Fanning the Audience’s Flames
Ten Ways to Embrace and Cultivate Fan Communities

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Executive Summary

The creative industries have long assumed a direct relationship between producer and consumer. Producers were the active agent. Consumers were the passive recipients – their “target.” Thus spoke the conventional “sender-receiver” model.

Increasingly, that mode of thinking has changed. The audience’s active engagement with media content is now taken for granted, shaping the production, distribution, and consumption of media content at every level; this same concept is extending to the ways we think about brands.

The drive is now to think of the creative industries less as creating products and more as creating universes which can be dispersed across multiple media channels. Such a change in thinking also requires a rethinking of audiences, not as passive receivers but rather as hunters and gatherers who seek out new information about brands and who search for new opportunities to engage with the media property. C3 faculty advisor Grant McCracken suggests in a recent post on his weblog that the word consumer is outmoded and that modern customers should be treated as multipliers, fans who, if engaged, increase the value of a brand or a cultural product exponentially. C3 faculty advisor Henry Jenkins has similarly argued that fans appreciate media properties in both the emotional sense (expanding its meaningfulness to themselves and others) and in the economic sense (broadening its potential value in the cultural marketplace).

The following study is meant to offer a broad overview of the many different ways fans increase the value of both brands and cultural products. It is intended as a first step toward a more sustained research agenda focused on the passionate consumption of McCracken’s multipliers.

This white paper identifies 10 ways that fans multiply or appreciate the value of media properties and brands:

1. Fans are loyals who constitute the most valuable segment of the viewing audience because they are more apt to watch regularly, seek out additional information about the program and its affiliated brands, have strong brand recall, have strong ties to sponsors, and make economic decisions they think will help ensure a favorite program’s chances for survival.

2. Fans form collective intelligence communities who work together to assemble and process information about a favorite media property and are drawn toward properties which reward their mastery and provide appropriate fodder for their problem-solving activities. As they do so, they support the extension of the media property across more and more channels of communication.

3. Fans represent grassroots intermediaries who help to spread the word about favorite media properties and in the process expand and educate the base of potential consumers.

4. Fans are lead users – early adopters of new products and properties but also early adapters who retrofit those materials to better serve their needs; studying how they modify media properties may help companies to better identify otherwise unnoticed flaws and potentials.
5. Fans communities often include important surplus audiences who illustrate potentials for expanding the market for particular brands and properties if they can be courted without alienating the core demographic.

6. Fans will play an increasingly important role in the era of Long Tail economics – helping to identify, promote, and revalue back listed materials which may have the potential of reaching a larger audience.

7. Fans may become tourists who seek out and visit locations they first experienced through favorite media texts; this tendency represents a unique opportunity for partnerships between the entertainment and tourism industries.

8. Fans perform their affiliation with the brands, often helping to intensify the emotional experience of other consumers.

9. Fans create new materials which can themselves become secondary sources of value and fans can become valuable co-designers whose early input can shape production decisions in order to increase the potential fit with their tastes and interests.

10. Fandom can become a training and recruiting ground, allowing media companies to identify potential new media producers.

We might see these ten roles which fans could play for media companies as a continuum of ever more passionate and active engagement with the entertainment property – tracing a movement from watching to discussing to promoting to co-creating to entering the industry. A smart media company benefits from each step in this process. By identifying the various ways that fans create value, we will suggest potential ways that companies can foster even stronger relations with their consumers. In the process, we hope to suggest the relationship between fan cultures and what C3 faculty advisor Robert Kozinets and others call brand communities.²

This document will also ensure that everyone involved in the consortium has a common vocabulary for discussing and thinking about fandom. We will show how much research has already been done on fan communities and how much more can be done as we advise member companies on the best ways to strengthen consumer loyalty. We will conclude with some concrete recommendations about how our member companies might act on this overview as they seek to build up interest in their own initiatives.

The most important take-away here: call off the lawyers! Stop reading fans primarily in terms of a prohibitionist model which seeks to protect intellectual property at all costs. Rethink fans through a collaborationist logic. Look for ways to rebuild ties to your consumer base. Realize that fans create value and that there is more to be gained by enfranchising them than silencing them. Fan relations should be an important aspect of the public relations and promotional efforts behind any media property and increasingly, fans may also hold the key for developing brand loyalty around consumer products.
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Created for MIT Convergence Culture Consortium
in partnership with Turner Broadcasting, GSD&M and MTV

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Fans as Infringers/Poachers

“Corporations will allow the public to participate in the construction and representation of its creations or they will, eventually, compromise the commercial value of their properties. The new consumer will help create value or they will refuse it. Corporations have a right to keep copyright but they have an interest in releasing it. The economics of scarcity may dictate the first. The economics of plentitude dictate the second.”

