as consumers enter into branded spaces; spreadability depends on creating a diversified experience as brands enter into the spaces where people already live and interact.**
- **Stickiness depends on prestructured interactivity to shape visitor experiences; spreadability relies on open-ended participation as diversely motivated but deeply engaged consumers retrofit content to the contours of different niche communities.**
- **Stickiness typically tracks the migrations of individual consumers within a site; Spreadability maps the flow of ideas through social networks.**
- **Under stickiness, a sales force markets to consumers; under spreadability, grassroots intermediaries become advocates for brands.**



- **Stickiness is a logical outgrowth of the shift from broadcasting's push model to the web's pull model; spreadability restores some aspects of the push model through relying on consumers to circulate the content within their own communities.**
- **Under stickiness, producers, marketers, and consumers are separate and distinct roles; spreadability depends on increased collaboration across and even a blurring of the distinction between these roles.**
- **Stickiness depends on a finite number of channels for communicating with consumers; spreadability takes for granted an almost infinite number of often localized and many times temporary networks through which media content circulates.**



In short, for media companies to fully grasp the advantages of spreadability, they have to unlearn the lessons of “stickiness,” lessons which may be less effective than they once seemed, as a consequence of the next phase of evolution in the media ecology.

Not surprisingly, many sites today struggle to balance between these two competing models, often resulting in disappointment. Consider, for example, the case of Sonific, an early experiment in adopting the spreadable media model within the music industry. In 2006, Sonific offered ‘customizable, flexible, Flash-based music widgets’ enabling users to stream one or more songs from the Sonific catalog to almost any webpage. Material from Sonific’s catalog could be included in nearly any web-based application — from modest blogs to social network pages and slideshows. Users could customize playlists and embed music from the catalog into their sites.

Sonific offered full-length-tracks as free, promotional streams, operating under the “You hear, you like, you buy,” rule proposed by UCE Birmingham Professor Andrew Dubber. By early 2008 Sonific had licensed over 200,000 tracks and had 80,000 users, but as of May 1 the service has closed operations citing unworkable licensing with the major record labels. The service’s demise is certainly due, in part at least, to the recording industry’s resistance to a spreadable model, a model that would actually encourage music fans to distribute content through decentralized networks. The music industry’s anxieties about piracy lead them to want to lock down content rather than encouraging consumers to shape its circulation. All of this suggests a moment of transition: old assumptions are going to be hard to

It seems that the industry’s major stakeholders still prefer this turf to remain unlicensed rather than to allow real-life, workable and market-based solutions to emerge by working with new companies such as Sonific. This is not the way forward.

**Gerd Leonhard
Sonific’s CEO, 2008**



displace. For some industries and for some purposes, the sticky model will maintain even as other sectors of the branded entertainment sector are moving towards a more spreadable model. In the short term, we argue that companies need to know what model they are choosing and why.

THE ENVIRONMENT FOR SPREADABLE MEDIA PART TWO: MEME

Richard Dawkin’s original formulation of “meme” theory sought to describe a set of universal conditions for cultural replication. His initial account of the concept describes the complex process of cultural and linguistic evolution which separates the Middle Ages from the Modern Era. Dawkins was seeking a model for cultural transmission which explained the early end of that period as much as later developments:

Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution. Geoffrey Chaucer could not hold a conversation with a modern Englishman, even though they are linked to each other by an unbroken chain of some twenty generations of Englishmen, each of whom could speak to his immediate neighbours in the chain as a son speaks to his father (Dawkins, 1976).

While the term “viral” has been treated as if it were the hot new thing, it has enjoyed a surprisingly long shelf life given the churn that has surrounded other aspects of digital culture: few discussions of viral media seek to identify the specific historical mechanisms which made this model feel so appropriate to contemporary thinkers. In short, the discourse on memes and viral media has been surprisingly ahistorical. That said, the discussion above links our concept, spreadability, to some fundamental shifts in the ways that media is operating.

In this next section, we will provide an overview of some of the core factors which are altering the ways that consumers

relate to media content and the way media producers and advertisers are connecting with consumers. These five factors — **Widgetization**, **Plenitude**, **The Long Tail**, **Social Networks**, and **Participatory Culture** — work together to provide a context for what we are calling spreadability:

FIVE FACTORS OF SPREADABILITY

- On a technical level, **widgetization** makes it much easier for us to bring branded media content into our own spaces.
- **Plenitude** – the fragmentation and diversification of cultural life – provides the cultural context which requires a much stronger match between consumer interest and the available content, thus creating a space which might support niche media and which would demand the customization of mass media content to local particulars.
- The **Long Tail** model reflects a rethinking of business plans to reflect the risks and opportunities that emerge from this fragmentation and localization of the mass media marketplace.
- **Online social networks** provide mechanisms which allow trusted recommendations to spread across different but intersecting communities of interest, which blur the boundaries between virtual and real world social interactions, and which allow consumers to assert stronger social ties with brands, stars, and media properties.
- **Participatory culture** allows consumers to take media in their own hands, not simply selecting content from the menu of available options, but also producing their own media, often in explicit response to previously circulating materials.

Over the past decade, many of these practices have moved rapidly from early adopters and lead users towards the social and cultural mainstream.



Widgetization

In simple terms, media spreads in the new digital environment *because it can*. Recent developments in web design offer individual consumers the ability to easily move media content from centralized locations to their own blogs, journals, social network profiles, and home pages.

The term *affordance* comes from the perceptual psychology of J.J. Gibson (1977) and the design research of Donald Norman (1999). Basically, it refers to the qualities of an object which make it possible for it to perform certain actions. The affordances of a media platform make it easier or harder to do things. As a rule, early adopters are willing to do things even if they are not easily achieved within the current technological infrastructure, while these practices are more likely to spread to the general population when technologies are redesigned to facilitate them. Consumers are spreading media content because of what a range of industry observers have described as “the Widgetization of the Web.” Here are some samples from a much broader conversation which emerged in 2006 and has continued to characterize conversations about the digital landscape down to the present moment:

Widgets are taking over the web, small pieces at a time. Big web destinations are opening their templates to custom configurations by users and pre-configurations with special partners. Mix and match your favorite content from around the web on your personal start page from Microsoft, Google, or Netvibes. Share a few live and always updating bits of information in your blog sidebar using widgets on WordPress or TypePad.

Niall Kennedy (2006)

The World Wide Web, as we know it, is exploding. From its fragments emerges a new “container-based” Web, based on Widgets. For the lack of a better term, I shall call it a “Widget Widget Web.”

Ajit Jaokar (2007)

Widgets have given novices the ability to have robust content and customized functionality within these Web pages without having to become Web developers. It democratizes the Web.

Rodrigo Sales (Havenstein, 2007)

As more and more people set up their “digital me” sites, whether they are blogs or MySpace pages or Facebook sites, widgets are becoming the machinery that allows media and content of all kinds to be easily distributed.

Matthew Ingram (2007)

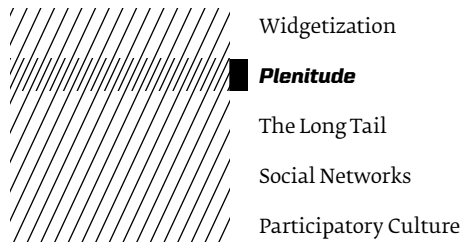
Today, the sophistication of the widget has arrived, and through a wide variety of applications and uses, the widget is reconnecting the internet. Widgets might have created a new paradigm in the social fabric of the web that extends beyond our computers into our handhelds and every aspect of our lives.

Emilio A. Castellanos (2008)

The claims above add up to a big picture where media content is dispersed rather than centralized because of the development of simple applications, which can be easily ported to any location, and which enable the flow of media from anywhere to anywhere. These widgets allow relatively inexperienced programmers to develop sophisticated sites that are more attuned to their needs and which become showcases of their range of personal interests. As media companies have embraced this widget based model of distribution they have reclaimed some aspects of the old push model — where

media comes to the consumer on a regular basis with little or no effort, rather than requiring a series of ongoing decisions to seek out new media content.

As these widgets become part of the operations of social network software, it becomes easier for consumers to recommend media to their friends, giving them resources to evangelize for brands and media franchises. Former C3 researcher Ilya Vedrashko (2007), now with Hill Holliday, talks about this process as “the Tom Sawyer Effect,” identifying ways that widgets encourage consumers to do promotional work for favorite products. In that sense, widgets become the new T-shirt, blurring between the promotional needs of advertisers and the expressive needs of individuals. The next step is likely to be the expansion of this widget logic to incorporate handhelds, mobiles, and other information appliances we carry with us wherever we go.



Plenitude

Anthropologist Grant McCracken (1998) has documented what he describes as the “specification” of our social and cultural lives, as old institutions which forced conformity are collapsing and new mechanisms emerge to enable us to find others who share our values, preferences, and interests:

Where once there was simplicity and limitation, everywhere there is now social difference, and that difference proliferates into ever more diversity, variety, heterogeneity. . . . So various and changing is this new social world around us that we can barely keep up with the pace of transformation. The tremors of change can be felt everywhere: in our schools and in our grocery stores; in our courts and on our playgrounds; on our computer screens and our multilingual ATM screens; in our reading and in our fashion and in our families.

The impact of this increased diversification is being felt in the mass media where the idea of a general audience is breaking down in favor of ever more differentiated niche populations. Meanwhile, the affordances of digital media have made it much easier for small, scattered, but determined sub-populations to find each other, forge social ties, and develop their own media consumption practices. Media still operates as an important kind of cultural currency within these diverse populations. People still want to talk about media, still draw emotional sustenance from its fantasies, still talk about their lives through reference to its characters, and still deploy its symbolic resources to express aspects of their own personal and social identities. Each community constructs its own mythology from resources borrowed from the mediascape, and the same media content may serve different

expressive functions within different affinity spaces. The rise of spreadable media content serves the interests of this diversification and localization process: being able to bring meaningful media content into their spaces allows these niche communities to better customize it to their needs. Spreadable media content can be easily referenced in conversations as they occur and thus can support trusted recommendations within these new communities.



The Long Tail

Chris Anderson (2006) has described the new business models which have emerged to support the distribution of entertainment content within this increasingly fragmented, decentralized, and diversified media marketplace. Anderson uses the term *Long Tail* to refer to content that generates revenue over time not by targeting a mildly interested general viewer but by focusing on highly motivated and engaged niches of consumers with specialized tastes. We might see the Long Tail as the media industry’s reaction to McCracken’s “plenitude.” The Long Tail, Anderson argues, operates under certain circumstances:

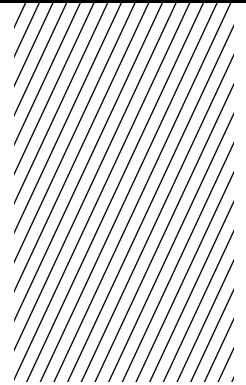
CONDITIONS FOR THE LONG TAIL

- where the costs of production can be lowered
- where diverse offerings remain available over extended periods of time
- where digital distribution makes it easier for companies to ship desired cultural goods to consumers
- where much of the promotional cost is assumed by supportive consumers rather than relying on traditional advertising channels
- where search tools and recommendation systems make it easier for consumers to find desirable content.

For these reasons, strategies focusing on spreadability are ideally suited to Long Tail content, allowing consumers to play a more active role in shaping the promotion and circulation of cultural goods which are personally and socially meaningful to them. Long Tail content spreads more quickly than mass media content because its consumers are more highly motivated. Here’s some of the reasons why consumers are more likely to “spread” Long Tail content:

SPREADING ALONG THE TAIL

- In many cases, consumers believe that they need to support this content if it is going to remain on the market
- Niche consumers have a sense of discovery which leads them to want to share their recommendations to others
- The content is better fit to the specifics of their niche community in the first place and is thus apt to be more highly valued by others in their social networks
- Such content is apt to generate more “talk” because of its novelty as compared to mass media content which tends to operate through saturating the market.



For mass media producers, spreadability may simply be one more way to expand touch points with consumers, where for niche media producers, spreadability may be the key factor in determining their ability to find and sustain an engaged market.



Social Networks

One of the most significant digital trends of the past five years has been the expanded role of social network sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, in shaping our online identities and creating a context for our encounters with media content. danah boyd (2006), a leading researcher on social networks, argues these sites represent a significant change in the social organization of the web — moving us toward what she describes as “egocentric” networks. An egocentric network circles around an individual, bringing together a range of other friends, co-workers, family members, and social affiliates defined in terms of their relationship to their hosts. As boyd explains:

Instead of slicing interest first and people second, the Friending process allows people to choose people first and interests second. People define their community egocentrically. Their list of Friends defines the context and this, in turn, defines the audience that they believe they are addressing whenever they modify their Profile or post a bulletin... This is also how viral messages spread when new recipients share it with their Friends and those for whom it resonates pass it on.

In redefining social networks around friendship clusters rather than shared interests, these new sites make it possible for ideas to spread more rapidly across different affinity spaces and niche markets, carried forward through the power of personal ties and trusted recommendations.

A striking feature of these sites is that they blend together connections which exist only on-line with those which exist

primarily in the space of face-to-face interactions, thus creating a context where recommendations may also travel from virtual communities into real world space. MySpace was the first social network site to recognize that these mechanisms could be used not simply to enact interpersonal friendships but also to allow participants to perform their fan affiliations — first with bands and later with a range of other media properties. We can now “befriend” media content we like just as easily as we can befriend people we encounter in our everyday transactions.

C3-affiliated researcher Nancy K. Baym (2007) has researched the impact of such practices on alternative music scenes:

In the 2000s, music fandom has played a central role in social networking sites. Not all have been fueled by the band-fan relationship like MySpace, but most interfaces encourage people to list or friend the bands they like in constructing their on-site identity. Since 2005, at least two dozen music-based social networking sites have launched, including Last.fm, MOC, iLike, and Goombah. Last.fm, the oldest and largest music-based social networking site, allows users to download software that tracks their listens and generates personal listening charts which are displayed on their profile. Last.fm users can also use their profiles to write self-descriptions and blogs, to ‘friend’ other music listeners, to see their ‘musical neighbors’ (users who, according to Last.fm’s algorithms, have taste most similar to their own), to join groups, to build playlists, to access personalized radio streams, to write and read private personal messages, and to leave messages in one another’s public ‘shoutboxes.’ Widgets based on users’ Last.fm charts and tags can be exported to create radio streams of users’ favorite music on other Web sites. Another important development in online music

fandom has been the rise of fan-authored MP3 blogs, in which individuals post sound files of songs accompanied by brief description and/or analysis.

Though it's easy to dismiss some of this exchange of music as "pirating," these blogs serve crucial publicity roles, especially in independent music scenes. Indeed, many such bloggers are deluged by requests from independent labels and bands to write about their music. Craig Bonell, who writes the MP3 blog SwedesPlease reports, "bands and labels seem generally thrilled to get the attention" (Baym, 2007).



Participatory Culture

Over the past decades, the availability of low cost and easy to use media production tools and the emergence of new systems of distribution to support the circulation of amateur media has helped to support the growing interest of consumers to individually and collectively take media in their own hands. Researchers at the Pew Center for the Internet & American Life have found that almost sixty percent of American teens online have produced media content and about a third have distributed the content they produced beyond the immediate circle of their friends and families.

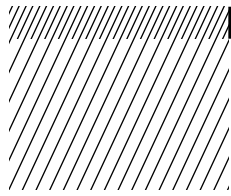
Much that is written about YouTube implies that the availability of Web 2.0 technologies has enabled the growth of participatory cultures. We would argue the opposite: that it was the emergence of participatory cultures of all kinds over the past several decades that has paved the way for the early embrace, quick adoption, and diverse use of platforms like YouTube. Some of these groups have quickly embraced YouTube as the realization of long-standing dreams about “garage cinema” or “do-it-yourself media,” while others have been more cautious, seeing its loss of context and the blurring between commercial and noncommercial spaces as posing as much of a threat as it is an advantage to their existing production practices. YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2009) has emerged both as a central archive for media content (including that produced by various communities of amateur media makers and that appropriated from the mass media) and as a distribution hub through which this content flows outward through a range of social networks. Both aspects of the site are important for understanding the phenomenon of spreadable media. As a central hub, YouTube represents the kind of hybrid media space described by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks* (2007) — a space where “differentially motivated” groups

(commercial, amateur, nonprofit, governmental, educational, and activist) co-exist and interact in ever more complex ways. As these various fan communities, brand communities, and subcultures come together through this common portal, they are learning techniques and practices from each other, accelerating innovation within and across these different communities of practice.

YouTube also represents a site where amateur curators assess the value of commercial content and re-present it for various niche communities of consumers. YouTube participants respond to the endless flow and multiple channels of mass media by making selections, choosing meaningful moments which then get added to a shared archive. Increasingly, we are finding clips that gain greater visibility through YouTube than they achieved via the broadcast and cable channels from which they originated. A classic example of this might be the Colbert appearance at the Washington Press Club Dinner. YouTube participants create value around this content in several ways: first, they may focus greater attention on content which otherwise might have gotten lost, holding it in storage so that word of mouth can attract greater viewer interest; second, they actively respond to the media content through the production of new media, often embedding it much deeper into public consciousness through this process of repetition and variation. The many web parodies, for example, which use as their starting point the basic template from the PC vs. Mac advertising campaign have all reminded consumers of the original brand message even if they have adopted it for new uses and contexts.

In so far as YouTube feeds into a range of other social networks, it accelerates the flow of new ideas across an otherwise fragmented and dispersed marketplace. Benkler argues that the presence of such visible and powerful models for participatory culture or what he calls “peer-to-peer cultural production” changes the ways that consumers think about themselves. They see themselves as contributing to a larger public dialogue; they watch media more attentively but also more tactically as part of a conversation to which they are expected to respond and as raw materials for their own cultural production.

THE GIFT ECONOMY AND COMMODITY CULTURE: PART THREE



Spreadability and the Moral Economy

Gift Giving and Reciprocity Online

Lewis Hyde: Thinking Through the Gift Economy

Value, Worth and the Transfer of Meaning

Spreadability and the Moral Economy

Consumers, both individually and collectively, exert agency in the spreadability model: they are not impregnated with media messages; they select material that matters to them from the much broader array of media content on offer. They do not simply pass along static content; they transform the content so that it better serves their own social and expressive needs. Content does not remain in fixed borders but rather it circulates in unpredicted and often unpredictable directions, not the product of top-down design but rather of a multitude of local decisions made by autonomous agents negotiating their way through diverse cultural spaces.

Consumers do not simply consume; they recommend content they like to their friends who recommend it to their friends who recommend it on down the line. They do not simply “buy” cultural goods; they “buy into” a cultural economy which respects and rewards their participation. Nothing spreads widely in the new digital economy unless it engages and serves the interests of both consumers and producers. Otherwise, the circulation gets blocked by one side or the other, either through corporations constructing road blocks (legal or technical) upon its spread or through consumers refusing to circulate content which fails to serve their interests. Nothing generates value in this new digital economy unless the transaction is seen as meaningful to all involved.

Too often, Web 2.0-era companies speak about creating communities around their products and services, rather than recognizing that they are more often courting existing communities with their own histories, agendas, hierarchies, traditions, and practices. So, rather than talking about the Saturn “community” as a “consumer tribe” (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar, 2007), we might more productively analyze what the contemporary car company has done to capture the interests and win the loyalty of a hundred year plus history of motorist clubs. The first model implies that Saturn

can set the terms for the consumers interactions with the brand. The second suggests the motorist culture created its own values and aspirations which Saturn has to address if it's car is to gain a central place in its social life.

The same is true of fandoms: we tend to discuss them in very limiting terms, often in relation to a single text as in "Trekkers" or "Potterheads," when in fact, fans tend to move nomadically from text to text in the course of their involvement within fan culture. They may be drawn into fandom by a given text but quickly their conversation broadens to include a range of other works also embraced by fellow fans and when their interest in a particular franchise ends, many will shift their fan loyalties to other programs which satisfy similar needs and interests. As a rule, we are misled when we focus on what media does to people rather than trying to understand what people are doing with media and why. We start from the premise that consumers only help facilitate the circulation of media content when it is personally and socially meaningful to them, when it enables them to express some aspect of their own self-perception or enables valued transactions that strengthen their social ties with others.

Courting communities is tricky. Forcing communities to talk about a certain product is almost impossible. These obstacles were swiftly dealt with in the construction of the site "Being Girl" which belongs to the Tampax and Always brands. As Josh Bernoff and Charlene Li comment on their new book *Groundswell*:

Beinggirl.com is not a community site about tampons. (Who would want to visit that?) It's about everything that young girls deal with. The site is very lightly branded and it's loaded with information about music, make-up, relationships and spaces for the girls to talk amongst themselves and with experts. Procter & Gamble had launched different versions of the sites in other parts of the world and also a Latina-geared version section of the US site called "Solo de Chikas: hot topic, cool musik and your place to speak out".

Tampax are courting a more specific community that is underrepresented in traditional marketing endeavors, undoubtedly

hoping that this interest will entice the participants to become loyal Tampax/Always consumers. At the very least, though, P&G has opened a fluid communication channel with an elusive demographic. Bernoff and Li suspect that the site's success is due in part to the fact that P&G "solved the customers' problems instead of its own, the costumers were willing to share. Add subtle brand messages and free samples and P&G was able to become part of the dialogue from which it was previously excluded. A key takeaway here is that companies should figure out what existing communities are most likely to use their product and what they are doing with it; they should identify basic needs of that community and develop informational resources to support them.

Knowing that the community pre-exists the brand or franchises engagement with it means corporations need to legitimate their entrance into this space. In earlier white papers (Austin 2006), we have introduced the idea that participants in economic exchanges are governed by an implicit set of understandings about what is "right" and what is "legitimate" for each player to do. This is what social historian E.P. Thompson described as a "moral economy." The moral economy describes the set of social norms and mutual understandings which make it possible for two parties to do business with each other. In some cases, the moral economy holds in check the aggressive pursuit of short term self interest in favor of decisions which preserve long term social relations between participants. In a small scale economy, for example, a local dealer is unlikely to "cheat" a customer because they need to count on continued trade with this person over an extended period of time and thus need to build up their reputation within this community.

The measure of a moral economy is the degree to which participants trust each other to hold up their end of these implicit agreements. As we have seen, when there is a sudden and dramatic shift in the economic or technological infrastructure, as has occurred with the introduction of digital media, it can create a crisis in the "moral economy," diminishing the level of trust within participating parties, and perhaps even wearing away the mechanisms which insure the legitimacy of economic exchanges. At such times, we can see all involved making bids for legitimation, that is proposing

new models or frameworks through which parties may reach a new understanding of what should provide the basis for fair and meaningful interactions.

We can see, for example, notions of “file sharing” and “piracy” as two competing moral systems by which we might make sense of the circulation of media content at the present moment of media transition, one put forth by consumers eager to legitimate their idea of the free exchange of content, the other put forth by the media industry eager to close off certain practices as “illegitimate” and damaging to their long term economic interests. The excessive rhetoric surrounding the circulation of music at the present time suggests just how far out of balance the moral understandings of producers and consumers have become. New technologies enable consumers to exert much greater impact on the circulation of media content than ever before but they also enable companies to police once private behavior as it takes on greater public dimensions. These shifts enable some to describe a crisis in copyright, others a crisis in fair use, and all sides to be more or less accurate in describing the tensions which have emerged.

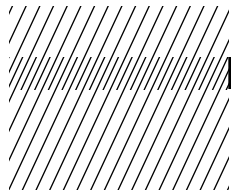
Discussions of “viral media,” or of what we are calling “spreadable” media, point to places where a new moral economy may be emerging. They allow us to map forms of audience participation which are seen as valuable to advertisers and media companies. Spreadable media represents an alternative framing of the free circulation of media content to the prevailing metaphor of “piracy.” Focusing on what we are calling here spreadability may thus offer us some tentative first steps towards renegotiating the social contract between media producers and consumers in a way which may be seen as legitimate and mutually rewarding to all involved. For this to occur, we need to understand that consumers and producers often follow different dictates, not simply because of competing economic interests, but because they have different motives, make different judgments about value, and follow different social dictates; in other words, they operate within separate and parallel economic orders. We might describe these two worlds as **commodity culture** and the **gift economy**. Certainly, most of us who have grown up in capitalist economies understand the set of expectations which shape the

buying and selling of goods. Yet, we also operate in another social order which centers around the giving and accepting of gifts. One (commodity culture) places greater emphasis on economic motives, the other (gift economy) on social motives.

Something of the mismatch between these two worlds is suggested by Ian Condry (2004) in his discussion of file-sharing among music fans:

Unlike underwear or swimsuits, music falls into that category of things you are normally obligated to share with your dorm mates, family, and friends. Yet to date, people who share music files are primarily represented in media and business settings as selfish, improperly socialized people who simply want to get something — the fruits of someone else's labor — for free. In fact, if asked directly by a friend to share music, sharing is the only reasonable thing to do.

Within commodity culture, then, sharing music is economically damaging, whereas in the gift economy, the failure to share music is socially damaging. We are never going to resolve such conflicts until we develop a better model for thinking about the interface between the two.



Spreadability and the Moral Economy

■ **Gift Giving and Reciprocity Online**

Lewis Hyde: Thinking Through the Gift Economy

Value, Worth and the Transfer of Meaning

Gift Giving and Reciprocity Online

In arguing that much of what goes on in cyberspace might be understood in terms of a gift economy, we are in fact making a claim which is at least as old as the web. Howard Rheingold's 1993 book *The Virtual Community*, for instance, mentions the gift economy as central to the relationships across the online world:

Reciprocity is a key element of any market-based culture, but the arrangement I'm describing feels to me more like a kind of gift economy in which people do things for one another out of a spirit of building something between them, rather than a spreadsheet-calculated quid pro quo. When that spirit exists, everybody gets a little extra something, a little sparkle, from their more practical transactions; different kinds of things become possible when this mind-set pervades. Conversely, people who have valuable things to add to the mix tend to keep their heads down and their ideas to themselves when a mercenary or hostile zeitgeist dominates an online community. In the virtual community I know best, elegantly presented knowledge is a valuable currency.... Sometimes you give one person more information than you would give another person in response to the same query, simply because you recognize one of them to be more generous or funny or to-the-point or agreeable... A sociologist might say that my perceived helpfulness increased my pool of social capital. I can increase your knowledge capital and my social capital at the same time by telling you something that you need to know, and I could diminish the amount of my capital in the estimation of others by transgressing

the group's social norms. The person I help might never be in a position to help me, but someone else might be.