– Grant McCracken, Plentitude: Culture by Commotion (1997)\(^3\)

In his forthcoming book, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Intersect, C3 principal investigator Henry Jenkins describes a three-stage movement from the folk culture which dominated America in the 19\(^{th}\) century to the mass culture which displaced it in the 20\(^{th}\) century to the participatory culture which will dominate the 21\(^{st}\) century.\(^4\) During that time, folk culture practices were pushed underground but the desire to participate actively in the production and circulation of culture was not crushed by the rise of modern mass media. Over the past several decades, new media technologies (from the photocopier to the iPod) have enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. The Web has made fan communities much more visible, expanding the scale of their activities, enabling them to respond more quickly to decisions by media companies, and making their efforts more visible within the culture. Fan culture (which we might define as the application of folk culture practices to the materials of mass culture) is no longer an underground phenomenon, hidden from view, but rather an increasingly public aspect of the circulation of mass media texts. Jenkins argues that media convergence is being fueled as much by the bottom up energies of these grassroots intermediaries as by the efforts of consolidated media companies to expand their reach within the marketplace. One cannot understand one without engaging with the other.

Jenkins writes, “Convergence requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions. If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public.”
The core question is how mass media companies will respond to the increasingly visible and powerful force of this new participatory culture. Will they embrace it and ride it toward new revenue streams, turn their back on it and hope it goes away, or actively try to shut it down and return to the “good ol’ days” when consumers were assumed to be passive? Everyone involved realizes we now live in a participatory culture but nobody can agree on the terms of our participation.

As the Internet made fan culture more public, many media companies have responded with distrust or distaste: they see fans primarily as people who infringe on their intellectual property and their activities as potentially damaging to their efforts to define what those materials mean within the marketplace. Fan fiction ranks up there with music downloads as one of the hot button issues for the legal departments of many media companies. As long as the phenomenon is understood primarily within a legal context, it is going to be impossible for corporations to recognize the potential benefits which fans bring to the table.

**Prohibitionists vs. Collaborationists**

Most commonly, these companies adopt a “prohibitionist” stance toward fan culture: that is, they seek to regulate if not outright ban most forms of fan expression. This stance is well documented in J.D. Lasica’s *Darknet: Hollywood’s War Against the Digital Generation* (2005). Lasica writes that, “under the new regime, the freedoms we have long enjoyed—lending an article to a friend, backing up a file, clipping an item for later retrieval—become illegal if done without the permission of the copyright owner” (140). In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins contrasts this “prohibitionist” response adopted by most old media companies with the collaborationist approach more commonly embraced by new media companies: such companies respect fan autonomy and creativity, seeing them as expanding the potential markets for their goods and in some cases, generating new content which expands the shelf life of their franchises. See, for example, Simone Murray’s 2004 comparison of prohibitionist reactions to *Harry Potter* fan communities with the collaborationist approaches to *Lord of the Rings* fan communities. Jenkins himself suggests that the same company – in this case, LucasArts – may adopt prohibitionist responses at some times or toward some fan communities and collaborationist responses in other contexts. The result is an era of mixed signals during which neither producers nor consumers understand what is expected of them.

In the past, media studies scholars, especially those focusing on fan communities, have often celebrated fans as “poachers,” a term popularized by Henry Jenkins’ 1992 book *Textual Poachers.* How do we separate out the positive evaluation of the “poacher” among academics and the negative assessment of “infringers” within the media industry? Both terms read the relationship in antagonistic or destructive rather than constructive terms. Instead, the Convergence Culture Consortium encourages a new model which emphasizes fans’ *emotional capital,* a term borrowed from a talk by Coca-Cola CEO Steven Heyer. We might think of emotional capital as the affective investments consumers make in favored cultural materials. For example, when a young couple says, “They are playing our song,” the “our” in that sentence is important: it describes an emotional relationship to the music which grew out of their unique memories and interpretations. For most people, the song remains in the background; for them, the song takes on special significance in their lives. The song becomes their emotional capital. Saatchi & Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts has proposed a similar concept of the *lovemark* to refer to a kind of loyalty toward brands or media franchises which exceeds all rationality or at least that goes beyond any simple economic exchange between producer and consumer. Roberts argues that lovemarks sustain their value over time because they become so deeply embedded in the lives and self-perceptions of consumers.
Closely related to emotional capital or lovemark is the concept of a *moral economy*. The term comes from historical research which seeks to understand how economic relationships operate in closed traditional societies – such as the villages of early modern England and France – where people recognize that any given transaction occurs in a context where they have to deal with these same people for the rest of their lives. Their sense of social and cultural links to each other dampens any tendency to profit at the other’s expense and thus sets ethical limits on behavior. Some form of moral economy surrounds all exchanges but the ethical norms differ from context to context. A prohibitionist stance is dangerous because it violates this social contract and throws the moral economy into crisis; a collaborationist stance is better because it strengthens the sense that producers and consumers are part of the same community and thus have mutual obligations to take actions which sustain rather than damage that relationship. In our first case study, we will investigate the ways that college students understand the moral economy which exists around their favorite media properties and recommend ways that companies can strengthen their sense of membership or affiliation with a brand/fan community.