Rheingold describes the gift economy operating in virtual worlds less in terms of a tit-for-tat exchange of value but rather as part of a larger reputation system in which one's contributions to the group are ultimately recognized and respected, even if there is no direct and explicit negotiation of worth at the time someone makes their contributions.

Richard Barbrook (1998), another early cyber-theorist, argued that the gift economy trumped commodity culture in the world view of those who were the first to form online communities:

For most of its users, the Net is somewhere to work, play, love, learn and discuss with other people. Unrestricted by physical distance, they collaborate with each other without the direct mediation of money or politics. Unconcerned about copyright, they give and receive information without thought of payment. In the absence of states or markets to mediate social bonds, network communities are instead formed through the mutual obligations created by gifts of time and ideas. When they go on-line, almost everyone spends most of their time participating within the gift economy rather than engaging in market competition. Because users receive much more information than they can ever give away, there is no popular clamour for imposing the equal exchange of the marketplace on the Net. Once again, the 'end of history' for capitalism appears to be communism.

Such values were built into the infrastructure of the web which was designed to facilitate the collaboration of scientists and researchers rather than to enable the metered access expected within a commodity culture. In the world of the web, companies were relative late-comers, even though they now represent the dominant

users of digital networks. As commercial values have spread into the web, they have had to negotiate with the older web ethos: there still remains great resistance to “spam,” for example, as unwelcomed advertising, whereas commercials are taken more or less for granted in traditional broadcasting.

Similarly, Stewart Brand (1995), another key thinker in the early history of web culture evokes the idea of a gift economy to explain how companies create valued relations to their customers within this new cultural context. In short, Brand argues that for any company or business to succeed online they need to join the gift economy that defines online relations. “It means often giving away content.” Online success is based on the build up of good will which companies can convert into economic transactions through other channels.

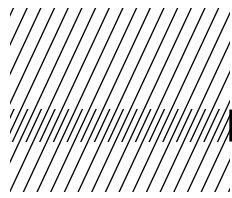
Many of these same assumptions about the ways that digital communities are shaped by the norms of a gift economy surfaced much more recently in danah boyd (2007)’s discussion of Facebook’s introduction of a “gifting” function. Facebook gifts operate within each person’s profile. Gift-giving is completely decentralized so people can choose gifts directly from their own profile page and pay Facebook through their account. Most gifts cost \$1 and every once in a while Facebook offers a gift for free. Now the system is in place, manufacturing and reproduction costs are negligible, and, even though they work under a direct payment revenue model, Facebook adds value to the users’ experience by letting them be in charge of distribution.

Features such as these are what make successful social networks different from a more complete contact directory. As boyd explains, the popularity and value of gifts on Facebook come from their somewhat intangible nature:

They do not have the same type of persistence as identity-driven purchases like clothing in (*World of Warcraft*). I think that it is precisely this ephemeralness that will make gifts popular. There are times for gift giving (predefined by society)...People write ‘happy birthday’ and send glitter for holidays...

These expressions are not simply altruistic kindness. By publicly performing the holiday or birthday, the individual doing the expression looks good before her peers. It also prompts reciprocity so that one's own profile is then also filled with validating comments.

Yet despite their intangibility and ephemeral nature, Facebook's gift-driven economy is valuable, meaningful and crucial to the participation of many members of the network. In evoking the gift economy to talk about gifts which are bought and sold via Facebook, even as they are given freely to those in our social networks, boyd is acknowledging a permeability in the relations between commodity culture and the gift economy. This should not be surprising: most of us purchase Christmas or birthday gifts at stores rather than making them ourselves and do not necessarily fear that their origins as commodities diminishes the sentiments that are expressed through their exchange. Whatever our myths may be about "gifts of the heart" and "labors of love," most of our gifts these days are manufactured and store bought. Yet, once we have made our purchases, the gift economy takes over and so to understand how digital goods circulate within and between social networks we need to develop a more nuanced understanding of how gift economies operate.



Spreadability and the Moral Economy

Gift Giving and Reciprocity Online

■ **Lewis Hyde: *Thinking Through the Gift Economy***

Value, Worth and the Transfer of Meaning

Lewis Hyde: Thinking Through the Gift Economy

Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (1979) represents perhaps the best guide on the ways that gift economies operate within the modern world. For that reason, we want to walk through some of his basic claims about the relations between commodity culture and the gift economy.

In a commodity culture, goods are traded as wages for labor or are purchased directly. Neither transaction shapes the circulation of materials within a gift economy: "A gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us." (p. xvi). Gifts depend on altruistic motivations; they circulate through acts of generosity and reciprocity. Their exchange is governed by social norms rather than contractual relations.

The circulation of gifts is socially rather than economically motivated: "Unlike the sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved." Furthermore "when gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges." (p. xx) The circulation of goods is not simply symbolic of the social relations between participants; it helps to constitute them. Hyde identifies three core obligations which are shared among those who participate in a gift economy: "the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate." (p. xxi) Each of these acts help to break down boundaries between participants, reflecting a commitment to good relations and mutual welfare.

Gift economies are relatively dynamic in terms of the fluid circulation of goods while commodity cultures are relatively dynamic in terms of the fluid social relations between participants. As Hyde explains, a “clean” trade within a commodity culture “leaves people unconnected,” (p.29) since it involves no future obligation between the buyer and seller. Under such conditions, “wealth will lose its motions and gather in isolated pools....Property is plagued by entropy and wealth can become scarce even as it increases.” (p.29) The commodity, he suggests, moves towards wherever there is a profit to be made, while a gift moves “towards an empty space,” towards resolving conflicts or expanding the social network. (p.29) By contrast, he writes, “To convert an idea into a commodity means, broadly speaking, to establish a boundary of some sort so that the idea cannot move from person to person without a toll or fee. Its benefit or usefulness must then be reckoned and paid for before it is allowed to cross the boundary.” (p.105) In so far as the new media ecology depends on spreadability, it needs to embrace the fluidity of exchange which enables a gift economy rather than the stasis that emerges from commodity culture.

In a gift economy, ‘status’, ‘prestige’ or ‘esteem’ take the place of cash remuneration’ as the primary drivers of cultural production and social transaction. Of course, even within a commodity culture, the production of cultural goods is rarely motivated entirely by profit. Artists also seek recognition for what they create; they seek to influence the culture; they seek to build reputations; they seek to express personal meanings. Only a complex set of negotiations within creative industries allow artist to serve both sets of goals at the same time. As Mark Deuze (2006) notes, anxieties about the free circulation of their output within a participatory culture are motivated both by a sense of losing artistic control and by the perceived economic threat to their livelihood.

Conversely, we seem to be seeing a series of misrecognitions between Web 2.0 companies and consumers as the companies misunderstand what motivates participation. On the one hand, consumers increasingly resent the ways that companies transform their labors of love into commodities which can be bought and sold for revenue. There is a growing recognition that profiting on freely given creative labor poses ethical challenges which are in the long run socially damaging to both the companies and the communities involved. On the other hand, many participants are frustrated when companies offer them financial compensations which are at odds with their understanding of the social transactions which are facilitated through the exchange of gifts. Fan communities, for example, have long-standing social taboos against “exploiting” other fans for personal gain, wanting to share their creative goods outside of commodity relations, rather than seeking rewards for what they produce. C3 research affiliate Abigail DeKosnik argues that the gift economy has gendered implications, with women traditionally associated with crafts in a gift economy and men associated with art within a commodity culture. Hyde would support this argument, suggesting that salaries tend to be lower within those professions which have historically been associated with the gift economy, not simply because they attract more women but also because they provide other kinds of social compensation.

Hyde sees commodity culture and the gift economy as alternative systems for measuring the merits of a transaction. He writes, “A commodity has value... A gift has worth.” (p.78) By value, here, Hyde primarily means “exchange value,” that is, the rate at which goods and services can be exchanged for money. Such exchanges are “measurable” and “quantifiable” because there are agreed upon measurements of value. By “worth,” he means those qualities we associate with

things that “you can’t put a price on.” Sometimes, we refer to what he is calling “worth” as sentimental value. It is not an estimate of what the thing costs but rather what it means to us. Worth is thus variable even among those who participate within the same community, even among those in the same family, hence the complex negotiations which occur around possessions when a beloved member of a family passes away. Worth can not be measured, though it can be negotiated, but in doing so, we have to take claims about worth at face value, since they have to do with internal emotional states.

Commodity culture and the gift economy are animated by different fantasies, which in turn shape the kinds of meanings which are going to be produced and transmitted around the exchange of goods. Hyde writes, “Because of the bonding power of gifts and the detached nature of commodity exchange, gifts have become associated with community and with being obliged to others, while commodities are associated with alienation and freedom” (p. 86). The values which shape exchanges in a commodity culture have to do with personal expression, freedom, social mobility, the escape from constraints and limitations, the enabling of new “possibilities”. We sometimes refer to such fantasies as escapism or social experimentation; they are closely associated with the patterns of “transformation” and “plentitude” which Grant McCracken has documented. The fantasies which animate the exchange of gifts are often nostalgic, having to do with the reassertion of traditional values, the strengthening of social ties, the acceptance of mutual obligations, and the comfort of operating within familiar social patterns.

Because the exchange of goods within a gift economy brings with it social expectations, not all gifts can be accepted. In that sense, there are goods and services which literally can not be given away, because even in the absence of an explicit value proposition, consumers are wary of hidden obligations, unstated

motives, or hidden interests which come smuggled inside the gift, much like the classic myth of the Trojan Horse. Hyde describes some circumstances where gifts are inappropriate: “On the simplest level, we are wary of gifts in any situation that calls for reckoning and discrimination. . . . A gift, no matter how well intentioned, deflects objective judgment” (p.92). Even traditional societies, then, distinguish between gifts which facilitate generalized good will and bribes which are designed to distort or corrupt process of judgment. At the same time, the translation of gifts into commodities can be socially damaging. Hyde writes:

We do not deal in commodities when we wish to initiate or preserve ties of affection. . . . Emotional connection tends to preclude quantitative evaluation. . . . When a decision involves something that clearly cannot be priced, we refrain from submitting our actions to the calculus of cost-benefit analysis (p.85).

Both sets of category confusions represent potential pitfalls for companies seeking to negotiate the boundaries between commodity culture and the gift economy. That said, Hyde does believe it is possible for there to be valued and meaningful transactions between these two social systems:

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

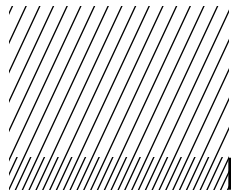
Hyde's use of the word, "erotic" here is especially evocative, meant to refer to the ways that the exchange of goods gains emotional intensity as it mediates between two or more participants. If "diamonds are a girl's best friend," as the old song goes, it is both because they have extreme value within a commodity culture and because they are emotionally meaningful within a gift economy.

We might understand spreadable media as content which passes between the commodity culture and the gift economy. Each of the above contrasts between the two social systems are helpful in understanding what kinds of terms might best facilitate exchanges between them. Each also helps us to identify historic sites of conflict or misunderstandings between the diversely motivated agents involved in the flow of content across the current mediascape. Many of these contradictions surfaced in the controversy which surrounded the launch of FanLib, a Web 2.0 company which sought to capitalize on the circulation of fan fiction. Fan fiction had been a part of the gift economy of the web for more than a decade, representing a cultural practice which dated back to *Star Trek* fandom in the 1960s. Seeing their stories as a "labor of love" which was designed to be shared with the community of others who shared their interests, fans have reluctantly charged money to recoup the costs of printing zines but there was a strong prohibition against any attempts to profit financially from the exchange of stories.

Some fans welcomed the emergence of digital distribution because it lowered the costs of sharing stories and thus pulled fan fiction fully into the gift economy. There was also a perception that the absence of financial profit helped to protect fans from prosecution for what might otherwise have been seen as an attempt to capitalize on the original producer's intellectual property. FanLib, however, sought to pull the production and circulation of fan fiction more fully into the commodity culture: they wanted to monetize on the traffic that fan stories drew to their sites, a step which provoked strong backlash from those most committed to fandom's gift economy. They showed little grasp of what motivated the activities of the gift economy: at various times, they sought to compensate fans either

through a share of the revenue or through giving them access to the media producers, neither of which reflected the system of status and reputation which had emerged within fandom.

The threat that fan fiction might be commoditized motivated some fans to create the Organization of Transformative Works, which would, among other things, create an alternative web portal for distributing fan created works totally outside of commercial imperatives. Yet, despite the controversy, FanLib did attract a significant number of contributors. C3 researcher Xiaochang Li (2007) discovered that many of those posting on the site did not feel strong ties to the existing fan community and did not understand their cultural production in terms of “gifts” to fellow fans. These fans did not see a conflict between what motivated their creative expression and the logic of a commodity culture. That said, it was not clear that such fans were as valuable to FanLib or the rights holders because they were less “connected” to the larger fan community, were less likely therefore to draw other fans to the site or to help expand the potential markets for the series being depicted.



Spreadability and the Moral Economy

Gift Giving and Reciprocity Online

Lewis Hyde: Thinking Through the Gift Economy

Value, Worth and the Transfer of Meaning

Value, Worth and the Transfer of Meaning

For a good to move from commodity culture to a gift economy, there has to be some point where value gets transformed into worth, where what has a price becomes priceless, where economic investment gives way to sentimental investment. If we do not understand how this occurs, we probably can not understand what motivates consumers to “spread” advertising and other media content within their social networks. When people pass along your content, they are not doing so as paid employees motivated by economic gain; they are doing so as members of social communities involved in activities which are meaningful to them on either an individual or social level. Symbolic goods stop circulating when they take on such economic value that there is no longer an incentive to give them to someone else or where their exchange fails to serve social goals within a particular community. In other words, symbolic goods cease their movement when they assume too much value or too little worth.

In *Culture and Consumption* Grant McCracken (1988a) brought together anthropological and marketing literature to offer an account of the way “meaning transfer” shapes the circulation of goods. McCracken starts from the premise that the circulation of goods is accompanied by the circulation of meaning: “Meaning is constantly flowing to and from its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers, and consumers.” Both designers and advertisers draw on meanings already in the culture around them as they seek to construct offerings that will be valued by their potential consumers. Advertising, as seen by McCracken, helps to move both the products and the cultural claims being made about the products into the life world of consumers. Once consumers have purchased the goods and bought into the symbolic meanings that surround them, they perform a series of rituals which are designed to integrate both goods and meanings into their everyday social experiences. In a later

These processes of evaluation may occur informally – as I decide whether to forward a link or not – or formally – through the kind of user-moderation techniques we associate with sites like Digg. Yet, either way, the process of evaluation shifts from elite individuals to the community itself and what moves to the top reflects a collective rather than individual evaluation of its worth.



revision of this argument, McCracken (2005b) writes “Consumers turn to their goods not only as bundles of utility with which to serve functions and satisfy needs but also as bundles of meaning with which to fashion who they are and the world in which they live.” (p.102)

McCracken (1988a) identifies four different kinds of consumer rituals which help us to adapt acquired goods into symbolic resources:

CONSUMER RITUALS

- **Exchange Rituals** – McCracken suggests that when we select a gift for someone else, we do so with an awareness of what makes this gift meaningful. A lover giving a gift seeks to symbolize something of their emotional investment in the relationship – think about the difference between white and red roses, for example. A parent giving a gift to a child seeks to express and embody some of their hopes for the kind of person that the child will become – think of the whole line of “Baby Einstein” products for example.
- **Possession Rituals** – McCracken argues that consumers spend a great deal of time asserting their claim on goods which enter their lives from the outside. We like to “perform” our ownership of those goods through “cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off and even photographing many...possessions.” At a higher level, he describes a process of “personalization” where goods are altered to better express the personality of their owners.
- **Grooming Rituals** – McCracken claims that for some goods, meaning is perishable and certain practices need to be repeated in order to extract value and meaning from them. These practices often center around either practices of personal grooming or the grooming of the goods themselves.
- **Divestment Rituals** – For McCracken, these rituals need to be performed when goods change hands – first, to exorcise the imprint of the previous owner so that they may be more fully one’s own and then later, to strip aside any emotional investments we have made into goods which we now must dispose or “regift” to others.

Each of these claims may be useful in thinking about how symbolic goods — such as spreadable media content — functions in the new world of social networks. But to do so, we need to recognize some core differences. First, for McCracken (1988a), goods are “an opportunity to make culture material” (p.88). That is, goods attach symbolic meanings to physical objects. To draw on a now tired but useful distinction, goods are atoms. Yet, the kind of cultural goods we are discussing throughout this white paper are much more often virtual rather than physical, bytes and not atoms. They may still render visible the often implicit assumptions through which we organize our culture: “The consumer system supplies individuals

with the cultural materials to realize their various and changing ideas of what it is to be a man or a woman, middle-aged or elderly, a parent, a citizen, or a professional” (p.88). We can see the widgets on our profile pages, the links on our blogs, the refinements on our avatars, as doing a similar kind of social work — as giving expressive form to our values and performing certain kinds of social identities.

It matters, though, that material goods are limited: they can only exist in one place at one time and to give them to someone else is to give them up yourself. Virtual goods, however, can be shared because they can be infinitely replicated. I can have my “cupcake” on Facebook and eat it too, or more importantly, I can share it with you without having to give it up myself. It is clear that personalization may play as strong if not a stronger role in such a system — as a means of distinguishing between countless copies of the same cultural good. Yet, we may have to spend less time with divestment rituals because the good we receive is no longer a good taken from the hands of another.

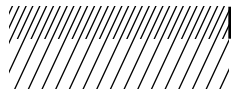
For McCracken (1988a), there remains something arbitrary about the assignment of particular meanings to particular goods, with advertisers involved in a series of competing bids for interpretation. Yet in the case of spreadable meaning, what we are circulating is often not the material good but the advertisement itself. It is involved in the exchange of meaning from its conception, though the meanings may change through the process of consumption just as goods may be altered, repurposed, or redeployed by consumers through the processes of possession, grooming, and divestment rituals.

Second, for all of his reliance on anthropological theory, McCracken (1988a) holds onto the idea of consumers as individuals who are motivated by personal desires and goals, “engaged in an ongoing enterprise of self-creation,” rather than as parts of larger social networks and cultural communities. Indeed, his account of consumption in the North American context stresses all of the ways that identity is optional — that we choose which social categories are operative and which are irrelevant to our presentation of ourselves. Going back to Hyde (2007), then, the fantasies he sees expressed through consumer goods are those we associate with commodity

culture — those having to do with freedom and individuality — rather than those of the gift economy— having to do with tradition and social cohesion.

As we think about why we pass along media content, though, we need to recognize that we are both expressive individuals and social beings, that we seek both to personalize content and to share it with others. We might understand how this process plays out by thinking about the ways social networks change the process of taste-making and gate-keeping which McCracken describes in this essay's discussion of fashion. For McCracken, what counts as fashion gets defined rhetorically through journalists who "serve as gatekeepers of a sort, reviewing aesthetic, social and cultural innovations as these first appear." These professional gatekeepers "winnow" down selections before these options even reach the population of early adopters. In a social network, however, this power of evaluation and "winnowing" is dispersed. Each member potentially assumes the role of grassroots intermediary, contributing to a collective process which evaluates and ranks cultural goods and thus speeds or retards their circulation.

COMMUNITIES OF USERS PART FIVE PART FOUR:



Rethinking the Individual Consumer

So, does it make sense any more to speak about media audiences or for that matter, consumers in this brave new world of spreadable media? Probably not. Witness the profusion of new terms which seek to describe “those people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006). Some call them (us, really) “loyals,” (Jenkins 2006a) stressing the value of consumer commitment in an era of channel zapping. Some are calling them “media-actives,” (Frank 2004) stressing a generational shift with young people expecting greater opportunities to reshape media content than their parents did. Some are calling them “prosumers,” (Toffler, 1980) suggesting that as consumers produce and circulate media, they are blurring the line between amateur and professional. Some are calling them “inspirational consumers” (Roberts 2005), “connectors” or “influencers,” suggesting that some people play a more active role than others in shaping media flows.

Recently Facebook was struggling with definitions such as these. In an aim to separate the users from the businesses, Facebook created a new profile category called ‘pages’. When relating with a business’ page, instead of becoming a friend, in usual Facebook fashion, the user becomes a fan. Six months after Facebook launched this new category, the terms are already starting to become murkier, and now in the users profile it no longer says “Jane is a fan of” but “Jane’s Pages”, the term is more open yet also more ambiguous. Andrew Lockhart, at the Thinking Interactive blog, suggests that companies might want to allow the user to define what type of relationship they want to have, between, for instance, fan, advocate, friend, coworker. Such a move would also give businesses a better understanding of how these users want to engage with them. Sometimes we just want to buy things which

are adequate to the purposes we want to use them for but not so vital to our sense of ourselves that we want to proclaim them to other people. The Facebook interface offered too limited a range of options for expressing our diverse affiliations with brands. Even where consumers actively seek to spread your content or advocate for your brand, they want to do it on their own terms and may be very particular about the kind of language they use to describe this relationship.

For some time now it was thought that the way to insure this success was by reaching the so-called “influencers”, this term comes from Malcom Gladwell’s book *The Tipping Point*. As Gladwell puts it, “What we are really saying is that in a given process or system, some people matter more than others.” Gladwell’s “influencer” model has become almost an article of faith in most discussions of viral media. The most widely quoted example is the comeback made by Hush Puppies shoes, according to Gladwell, due to their adoption by specific Williamsburg tastemakers. He bases his theory on Stanley Milgram’s ‘Six Degrees of Separation’ study, where 160 Nebraskans were instructed to send a letter to a particular stockbroker in Boston by giving it to someone they thought was socially closer to that person. As is now widely known, it took roughly 6 people for each letter to reach its destination. When Gladwell analyzed the study he discovered that it was the same three friends of the stockbroker who provided the final link, and this is where the “influencers” theory comes from, determining that certain connectors are more important than others.

For the past seven years, network-theory scientist Duncan Watts (Dodds, Muhammad and Watts, 2003) has been studying these results and running other experiments of his own. After testing Miligram’s theory with 61,000 people he confirmed the average

length of the chain was in fact six links, but he did not find any evidence of “influencers”. There were as many chances for a message to get passed by a “super-connected” person than by an average one. Messages move through society from one weakly connected individual to another. So the question now becomes, not how to reach the influencers, but how do individuals choose to behave in a networked society and what kinds of social structures best support the spread of content.

Yochai Benkler (2007) argues:

Human beings are and always have been diversely motivated beings. We act instrumentally, but also noninstrumentally. We act for material gain, but also for psychological well-being and gratification and social connectedness.

This seemingly simple statement further more complicates the idea of a networked society and hinders attempts to predict the way communities of users will act. On the other hand, this more nuanced vision allows us to have a deeper understanding of the diverse online behaviors. For instance, there are countless explanation for why people might join a particular social network or make the decisions they do when they come there.

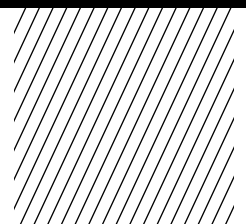
According to Benkler, this shift into a networked information culture does improves the practical capacities of individuals in that:

Sometimes we see ourselves as fans and supporters of particular brands, but sometimes, to paraphrase *Sex and the City*, “we just aren’t that into you.”



VALUE OF NETWORKED INFORMATION CULTURE

- It improves their capacity to do for and by themselves.
- It enhances their capacity to do more in loose commonality with others.
- It improves the capacity of individuals to do more in formal organizations that operate outside the market sphere.



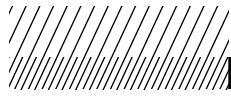
It is because of these empowered individuals, their new capacities, and their desire for social interactions that spreadable media is possible. If the technology was available, but society

Within a spreadable model every user is “worth” as much as the next, for, if one of them behaves as a consumer, the next one might choose to act solely as the distributor of your message.



hadn't undergone any cultural changes, we would still be operating exclusively under a sticky model. Benkler has observed that this new society gives "individuals a significantly greater role in authoring their own lives, by enabling them to perceive a broader range of possibilities and by providing them a richer baseline against which to measure the choices they in fact make."

Consumers are choosing to be part of participatory culture in diverse and fluid ways. Forrester Research has developed a useful taxonomy of the types of participation that occur in networked environments; it starts with the most passive users and finishes with the most active participants that publish their own content at least once a month. It's important to note that while this ladder helps us visualize a complex process, users don't necessarily adhere permanently to these roles, and more than likely, behave in different manners within different communities. Moreover, seeing it as depicting a process of ever more intense engagement with media content may mask the degree to which it also describes an economy, with each rung of the ladder performing tasks which are needed to support those below and sometimes above them. So, even some one who is a lurker may provide a sense of empowerment to contributors by expanding the scale of the community and thus motivating them to put more effort into their work. Someone who is a critic may create value for creators but so may someone who collects what the creators create. And the interplay between these different kinds of cultural participants creates opportunities for communication to take place and thus for content to be transmitted.



Rethinking Communities

Such communities are also quite diverse in themselves. In fact, games scholar James Paul Gee (2004) has defined some of these groups as “affinity spaces,” affinity that is, for a common endeavor. He argues that the romantic notions of community do not apply here as engaging with one another is a secondary objective, if it exists at all, in some cases, though it may be a primary objective in others. Gee is interested in the kinds of informal learning which takes place in the cultures of gamers, for example, which depend heavily on the sharing of knowledge towards common if sometimes contradictory goals. Such “affinity spaces” can provide greater motivation for the production and circulation of information, may offer a “hothouse” context where new ideas may emerge, may offer motivation for people to intensify their participation. We form non-exclusive relationships to these kinds of “affinity spaces”: we may have multiple interests and thus we may engage with multiple different “affinity spaces” in the course of any given day. Older notions of community often started from assumptions of exclusive memberships, whereas this focus on social mobility and multiple commitments helps us to understand how content might spread quickly between different “affinity spaces” as members trade information from one site to another.

Not all “affinity spaces” operate according to the same social dynamics. Lara Lee, from Jump Associates, has offered a promising typography for thinking about the social structures of different kinds of communities:

3 TYPES OF AFFINITY SPACES

- **Pools:** Here people have loose associations with each other, but a strong association with a common endeavor or with the values of the community. Most brand communities are pools, so are most political organizations.
- **Webs:** Webs are organized through individual social connections, so the ties with each member are stronger and they operate in decentralized manner.
- **Hubs:** In a Hub, individuals form loose social associations around a central figure, as in the case of fan clubs. Hubs may form around brands but they are more likely to form around dynamic figures who embody the values of their company – a figure like Microsoft's Bill Gates, say, or Virgin's Richard Branson. Such strategies only work when there is a clear connection between the brand's values and the personality of this central figure.