For example, C3 partner Ian Condry has explored the very different responses of American and Japanese companies to fan “piracy.” Condry finds that Japanese media companies have tended to allow and often encourage active fan involvement rather than pursue legal battles against infringers; such a model “encourages flourishing music cultures” rather than antagonizing their core market.

Other contemporary research has also indicated that activities deemed “pirating” have often actually been a boon to legitimate business if viewed from a less prohibitionist perspective. For instance, Brian Larkin’s 2004 study of video circulation in Nigeria examines, in detail, the infrastructure of the country’s pirating market. Larkin finds that the pirating of current Hollywood and Indian films reflects a desire for those in the developing world to be able to watch new releases at the same time as first-run audiences; the illegal distribution and exhibition of these videos has broadened audience awareness of media product, created the infrastructure of lawful video distribution, and spurred the growth of local filmmaking.
Consumers, given a choice, will gravitate toward those media franchises which are most welcoming and away from those which are most confrontational. In the branding world, Nike has gained publicity for its 2005 Nike iD campaign through interactive advertising agency R/GA in which Nike fans can go to the Web site and design their own customized pair of sneakers. The campaign also encouraged consumers to design their own advertisements, which fed back into the larger promotional efforts. They held contests and showcased the best works produced. In a similar vein, as Jenkins writes about in *Convergence Culture*, new network developments at BBC, such as the “Create with the BBC” campaign, and Al Gore’s Current TV seek to integrate user-generated content with content produced by the network in an increasingly seamless format. This degree of involvement gives fans a greater emotional stake in the company’s success and can lead to the development of a larger and more loyal fan base.

**Fans as Infringers/Poachers—Bottom Line**

Since media producers have long viewed fans as violators instead of partners in the production of media content, the friction between fan communities and corporations is understandable. Only through changing the ways in which fans are viewed can companies realize how valuable fan communities can be.

**The bottom line** is a collaborationist approach enhances the value of media properties by strengthening the moral economy; a prohibitionist stance, by contrast, antagonizes segments of the market which are central to the long-term success of media properties.
Fans as Loyals

A collaborationist stance fosters consumer loyalty – something of ever-increasing value in a fragmented entertainment marketplace characterized by abrupt shifts in fortunes and declining interest in once successful media franchises. Our research suggests that *loyals*, those who have invested the most emotional capital in their relationship with creative products, represent the most attractive and valuable segment of the media marketplace.¹⁴

**MIT and Initiative Media: American Idol 2**

Researchers in the Comparative Media Studies program collaborated with Initiative Media¹⁵ to study the viewing habits of *American Idol 2* on ABC (2002-2003). The investigators observed both group viewings in dorm settings and family viewings in the home; it also involved large-scale quantitative surveys conducted with self-identified American Idol fans, with regular viewers of reality television, and more generally, with people who were watching “favorite” programs.¹⁶ Earlier Initiative research had found that less than 10 percent of the viewers of most network shows regard the program as a favorite, while some shows—especially cult programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997-2003), *WWE Friday Night Smackdown* (UPN, 1999-present), or *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-present)—are regarded by as many as 50 percent of their viewers as favorites. The research, further analyzed in Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*,¹⁷ found that viewers watching a favorite program:

- were twice as likely as more casual viewers to pay attention to advertisements
- were less likely to switch channels during commercial breaks
- had significantly higher brand recall.

Furthermore, active fans are more likely to seek out further involvement with the brand across ancillary channels. The research found that 45% of loyal *American Idol* viewers also used the Web to find out more information about the show and, as a result, had further exposure to brand messages affiliated with the program. Thus, MIT and Initiative Media encouraged companies to look at not just the raw number of impressions but also depth of interaction, which the research termed *expressions*.¹⁸
Hypersociality

The Initiative/MIT study also found that viewers were more likely to return to the program week after week if it became a social ritual within their family or if they talked about it with other people. And curiously, watching in a social context increased awareness of brand messages, in part because advertisements are integrated into conversations around the program. This work complements Mizuko Ito’s notion of *hypersociality*. In a 2003/2004 study for *The Social Science Research Council*, Ito finds that games like *Yu-Gi-Oh* which involve both sharing stories and exchanging cards create stronger social ties among fans. These social bonds reinforce each member’s investment and participation within the franchise, thus potentially extending the amount of time and money they invest in the phenomenon.