Each of these social structures may be valuable from the point of view of a brand or a media franchise. Hubs are most likely to be influenced through dominant figures, whereas the other two may be shaped by any member. Media content which supports shared activities is most apt to circulate through pools, while that which sustains social connections is most apt to be valued within webs.

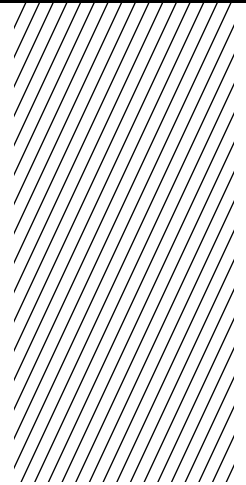
Lee's taxonomy seek to understand what motivates our membership in particular kinds of shared social spaces. Others have sought to explain the different barriers to entry which shape alternative kinds of communities:

BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

- **Open:** These spaces do not require any registration in order to participate. Users can leave anonymous posts, as is the case on some kinds of blogs or online forums. However, without some form of reputation system, the possibility of engaging in a common endeavor is more limited, resulting in short lived communal experiences. Members feel little or no strong emotional ties to such communities which they enter and exit on a whim. They may move through many such social spaces in the course of a single session online.
- **Free registration:** This is the most common way of implementing a space for a community exchange, it's present in the majority of social networks (the ones that operate by outside selection are the exception) and most blogs and message boards. This model has given sites like Amazon the necessary data to customize itself to its community's and individual user's needs. It's in these open and free communities where the spread of media is possible and successful.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

- **Purchase:** These spaces function within the logic of a sticky model. They operate under the assumption that once you buy your way in, you will stay in. Evidently most of the content within these spaces is proprietary and its spread is limited. The transmission of desired content beyond its borders poses a threat to its subscription model, though closing off that content from wider circulation often makes it harder for potentially interested consumers to determine the value of what it has to offer. These spaces tend to be hubs with very little interaction between the users and it is this lack of strong social ties which has led to growing skepticism about so-called corporate communities.
- **Outside Selection:** These are closed spaces with gatekeeper. Their value is in their exclusivity and specificity, but due to their closed off nature, they don't encourage the spread of media, although they might generate buzz.

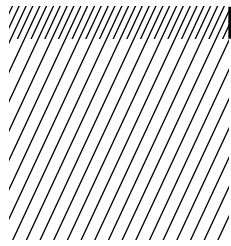


Although we've used the concept brand communities a couple of times, it's important to reiterate that communities aren't created, they are courted. Most brands will need to court a range of different communities and travel across pools, webs, and hubs if they want to reach the full range of desired consumers. To achieve that, they must embrace what filmmaker Lance Weiler calls "The Scattershot Approach." The idea is to be available for your users in whichever way and every way they deem appropriate, be it through a web site, widget, RSS feed or embeddable video, making the process of finding and communicating with you as easy and enjoyable as possible. That may be the strongest incentive for shifting from a sticky paradigm, which often is a one-size-fits-all model, towards a spreadable paradigm, which allows consumers with diverse interests to retrofit your content to serve their local needs and interest. Your job is to make it available to them in a form where they can deploy it and often to provide them with the tools or widgets required to make it accessible to others within their communities.

SPREADABLE CONTENT PART FIVE

Thus far, we have examined some of the technological and social conditions that allow for media to spread, but it remains clear that not all media content and materials are equally spreadable. Nor it is simply a matter of “good” or “interesting” content — we do not pass on every bit of interesting information or every clever video. Content is spread based not on an individual evaluation of worth, but on a perceived social value within community or group. Not all good content is good for sharing. In a gift economy, the gifts we share say something about our perceptions of the person we are passing them to as much as they express our own tastes and interests. Most importantly, the exchange of gifts serves to reinforce relations within the community and a badly chosen or ill-considered gift can cause hard feelings. Above all, we don’t circulate gifts because advertisers ask us to do so — and ideally, we’d like to minimize the hard sell contained in such gifts. We might well give someone a shirt with a designer label or even a T-Shirt which promoted a favorite film, but we are unlikely to stuff a catalog in the gift box in hopes that our friend will go back and buy more from the same company.

So, if we want to predict what content will “spread,” we have to develop a fuller understanding of the ways that the circulation of information may strengthen or damage social relations. We must first come to understand what function the circulation of content and information serves within a social network — that is, what is the relationship of the community to the materials that it circulates? From there, we can determine the necessary characteristics that advertising content must exhibit in order to have potential for use within a gift economy. We can then begin to draw out aesthetic and structural forms that lend themselves particularly well to this process.



What makes content worth spreading

Spreadable Texts

How to Make Content “Spreadable”

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Advertising as “Producerly” Cultural Commodities

What makes content worth spreading

There’s a lot we can learn about how content circulates online by examining the existing literature on how rumors spread in face-to-face communities. Patricia A Turner (1994) has studied the circulation of rumors within the African American community. Turner makes the distinction between rumors, which are informal and temporary constellations of information, and contemporary legends, which are “more solidified rumors” (Turner, 1994, p.5) and maintain a reasonable consistency in narrative content as they are passed. Her description of such rumors bear a striking resemblance to what we’ve come to think of as Word of Mouth advertising — testimonial accounts about a product or service — and the circulation of advertising content itself that now most often characterizes “viral” media.

Many of Turner’s cases center upon commercial products and corporations. In particular, the rumor that a number of different companies were owned by the Ku Klux Klan remained one of the most persistent and widespread in the African-American community during the period of her research. Various companies were implicated in such rumors, ranging from food and consumable products (Church’s Chicken, Marlboro cigarettes) to clothing companies (Troop). Some were private enterprises and others public and none had any explicitly racist policies outside of marketing predominantly to African American populations. Church’s chicken, for instance, managed to rally the support of the NAACP president at the time (Turner, 1994, p.96). These rumors inflicted serious damage on these brands, resulting in “severe financial losses”: Church’s was forced to sell and Troop went bankrupt. (Turner, 1994, p.96). No sooner did one company collapse under the weight of the community’s suspicions than new rumors of KKK associations were directed against other, similar companies. Though such claims may not have had much basis in fact, the accusations, Turner tells us, were far from random. In fact, the companies were linked by:

certain key elements . . . Namely, white-owned firms (with) . . . advertising directed solely at black consumers, that established nationwide franchises selling popular but nonessential commodities in primarily black neighborhoods (Turner, 1994, p.97).

Thus, what perpetuated the circulation of rumors about these companies had to do with what their products represented for their consumers. As Turner explains later in describing an instance in which the Church's Chicken rumor was successfully passed:

By sharing (the story) with my informant, (the person telling the story) was solidifying the bonds between them and, in a sense, bolstering their identity as potential victims of racist activity; in addition, a spotlight was trained on the potential aggressors, for one must never forget who the enemy is. My informant accepted the rumor because it functioned as a metaphor for the struggle he was facing in his attempt to establish himself as a man in American society (Turner, 1994, p.106-107)

By circulating the story, community members are able affirm their commonality and draw clear lines of who is friend and who is foe, express the shared concerns of that group (racism and discriminatory treatment) and bring their anxieties under control by responding to a symbolic embodiment of their concerns. These rumors reflect the reality of a world where racism often no longer takes the direct form of a KKK rally but may be implicit, tacit, and thus hard to locate or overcome. They are responding to what other social critics have called "enlightened racism" — that is, racism which is recognized by its affects but not by its goals.

Though clearly specific to this particular community, the example here offers valuable insight into the social factors that motivate sharing information and content within communities in general:

SOCIAL FACTORS MOTIVATING SHARING

- To bolster camaraderie and articulate the (presumably shared) experiences and values that identify oneself as belong to a particular community (“bolstering their identity”)
- To gather information and explain difficult to understand events or circumstances.
- To establish the boundaries of an “in-group”.

These same factors may come into play when fans advocate for a franchise or consumers promote a brand.

FAN ADVOCACY OF BRANDS

- They are doing so because the brand express something about themselves or their community.
- They are doing so because the brand message serves some valued social function.
- They are doing so because the entertainment content gives expressive form to some deeply held perception or feeling about the world.
- They are doing so because individual responses to such content helps them determine who does or does not belong in their community.

If the same content is passed between multiple communities, it is because that content serves relevant functions for each of those communities, not because it serves some lowest common denominator or universal function. Consider, for example, the campaign commercials produced by Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee. Starting as a dark horse with limited cash on hand, Huckabee sought to insure his content would spread to multiple communities of potential supporters. One such spot featured action star Chuck Norris. After an initially limited television buy, this spot spread through YouTube and ultimately became the focus for news coverage as a consequence.

What made Norris an inspired choice for such a spot was that his name recognition worked well in several radically different social networks. On the one hand, Norris had increasingly become a recurring reference point for jokes on late night comedy shows and had become a camp icon, inspiring sites such as *Chuck Norris Facts*. Here, deploying Chuck Norris showed that Huckabee was cool,

C3's Favorite Chuck Norris Fact: Chuck Norris' calendar goes straight from March 31st to April 2nd; no one fools Chuck Norris.



**During the week
Huckabee released
the Norris ad, his
popularity rose 66%**



that he understood and embraced some aspects of contemporary popular culture, and as a consequence, the spot helped to defer anxieties which might surround his status as a Baptist Minister, allowing him to escape the cultural war discourse that surrounded previous evangelical candidates.

On the other hand, Norris himself had a solid base of support among evangelical Christians. He writes a weekly column for the conservative news service *WorldNetDaily* on which he announced that were he to be president he would “Tattoo an American flag with the words, ‘In God we trust,’ on the forehead of every atheist.” Norris is an outspoken Christian and has actually written several books on the subject. The Norris/Huckabee spots, thus, managed to speak to two very different communities, religious conservatives and an internet savvy young audience. Both saw something that spoke to them and many decided that it was content worth spreading.

To give a more immediate example, we might think of the way the VW Polo spoof ad was circulated. The spot itself featured a man of indeterminate but Arabic descent pulling up alongside a cafe in a VW Polo. After muttering a few indistinguishable words, he presses his thumb down on a detonator, at which point we cut to an exterior shot that shows the Polo containing the entire explosion. The spot was never intended as a legitimate advert for VW, but rather part of a showreel that was leaked onto the web.

First, the spot was commented upon and passed among a number of different niche groups online, used as a way to express a number of different sentiments, but all with the purpose of articulating some form of value system or viewpoint. There were a number of blogs that posted the video in the spirit in which it was probably intended, citing its strength as an advertisement for being memorable and one discussion board post framed it with the saying that “anything worth taking seriously is worth making fun of,” aligning the video with the humor tactics of popular media like *The Daily Show*.

But a quick look at the trackbacks to one of the early posts on the blog Whizbang, which range from “disgusting” to “humor to the rescue,” suggest that as the video spread more widely, it generated a wider range of interpretations of its message. Some blogs used it as a sort of war rally, with comments such as “perhaps we should

start issuing (the Polo) to British forces” and “If only we could ship an entire fleet of these things to the Islamofascists world-wide.” On the other side, it was framed as offensive and tasteless; It was pointed out on the Snopes.com article that the man in the commercial not only had a “distinctive middle eastern appearance,” but was also wearing a checkered keffiyeh that was reminiscent of Yasser Arafat, suggesting a pointed political message at work. One blog that specializes in media surrounding the Middle East juxtaposed a description of the video against an article about a poll which “highlights anti-Israeli feeling in Germany”, while another site listed the video as the number one most racist commercial, even beating out ads from white supremacy organizations.

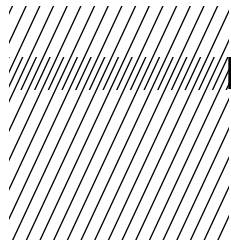
The commercial was spread through a number of different interest communities with a range of opinions, but what they all have in common was that each used the ad to articulate specific values and agendas. The blog about racist commercials, for instance, was able to express anxiety over a long-standing pattern of negative stereotyping of various minorities. Other blogs that took a pro-war stance were able to use their attitude towards the situation portrayed in the video to create us/them distinctions on both a national level (“we” versus the “Islamofascists”) and an ideological one, implicitly drawing a line between those who support the message and those who find the message offensive.

As we have seen, not all of these communities are as clearly defined as the African-American community Turner studied. Some communities may be pools, organized around shared interests, ranging from politics to pet care. Some may be webs, organized through the criss-crossing social affiliations of their members. And some may be hubs, structured around a central personality and their friends and followers. In some cases, the motives which shape the groups activities are clearly articulated and there is an ongoing conversation about what it means to be a member of such a community. They may be very aware of their shared agenda and have a critical perspective on what kinds of values shape their transactions. They may also have a vivid conception of the borders of their community and may aggressively police them against those who do not share their views.

They may have ambivalent or even hostile feelings about

the circulation of meaningful content beyond the borders of their own community. Heather Hendershot (2004), for example, has documented the complex set of social negotiations which occur around the production and distribution of Christian music. She finds that this music is perceived as serving two very different goals — reaffirming the shared values within Christian communities and serving as a vehicle for “witnessing” to those who have not yet accept Christ. Yet, as artists sought to insure their spread beyond the borders of the self-defined Christian community and thus reach potential new members, they often had to downplay those messages which signaled their membership, a process which often provoked ire from their most hardcore fans. The strategies which insured their circulation in the cultural mainstream might cause them to lose the support of their initial niche market.

Hendershot documents how different artists reconcile these contradictory pushes and pulls on their performance, making peace with the decision to remain within or move beyond their initial base of support. In each of these cases, though, the same core principle holds: the sharing of content with others is fundamentally an act of communication within and beyond cultural communities. When advertising spreads, it is because the community has embraced it as a resource for expressing its shared beliefs or pursuing its mutual interests. Community members have embraced the content because it allows them to say something that matters to them, often something about their relations to other community members. In that sense, it has acquired worth. But the worth of an advertisement may and often does differ from one community to another.



What makes content worth spreading

■ **Spreadable Texts**

How to Make Content “Spreadable”

Producerly Texts: Cultural Commodities that become Cultural Resources

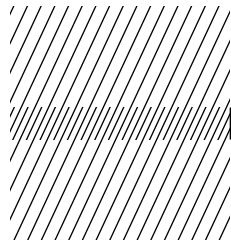
Advertising as “Producerly” Cultural Commodities

Spreadable Texts

As this circulation occurs, the original producer no longer is able to determine what a particular piece of content means because they are no longer able to control the context within which it is seen. Meanings proliferate as people pass the video on, inserting it into a variety of different conversations. Like an elaborate game of telephone, the message morphs and mutates as each successive viewer sees not the original intent, but the interpretations just prior to their own. This kind of intervention, however, is not only the product of circulation, it is also the required precondition: content will spread only when it can serve the particular communicative purposes of a given community or group, and only community members can determine what those might be. Corporations cannot artificially build communities around their brands and products, but rather must allow their brands to be taken up by pre-existing communities by creating content that supports and sustains this kind of expressive appropriation. In other words, in the spreadable media landscape, companies must find ways not simply to motivate consumers to talk **about** their brands but also enable them to talk **through** their brands.

This is, of course, not a novel concept. Advertising, as Grant McCracken notes, has always been a tool for mapping generalized cultural meanings onto specific brands and those brands must be meaningfully inserted into the life-world of their consumers. Advertising may convince us that particular products may become good gifts because they convey shared values. Yet, in the spreadable media content, the advertisement may itself become a gift which we

pass along to others we care about. As they do so, they remake the advertisement — sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively — to reflect their perceptions of themselves and of the people to whom they are giving it. Right now, many companies fear this loss of centralized control over the circulation and interpretation of their brand messages. They want to hold onto the idea that a brand may carry a highly restricted range of meanings. But in doing so, they run the risk of removing the value of the brand as a vehicle for social and personal expression. They produce commodities which we can not consume and in the long run, they will become products we will not buy. So, the challenge is how to rethink advertising strategies to generate brand messages that support these processes of personalization and localization.



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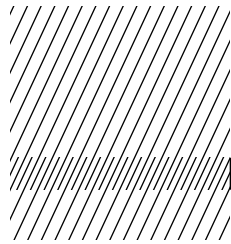
If sharing and spreading content is a sign of its popularity, then to understand what makes videos spread, we must first figure it out what it means for media to be “popular.” In *Understanding Popular Culture*, media and communications scholar John Fiske, draws a distinction between mass culture, that is culture which is mass produced and distributed, and popular culture, that is culture which has been meaningfully integrated into the everyday lives of consumers. This act of turning mass media into popular media involves “the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures” (Fiske, 1989, p.23).

We must be careful here not to confuse messages with meanings. For the purposes of this discussion, messages refer to specific ideas that can be encoded into a media text by its creators, while meanings are the active interpretations of the audience, which may or may not align with the intended message. To return again to our previous example, in the VW Polo ad spoof, the intended message was that the creators were witty, creative, and irreverent. The meanings that were drawn from it were varied, ranging from patriotic to racist. Messages are encoded into a text; meanings are decoded from the text.

Fiske argues we produce culture when we integrate products and texts into our everyday life. When we hear a song in a music video, it is part of mass culture. When we sing it in the shower, we turn it into popular culture. When it is under the control of its producers, it is mass culture. When it is under the control of its consumers, it is popular culture. Fiske, thus, puts strong emphasis on the act of interpretation which occurs as a text gets embraced by consumers. He argues a text becomes part of popular culture when consumers recognize and embrace its potential as a vehicle for expressing their own meanings. To read this through the lens of the

gift economy, it is at that moment when the commodity becomes a gift and when its worth gets recognized.

Cultural products or commodities, like videos, are simply what Fiske calls the “raw material” for the production of popular culture. What makes culture popular, both widely accepted by and belonging to the public, is the ability of people to use it to express, define, and understand their social and cultural relationships. To bring this to viral video, the video itself can be seen as a cultural commodity, but its user-controlled circulation transforms it into a cultural resource. In other words, we cannot think of popular culture as a top-down process of mass marketing, but a bottom-up process of creative interaction with cultural commodities, a relationship with media that is neither simply consumption nor production, but an active negotiation between the two.



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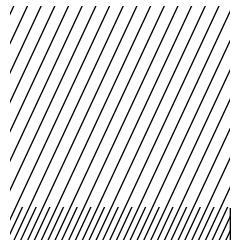
To imagine this simply, a video will become popular if it allows to consumers to participate in the production of meaning and is transformed into a cultural resource through which they communicate something that matters to other members of their community. This sharing of texts and meanings becomes the basis for social affiliations and often re-articulates or reconfirms the group’s shared values. Fiske argues that some texts are more apt to produce new meanings than others. He calls such texts producerly, arguing that a producerly text:

offers itself up to popular production . . . it has loose ends that escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them — it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control” (Fiske, 1989, p.104).

In other words, a media product doesn’t have to give up having a clearly defined message, but in so far as it limits its potential meanings, it also limits its potential circulation. Propaganda is not producerly because it sets too rigid a set of limits over its interpretation. A text which articulated an overly confusing or completely incomprehensible message might also not be producerly because it would not offer sufficient resources for consumers. The VW Polo ad, on the other hand, was highly producerly; It had an intent and a set of preferred meanings, but in the end it was left ambiguous enough, with enough open-ended details, that it could be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on the contexts into which it was spread and the ways it was deployed by consumers within localized

conversations. A producerly video then is one that can be enjoyed and accessed on multiple levels. It can be taken at face value, but also leaves openings for deeper, more active interpretation.

Fiske's notion of the "producerly" introduces the general guiding principle for transforming cultural commodities into cultural resources: open, loose ends and gaps that allow the viewer to introduce their own background and experiences. Such openness allows them to convey something of themselves as they pass the content along, transforming the video into a resource for self-expression. While the media industries cannot themselves produce cultural resources, they can produce cultural commodities that are primed to be used as cultural resources. Such materials only become gifts when we choose to give them to someone else.



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Such texts must be producerly, must be open to multiple interpretations and use, before they are spread. The tight control over the message doesn’t just break down through the videos circulation. The loss of the producer’s control over meaning is a precondition for the videos circulation. When people feel that they can have a stake in the content, when it can be used to represent themselves and their views somehow, they are inclined to share a video with others.

We must keep in mind, however, that a commercial is not just any type of video. More so that general art or entertainment, commercials have an explicit functional purpose — to help position material goods within a cultural context. Publicity and advertising is used, for instance, to ensure that a particular brand of designer sunglasses evokes a sense of “coolness” within a particular niche of consumers. Historically, this has required much tighter control over their potential messages and thus the idea that consumers may appropriate and rework brand messages may generate a high degree of anxiety. Media producers worry about losing control. The reality is that they have already lost control; consumers can take their brands and do with them whatever they want. And the more producers do to reign in this grassroots creativity, the more they will take away the “worth” of their goods and devalue their content in the eyes of those consumers.

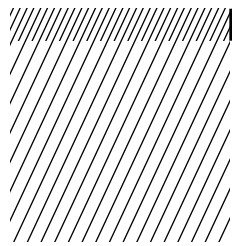
Therefore, in order to become cultural commodities that can be made “producerly,” ads must sacrifice some of their functional purpose. We don’t post and share clips just because of what we have to say about the ad, but also because of what it might have to say about us, so the ad must be capable of users express something beyond their affinity for the product it promotes. Only when commercials have enough ambiguity in meaning that they give up control of

their promotional function can they develop the gaps and spaces to becomes producerly. When that happens, instead of giving meaning to a pair of sunglasses, the ad itself becomes a cultural commodity not unlike a pair of designer sunglasses that we can “wear.”

We can post the video or the widget on our social network sites, say, and in so doing, signal something about ourselves. But in such a context, the brand messages does not entirely disappear. Each new viewer encounters it afresh and is reminded of the brand and its potential meanings for them. Users remain aware of the advertisement’s sources and goals and thus they become part of the process by which meaning transfer occurs. We might consider, for example, what happens when the template created by the PC vs. Mac advertising campaign gets used as the basis for parody videos which apply its images to distinguish between other kinds of products, say, between Nintendo and Sony Playstation, between DC and Marvel, or between Republicans and Democrats. When we see these other uses of the template, we still recall, on some level, its original function as a way of promoting Apple. The repurposing allows the brand iconography to spread to new contexts, even as it offers us a way back to its original source.

PART SIX: SPREADABILITY: AESTHETICS AND STRUCTURAL STRATEGIES

Cadbury’s “Gorilla” spot — an ad featuring nothing but a life-size Cadbury-purple Gorilla belting out the drumline to Phil Collins classic “Something in the Air Tonight” — didn’t spread just because it was “producerly.” It was also incredibly amusing. There is still truth in the notion that good, compelling content remains a crucial factor in the spreadability media. If a “producerly” openness is required in order for content to be adopted into the gift economy, not all gifts are equally valuable, and thus not all content is equally spreadable. Producerly engagement encourages individuals to take on content as their own and invest their own identity in it, making it a potential tool of communication. But, in thinking back to what we outlined as some of the key motivations for spreading content, we must remember that in order to become spreadable, the content has to be able to create worth. In other words, openness and an abundance of meanings and uses may make some advertising material a potential gift, but it has to be able to communicate something that is socially meaningful before someone will give it.



Humor

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Humor

If one looks at the videos that have spread most successfully, a clear pattern begins to emerge: a lot of them, like “Gorilla,” are really, really funny. The success of humor should come as no surprise — we intuitively understand that sharing funny anecdotes or cracking jokes that everyone gets is an easy way to build camaraderie and put people at ease in formal situations. Conversely, making a joke that people don’t understand is a fast way to inject awkwardness into any situation and induce a sense of alienation in those left out of the punch-line. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1991) has noted the very thin line which separates a joke from an insult: a joke expresses something the community is ready to hear; an insult expresses something it doesn’t want to talk about. The act of recognizing a joke is an act of exchanging judgements about the world and thus the spread of jokes can strengthen social ties.

Humor, therefore, has the ability to define “insiders” and “outsiders” within a community: insiders may take pleasure in making fun of outsiders. Consider how jokes form around rivalries between colleges or companies: MIT folks don’t really imagine that folks at Harvard are foolish but making Harvard jokes signals that we are all part of the same community and close ranks against those “up the river.” But tell the joke in the wrong time or place and we can damage social relations, insulting those we sought to include, alienate those we sought to bring close to us. Humor, thus, is not simply a matter of taste: it is a vehicle by which we articulate and validate our tastes.

If we look more closely at the spread of videos, we can identify two extremely popular forms — *parody* (often in partnership with certain elements of nostalgia, usually ironic) and *humor* that uses absurdity or shock/surprise. To be clear, these categories are by no means mutually exclusive, and successful videos quite frequently use a blend of both for added effect.

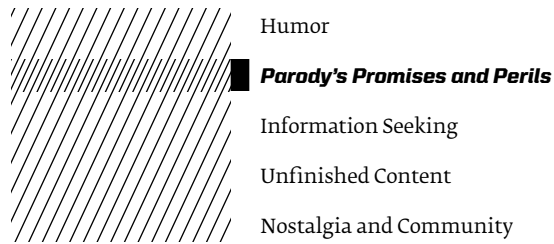
Cadbury's "Gorilla" is a prime instance in which parody, nostalgia, and absurdity are blended in order to create an provocative and spreadable ad. To be fair, parody in general always has elements of absurdity, since its humor relies on the intrusion of unexpected elements into an "normal" or common situation. In "Gorilla," however, the dominant form at work is absurdity. This is established from the very beginning, by starting with a close-up of the gorilla, and pulling out to reveal the drum kit. The opening moment is one of surprise, emphasized with a sudden rise in the music, upending our expectations of what we would see following a series of shots of a gorilla's face. The strangeness of the set-up itself becomes the punchline, rather than forcing any complex interpretations or outside references as is more common in direct parodies. The video is primarily funny because it asks us to confront the limits of our expectations.

The implicit parody elements present are used to keep the absurdity within the bounds of comprehension, however. It is not purely surreal, but rather references a number of clichés and cultural touchstones. The way the gorilla drums, for instance, is a familiar exaggeration of drummers, and Phil Collins in particular, getting swept up into the music. The gorilla, too, is incredibly realistic looking and the opening close-ups are reminiscent enough of nature programs that several users on YouTube commented that they mistook it for an animal rights advertisement until the drumming began. The surprise comes from overturning certain expectations of normality precisely because it is able to set up and evoke them in the first place.

The good-natured irreverence exhibited through absurdity and parody in this instance is central to what makes a video spreadable. In enacting reversals and disruptions of standard patterns, the "Gorilla" video poses a sort of abstract challenge to formality and authority. In effect, its informality gives users

permission to transgress the audience/producer boundary, to adopt and adapt the content for their own purposes. In other words, if the advertisers don't take themselves too seriously, it invites users to get in on the fun as well.

This worked beautifully for Cadbury, resulting in a slew of remixes and mash-ups that helped promote the original and turn Cadbury into a sort of cultural benchmark in its own right. One user interpreted the video to be melodramatic and "cheesy," and thus created a response called "A glass and a half full of cheesiness" which redid the video using the over-the-top 80s ballad "Total Eclipse of the Heart." Another remix plays up the fact that the drummer is a gorilla, using "Welcome to the Jungle." Still more use artists ranging from Nirvana to 50 cent, the latter song not even having much by way of a traditional drum beat. Further spoofs went on to re-shoot the video with other unexpected drummers, from a tiny stuffed monkey, which plays off the fake primate aspect, to a model in her bra, which does a riff off of the strapline "a glass and a half full of joy," replacing it with "two cups full of joy." Both by depriving the video of a specific message and engaging forms that are primed for participation, "Gorilla" serves as an exemplar of a "producerly" text that spreads as more and more people have a go at remaking it for their own comic effects. Its absurdity creates gaps "wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them" (Fiske, 1989, p.104).



Parody's Promises and Perils

Another thing that “Gorilla” does well is provide different levels of engagement — the video works whether or not you get the Phil Collins references. However, this is not always the case with humor. The strength of parody as spreadable media is the fact that it is a predominantly participatory form. That is to say, for something to be recognizable as parody requires certain cultural knowledge on the part of the viewer. This is precisely what makes parody valuable for spread — it can express shared frameworks of reference within a community and, especially when it plays on nostalgic references, a shared history as well, thus marking those inside as those who “get” the joke. But as we mentioned briefly, this has the potential to alienate as well, and unless advertisers want the spread of their content to be siloed exclusively within small niches, they must be careful to build different levels of “insider” knowledge.

Two instances of well-executed parodies are the efforts by Coca-Cola and Toyota in addressing the gaming community, a large, but undeniably specialized interest group. With the rise of advertising interest in immersive online worlds, such as Second Life, and the increasing visibility of enormous, global networks of online gamers, big trans-national corporations have started to take notice. Following its now legendary Chinese *World of Warcraft* commercial, Coke launched another video game parody/homage during the Super Bowl. Though it premiered on “traditional” media, Coke quickly posted the spot onto YouTube, where it now has over 2.2 million views and nearly 2,000 comments (this, of course, doesn’t even count repostings by other users). The spoof features a game-world that references the popular *Grand Theft Auto* — grimy, crime-ridden streets, and a rough, swaggering male protagonist — but when the protagonist has a Coke, the entire game experiences a dramatic reversal. The protagonist slams down exact change on the counter, behind which the store clerk stands rigid, with his hands raised,

as if he's being held up. The protagonist drags a blond yuppie, complete with a sweater tied around his shoulders, out of his convertible only to give him a Coke and share a toast. He puts out fires as he strolls on the streets, recovers purses for grannies, gives money to the homeless, and stuffs a passer-by into a convertible full of scantily clad babes. His good deeds attract supporters until he's leading a full-blown parade down the street, complete with helicopters. Every step along the way, every cliché of the crime game gets transformed into an act of giving and joy. Police cars running into fire hydrants, by instance, result into two perfect half-arches of water that creates rainbows.

Though the message is almost painfully sincere, the spot works because of the combination of a broad message (turn bad things good by giving back, part of their "mycokerewards.com" campaign) and very specific details about the game world it was parodying. The narrative works whether or not the viewer knows anything about *Grand Theft Auto*, but if the countless mentions of the game in the YouTube comments were any indication, the fact that it spoofed the popular game inspired many to help spread the word. Those who "got" the video game elements, especially the more subtle ones like the fact that the character is able to pull a seemingly endless supply of random objects out of nowhere, were able to share and discuss their knowledge, as well as make further "in" jokes ("I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek of Grand Theft Auto: San Francisco" –http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=7wt5FiZQrgM&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3D7wt5FiZQrgM). Even beyond the different levels of gaming knowledge, there is yet another layer of cultural references — the song used in the spot, 'You Give A Little', is from 1976 musical called *Bugsy Malone*, itself a parody of cinema representations of 1930s gangsters. In the comments, fans of the film lobbied to see the musical released on DVD and responded to one another, declaring their alliance to that particular fan group.

Yet another recent success was the Toyota *World of Warcraft* commercial. What made this one different from the previous spot (which, for all its infamy, did not reach nearly the same level of online circulation) or even the *Grand Theft Auto* spoof, is that it not only utilizes details and aesthetics of *World of Warcraft*, but refers to a very specific

event in the online gaming culture's history. The 30-second spot features a group of warriors standing around planning and arming for an attack, when all of a sudden one of them goes rogue, transforms into a truck, and goes rushing off into battle.

This is a direct reference to the Leeroy Jenkins incident that became so widespread as a cultural reference that it was featured as a question on *Jeopardy*. Within the *World of Warcraft* community, the Leeroy Jenkins incident was so well-known that an add-on was created so players could "invoke the power of Leeroy Jenkins" and play a sound-clip from the original battle video.

The key to this parody was how it managed to remain faithful to the cultural cues of the game and the incident — the deadpan, matter-of-fact voices of the players, the crazy, over-the-top aggro yelling of the "Leeroy" character, who at one point utters one of the lines from the original LeRoy Jenkins video. There is also an additional layer of self-reflexivity, when one of the *World of Warcraft* players responds with an exasperated "No way. There's no trucks in Worlds of Warcraft!" All of these things work as winking invitations to those involved in *World of Warcraft* to get in on the joke, and as over-the-top as it is, the spot is never more over-the-top than the original, carefully avoiding coming off as a mockery.

Companies must be careful, however, that in trying to address a wider audience with different levels of shared cultural knowledge that they do not make the parody itself so broad and lacking in culturally specific details that the spoof comes across as mocking, lazy, or disingenuous. Additionally, it should be noted that the form alone will not do all the work. Take, for instance, the Mini Cooper film series "Hammer & Coop," which, despite being designed to "go viral" as a parody of 70s and 80s cop shows (*Starsky & Hutch* and *Knight Rider*), got nowhere near the attention of the most successful spreadable media. Despite some impressive numbers boasted by the advertising firm behind the series, the YouTube view numbers flatten out in the tens of thousands, instead of millions. As a parody, it lacked a clear interest community due to the broadness of execution. While it parodied the general aesthetic and the dominant tropes of the 70s and 80s cop genre, it failed to draw clear attention to any specifics,

and in fact relied on references to other parodies of the genre at times by making the protagonist resemble Ben Stiller's character from the recent *Starsky & Hutch* remake. Though by no means a failure, the video's limited circulation when compared with the Coke, Cadbury, and Toyota ads, suggests that it is not only the parody form, but the quality and subtlety of execution that matters.

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Information Seeking

Another characteristic of popular “viral” content is some level of ambiguity or confusion that encourages people to seek out further information. This act encourages the sharing of content as people enlist their network to help with the problem solving, an act typically known as “collective intelligence” or “crowd sourcing.” In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins argues that a successful media franchise is not only a cultural attractor, drawing like minded people together to form an audience, but also a cultural activator, giving that community something to do. Figuring out such spots offer many different communities something to do and thus a reason to continue to engage with its content. Often, these spots force us to look twice because we can't believe, or understand, what it is we are seeing. We need to verify their authenticity, intent, or simply figure out how it was accomplished.

The Cadbury Gorilla spot, for instance, did this to a certain extent, with some discussion surrounding just who was in the Gorilla suit — Phil Collins himself was cited as a possibility — and, to a lesser extent, whether or not the Gorilla was real. The VW Polo also engaged this kind of participation, provoking questions of whether or not the ad was “real” or in any way affiliated with Volkswagen. With Volkswagen's denial of any connection to the commercial, people became wrapped up in a search for the origins of the ad, locating information on the creators, the director, and even the budget as clues to whether or not it was a publicity stunt.

Yet another interesting instance of this logic is the “homemade” Ford Mondeo “Desire” video. The ad itself is a whimsical, if somewhat ambiguous, television spot composed of a series of still and near-still shots of cars lifting off the streets of London attached to colorful bunches of helium balloons. The video was uploaded to YouTube and received a few hundred thousand hits, a decent, if unremarkable, showing. What makes the Ford Mondeo

case so interesting is that almost six months after the original ad went up on YouTube, a video appeared of two guys from New Zealand tying balloons to a car until it lifted off. The video, posted by a user by the name of homeschooled2, claimed to be a “homemade” version of the Ford ad. It received far greater viral circulation than the original, clocking in over a million YouTube views and thousands of comments, as well as news media coverage, as people tried to prove whether or not what happened the video was physically possible. Two days after the initial “homemade” video went up, homeschooled2 posted a couple of “making of” follow-up videos that showed that the video was made with aid of a crane and some clever digital editing effects, with acknowledgment of help from the “team from Ford” in the video description. Leaving the nature and extent of Ford’s involvement ambiguous, the “making of” videos forced us to consider whether Ford had orchestrated the whole thing, making the original ad with the addition of a viral campaign in mind.

Many of the comments surrounding the “homemade” ad were focused on determining whether it was “for real.” Even after the follow-up videos that revealed both the crane and the Ford involvement were posted, clearly linked from the original, discussion continued along these lines, suggesting that it was not the answer to the question of authenticity that was the point, but the process of questioning. What is finally at stake is not knowing, but seeking answers. The “homemade” video thus spread by opening itself to this search for authenticity.

This search for authenticity, origins, or purpose can be seen as yet another way of actively constructing the meaning of content, another type of gap that encourages producerly engagement. Here, it is the process of uncovering the “truth” that is more important than what is found. Whether the VW ad is proven to be an intentional stunt or an accidental leak, whether Ford had planned the “homemade” ad from the beginning or not, whether it really is Phil Collins in the gorilla suit, the debate, allows individuals to create and justify their interpretations by asserting control over what information they have about the ad.

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Unfinished Content

In all of the previous examples, the “gaps” are in the meaning of the content, whether due to general ambiguity within or hidden information surrounding the ad. Burger King’s Subservient Chicken interactive video site, launched in 2004, literally engaged users in the creation of the video’s content.

Visitors to the site saw a video window with a man in a chicken suit standing in a room. Below, there is a text input box with the words “Get chicken just the way you like it. Type command here.” Once a command is typed, it triggers a video of the man in the chicken suit performing the command. There are nearly 300 different clips in all, each set to respond to a variety of similar commands ranging from “jump” to “lay egg” to “moonwalk.” Commands that the chicken doesn’t understand might result in a clip expressing confusion or boredom, while commands deemed inappropriate, such as those that are sexually explicit, result in a clip of the chicken wagging his finger in disapproval. All of the video clips fit within an amateur video aesthetic, with a single, low resolution camera, pointing head on not unlike a webcam mounted atop a computer.

Unlike other so-called “interactive” video campaigns, such as the Guinness domino website in which a user solves a series of puzzles to reveal parts of the finished video, the Subservient Chicken site creates a more dynamic interaction, engaging the user in a process of actually creating the video. The site does nothing until a command has been entered. That is, the particular video (or series of clips) that is viewed, the actual output, is controlled and triggered entirely by the user. Whereas the Guinness campaign is a matter of engaging with content that is only retrieved interactively, giving up control to the participant only at the level of access, Subservient Chicken gives up control at the level of creation. Though the videos are pre-made, the content itself fundamentally incomplete. Not only is there no meaning, but there is also no action, no finished content until the

user enters a command. Thus, by creating a partial work, an archive of incomplete, component parts, the Subservient Chicken campaign offered the user agency that went beyond just access and choice, but tangible participation in the work's creation.

Subservient Chicken becomes producerly by explicitly engaging the user in the creative process. It also triggers an information-gathering urge, much like the Mondeo or VW Polo ads. Users debate how its mechanism works as much as they reinterpreted its meaning or questioned its authenticity. Gamers often seek to test the limits of a game to see how much actual control and agency they can exert. Here, users wanted to push against the limits of the ad to see what flaws they could locate in its execution. Websites soon appeared when catalogued the various commands and their responses. People worked together to test the limits of application and in the process, spread the video to other interested parties, trying to expand the ranks of the puzzle solvers. According to Axel Bruns (2007), some of the key characteristics of “produsage” — the “hybrid, user-and-producer position” occupied by participants in user-led spaces such as Wikipedia and YouTube — include that content is “continually under development” and highly collaborative. Working together, they hoped to outsmart the original producers or at least figure out how it all worked and thereby “beat the system.”

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Nostalgia and Community

Earlier, we noted that commodity culture and the gift economy operate on the basis of very different sets of fantasy. We turn towards commodity culture when we seek to express our individuality, when we want to break free of social constraints, when we want to enjoy opportunities for upward mobility or shift our status and identity. The fantasies which shape the gift economy have more to do with social connectivity and especially with reaffirming existing values and preserving and promoting cultural traditions. The fantasies of a commodity culture are those of transformation while those of a gift economy are often deeply nostalgic.

When materials move from one sphere to the other, they often get reworked to reflect the values and fantasies associated with their current context. Jenkins (1992), for example, argues fan media production and circulation often centers around themes of romance, friendship, and community. These values shape the decisions fans make at every level, starting with the choice of films and television programs which seem to offer the best opportunities to explore these concepts. When fans rework program content through vidding (a genre of fan music videos) or fan fiction, they tend to draw attention to those situations where such relationships are most vividly expressed. A fan music video for *Heroes*, for example, centers around moments when two or more of the characters are interacting, even though the structure of the original program kept these characters apart for the better part of a season. The selected music further emphasizes the social bonds within the community and the emotional links these characters feel towards each other.

These themes surface most often in fan made media because, consciously or not, these works allow fans to explore the nature of the social bonds and emotional commitments that draw them together as a subculture. Fan-made media is media that is shared with others with common passions and often its exchange can be understood

as a marker of friendship or at least sisterhood. In some cases, fans produce stories or videos to give to other fans explicitly as gifts. But in many other cases, they understand their works as a contribution to the ongoing life of their community. The community tends to nurture writers and artists, seeing each member as potentially making a creative contribution, but they value more strongly those whose works reflect the core themes of fan culture more generally.

Other content which is commonly “spread” within the gift economy has an explicitly nostalgic tone. For many baby boomers, there is enormous pleasure in watching older commercials or segments from children’s programs of their childhood. This is a generation which is using eBay to repurchase all the old toys, comics, collector cards, and other stuff that their parents threw away when they went to college. The exchange of these retro or nostalgic texts helps to spark the exchange of memories, which are often bound up to personal and collective histories of consumption and spectatorship. Robert Kozinets (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, 2003) has explored how such “retromarketing” practices have helped to revitalize older brands, giving them greater currency in the contemporary marketplace. As Kozinets and his collaborators explain:

Long abandoned brands, such as Aladdin (lunchboxes), Beemans (gum) and Chuck Taylors (shoes), have been adroitly reanimated and successfully relaunched. Ancient commercials are being re-broadcast (Ovaltine, Alka-Seltzer) or brilliantly updated (Britney Spears sings “Come Alive” for Pepsi). On the Internet, sites devoted to marketing a variety of retro merchandise—from candy (nostalgiccandy.com) to fabric (reprodepotfabrics.com), games (allretrogames.com) to home furnishings (modfurnishings.com)—have popped up. Retro styling is de rigueur in countless product categories, ranging from cameras and colognes to telephones and trainers. Even automobiles and detergents, long the apotheosis of marketing’s new-and-improved, washes-whiter, we-have-the-technology worldview, are getting in on the retroactive act, as the success of the Chrysler P.T. Cruiser and Color Protection Tide daily remind us.

In many cases, the release of these retro products sparks enormous conversation wherever there are consumers old enough to have fond memories of their hay day. In other cases, online discussions of long retired brands has led to a greater appreciation of their potential within parent companies, as in the case of Quaker Oats' Quisp cereal, which had been introduced in 1965, entered the popular imagination thanks to an inventive ad campaign created by *Rocky and Bullwinkle's* Jay Ward and Bill Scott, and finally disappeared from national circulation in 1977, though it remained available in some regions of the country. Internet discussions and eBay transactions sparked growing consumer awareness of the brand, helping to pave the way for more aggressive marketing effort by Quaker, including the development and online sale of a gourmet sized package of the crunchy sugary cereal.

While online fans contest the authenticity of the re-issued product, they also share personal memories of their childhood enjoyment of the product and in the process, spread the news of its reissue to others in their social circles. In discussing the values which shape successful retro-brands, Kozinets and colleagues describe something very close to the animating fantasies of the gift economy:

Utopianism is perhaps the hallmark of the retro-brand. The brand must be capable of mobilizing an Elysian vision, of engendering a longing for an idealized past that is satisfied through consumption. . . . Solidarity is an important unifying quality of the retro-brand. Whether as extreme as a cargo cult or as moderate as fictive kinship, the brand must inspire among its users the sense of belonging to a community.

CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF SPREADABLE MEDIA

So far this white paper has:

OVERVIEW

- criticized the vagueness of existing models of “viral media” or “memes”
- outlined the differences between spreadable and sticky media.
- identified those factors which have led to the rise of spreadable media
- shown why spreadable media involves a collaboration between the gift economy and commodity culture.
- discussed a range of different kinds of communities that are shaping the spread of media
- pointed towards some properties shared by the most spreadable media content.

In this concluding section, we will return to the core question from the perspective of our clients: Is it a good idea to allow or enable my consumers to spread my brand message or my copyrighted content?

We enter this discussion with some modesty. The situation we have described here is in flux. New examples of spreadable content, new business plans, and new policies regarding intellectual property are announced each day and so far, the verdict is still out. There’s a lot we do not yet know about spreadable media’s benefits and risks from a corporate perspective. In this transitional moment, we advise companies to proceed with caution but fear that those who remain totally outside this space may be running greater risks than those who make at least some modest steps towards embracing spreadability.

THERE IS NO MAGIC FORMULA ON OFFER HERE.

Certainly, one can point to some great success stories from companies who have been early to embrace this spreadable model. One such case is the Dove Evolution campaign that was released online with a 75 second clip showing an “ordinary” woman’s painful transformation into an “object of desire”. The ad boosted sales, received over 5 million views and cost nothing to distribute online. Dove also released another version of the spot on television during the Superbowl. Placing the ad cost the company \$2.5 million and it received 2.5 million views. Granted, broadcast television provided them with an opportunity to reach a large number of viewers in a very short period of time, but the online version reached almost twice as many people at a fraction of the cost. One take-away here is that television may remain a stronger venue for “just in time” information, while the slower circulation of information online may ultimately result in much deeper saturation within the culture.

Or consider the success of the Cadbury Gorilla advertisement which we’ve cited several times already. In 8 weeks the ad received 5 million views, positioning Cadbury to grow 30% above the industry average that same year, increase it’s sales by 7% and most importantly, detach itself from the chocolate recall-salmonella scandal that had greatly impacted the company’s image in the UK.

Such success stories have inspired other companies to develop so-called “viral” marketing strategies, some of which have succeeded, many of which have not. The decentralized nature of the process, the lack of control over the flow of content means that there are no guarantees that such content will reach their desired market segments or for that matter, that they will circulate anywhere. If you want to guarantee the number of eyeballs which consume your message, nothing is going to replace traditional broadcasting methods anytime soon. Lowering the transaction costs, however, make it possible for companies to minimize their risks in trying out such strategies as an add-on to existing marketing approaches.

So what is spreadable media good for?

VALUE OF SPREADABLE MEDIA

- To generate *active commitment* from the audience,
- To *empower* them and make them an integral part of your product's success,
- To benefit from *online word-of-mouth*
- To reach *niche, highly interconnected* audiences,
- but most of all, to communicate with audiences *where they already are, and in a way that they value.*

Each of these factors suggest that such an approach may yield longer term rather than shorter term benefits:

BENEFITS

- Spreadability may help to *expand and intensify* consumer awareness of a new and emerging brand or *transform* their perceptions of an existing brand, re-affirming its central place in their lives.
- Spreadability may *expand* the range of potential markets for a brand by *introducing* it, at low costs and low risks, to niches that previously were not part of its market.
- Spreadability may *intensify* consumer loyalty by *increasing emotional attachment* to the brand or media franchise.
- Spreadability may *expand* the shelf life of existing media content by creating *new ways of interacting* with it (as occurs, say, around the modding of games or the archiving of classic television content on YouTube) and it may even *rebuild or reshape* the market for a dormant brand, as suggested by Robert Kozinets writing on "retro-brands."

All told, those companies which have the most to gain from this approach are those who have the least to lose from abandoning traditional broadcasting models, those which have:

- lower promotional budgets
- who want to reach niche markets
- who want to distribute so-called "Long Tail" content
- who want to build strong emotional connections with their consumers.

Those who have the most to lose are those companies which:

- **have well established brand messages**
- **have messages that are predictably delivered through broadcast channels**
- **who are concerned about a loss of control over their intellectual property**
- **who have reason to fear backlash from their consumers.**

Even here, remaining outside of the spreadable model altogether may cut them off from younger and more digitally connected consumers who spend less time consuming traditional broadcast content or who are increasingly suspicious of top-down advertising campaigns.

Such considerations intensify when we move from brand messages, which one wants to circulate freely, towards content, which is expected to generate revenue. Right now, spreadability has proven more effective at generating buzz and awareness than as a revenue generator, though this may be changing. Consider, for example, the mobile sector. As many as 20 percent of mobile subscribers are listening to music on their mobile devices (Minney, 2008) with similar increases occurring with other media such as games and video. There is also a strong rise in mobile media sharing, either directly phone-to-phone or pc-to-phone, in either case mobile consumers are already embracing spreadable media by default and companies are discovering that there is money to be made by facilitating their activities.

So far, only a few companies are taking advantage of a potential Mobile Web 2.0, according to Sumit Agarwal, a product manager in Google's mobile division:

We're really at mobile Web 0.5, to be completely honest, the real thing about Web 2.0 is people introducing applications to each other. True viral applications, something sent from one person to another, will absolutely be a big part of mobile. (Salz, 2007)

One such company, MoConDi Ltd. announced in September of 2007 that its Italian based service, MeYou, had reached more than 800,000 registered users. By January 2008, that number had doubled. MeYou is a mobile phone application which supports distribution of a mobile content to end users. These users can then recommend content to additional users and receive credits for doing so. Users receive MMS recommendations which contain a message and download link for the content and a link to install the MeYou application. In this case, they are using the same marketing strategy that launched Hotmail in the 90s.

MeYou has implemented a hybrid model between the spreadable and sticky models, between content distribution and marketing. As such, users will receive certain content directly from MeYou or from their friends for free, but other content requires for direct payment. Users can still share such by sending the application for which the receiver has to then purchase the activation code. This model is particularly successful with games where after the applications are activated, users can play against each other, creating strong social incentives to expand its reach. MeYou works mostly with ringtones, images, videos, animations and games. Through its parent company, MoConDi generate mobile branded content and distribution strategies for other businesses. According to MeYou's public information 60% of users purchase content and 64% of users send recommendations with 24% of recommendations resulting in purchases.

We might contrast the relative success which MoConDi has enjoyed through enfranchising its consumers to spread content with the backlash which has come as a result of the tendency of major media companies to brand grassroots circulation as "piracy." For quite some time, Sony-BMG and all other music majors have opted for issuing take-down notices when content to which they hold rights to is posted on YouTube. It now seems that Sony-BMG is finding a way to move away from that prohibitionist model and is embracing a profit sharing, win-win philosophy based on building stronger collaborations with their fans. They have opted for inserting a link to the content's original site on the video post and eliminating its capacity to be embedded. So, on one end they've limited the spread of their content in favor of increasing the stickiness of their own site.

But they also are allowing fans to share music and YouTube to make a profit. In the process, Sony–BMG is increasing the traffic to and visibility of its official sites, but most importantly, the company is no longer treating fans and potential consumers as criminals.

Such an approach is spreading across other industries and throughout other mediums. Peer–to–peer technologies have dealt with a bad reputation for years — since the days of the Napster trials, P2P’s original idea, to enable user share big files, has been demonized. The entertainment industry has pegged it as a tool for piracy. And recently, ISPs have blamed it for clogging their networks. Nevertheless P2P is the perfect example to illustrate some of the models of resource–lite, user–led, pull distribution that benefit from a spreadable mentality. Here company and user/distributors are building a completely new relationship where the company trusts the user with the safekeeping of its content. In spite of the bad reputation and lack of control, the same entertainment industry that one day attacked it, has now found, both in the bit torrent technology and in P2P, a powerful ally. NBC is working with Pando Networks, a P2P content–delivery–technology company, to revamp its NBC Direct service (Weprin, 2008). BBC and Showtime, amongst others, are now working with the bit torrent distribution platform Vuze. And Fox, Lions Gate and MTV are all working with the original Bit Torrent company.

Media scholar Mark Pesce (2005) argues that many mainstream British and American television series are enjoying commercial success in international markets because — and not in spite of — their massive online circulations. Pesce argues that illegal downloads helped to promote the content, closing the temporal gap between domestic and foreign distribution, and increasing consumer interest. Pesce argues that what he calls Hyperdistribution is here to stay.

The clock can’t be turned back, BitTorrent can’t be un–invented. We have to deal with the world as it is, not as we’d like it to be. In the new, “flat world,” where any programme produced anywhere in the world is immediately available everywhere in the world, the only sustainable edge comes from entrepreneurship and innovation.

Pesce's plea for innovation is made that more urgent by the fact that, according to a study performed in 17 countries, 29% of active technology users regularly write comments and blogs, 27% share free music and 28% access social networking sites.

Clearly, a significant portion of the public is embracing those technologies and cultural practices which support spreadable media. They want to play active roles in helping to shape the flow of media within their own social communities. This is part of what Josh Bernoff and Charlene Li are calling the "groundswell", which is being fueled by the combined force of "people's desires to connect, new interactive technologies and online economics". They describe the groundswell as a movement that can't be stopped but must be joined in order to retain currency. It has changed the power relation between companies and consumers, and, in embracing the groundswell and the spreadable media model, companies are also redefining their relationships and their sense of self. This might be a painful process, but at the end there will be more to be gained than lost. By ceding this power to its consumers companies are losing much of the control over their distribution, but they are gaining the value of each user's personal ties.

We may not yet have reached the point where "If it doesn't spread, it's dead," but that time is coming and companies need to be rethinking their business models now in anticipation of these shifts which will even more fundamentally alter the media landscape.

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