C3 researcher Sam Ford found that professional wrestling fans often engage in activities intended to increase the loyalty and enjoyment of other fans, thus making the loyal fan base recruiters, cheerleaders, and motivators for the media property, drawing in more casual viewers and sustaining other loyal viewers. This coincides with the findings of the *American Idol* study, in which loyals in family units often directed the attention of more casual viewers within the family toward the show each week. As fan communities move online, their role as grassroots intermediaries promoting other’s loyalty and participation expands beyond face-to-face social connections and toward a larger public. Fans are increasingly savvy about the need both to generate larger ratings and also to reach valued demographics and will actively campaign to increase public awareness of shows they want to keep on the air. Fandom, in other words, feeds on social contact and thus will take action to recruit new consumers.

Fans as Loyals—Bottom Line

Preliminary research sees loyals as the most economically valuable segment of the viewership around popular media franchises: they are more valuable than causal viewers to media producers because they can be counted on to return week after week and because they actively seek to expand the market for favored cultural products; they are more valuable to advertisers than casual viewers because they are more likely to have continued contact with brands and more likely to integrate their messages into their ongoing social interactions around the program. The hypersocial nature of these fan communities tends to be mutually reinforcing: fans are more likely to remain loyals if the show becomes part of their interactions with others in their social community and they are more motivated to help publicize the media property, expanding its market even as they expand their own ranks.

The bottom line is that the focus on quantitative measures of impressions must be supplemented, if not outright replaced, by more qualitative measures of the degree and kind of emotional relations consumers have with the shows they watch.
Fans as Collective Intelligence

Based on the American Idol study, then, it appears that loyals play an important role in recruiting new consumers and thus expanding the potential market for media properties. Moreover, having a fan community is significantly more valuable in terms of insuring consumer loyalty than simply attracting a similar number of individual viewers. The cybertheorist Pierre Levy has proposed the term collective intelligence to refer to the new kinds of cultural communities which are emerging on the Internet as fans begin interacting with each other more frequently and as fan networks expand from local to virtual communities. As Levy explains, within a culture based on collective intelligence, nobody knows everything, everybody knows something, and what one person knows is potentially accessible to all members. Since the social life of these groups depends on the production and circulation of information, they are drawn toward situations which encourage the collaborative production and active sharing of knowledge. Building on Levy’s concept, C3 principal investigator Henry Jenkins argues in Convergence Culture that successful media properties are cultural attractors (that is, they draw together large numbers of like-minded individuals) and cultural activators (that is, they set into motion the group’s collective efforts to research, critique, and express themselves through media content).

Indeed, more and more media companies are designing opportunities for participation into their franchises. In a 28 October 2005 entry to his weblog, Grant McCracken encourages companies to consider branding in similar terms, finding ways to reward the pursuit of complexity or encouraged the sharing of interpretations of embedded brand messages rather than offer simple and blunt pitches for products.

In Convergence Culture, Jenkins offers two case studies of the collective intelligence of fan communities. The CBS reality show Survivor (2000-present) developed a strong fan community online dedicated to trying to find out the results of the show between the time it was taped and the time that it aired. In a practice known as spoiling, the fans pooled their combined knowledge and exploited their geographic distribution to gather and evaluate leads about potential series locations or contestants, seeking to correctly identify participants before this information was formally announced. Jenkins writes that, “in an age where all information sources are interconnected and where privacy is breaking down at an alarming rate, there is an immense amount that a team of several hundred people can dig out about a person, given enough time and
determination” (50). Survivor’s Executive Producer Mark Burnett and others involved in the production began playing with these spoiling fans, planting misleading clues, trying to encourage misinterpretations or foster greater intrigue about what was actually going to occur, because he saw spoiling as part of the mystique surrounding the series. As the fan base grew, and as journalists and the lay public became more aware of these efforts, the activities were seen as more threatening: what started as a cat and mouse game with an elite group of fans threatened to spill over and impact the way the larger public responded to the series.

Jenkins also explores the Matrix franchise as an example of transmedia storytelling, where important information needed to fully understand the world of the story was distributed across an interconnected series of films, comic books, Web sites, video games, and animated shorts. In this case, “fans raced, dazed and confused, from the theaters to plug into Internet discussion lists where every detail would be dissected and every possible interpretation debated” (138). The Wachowski brothers spread these complicated details throughout all of the various Matrix narratives depending on the collective intelligence of fans to collect and decipher all of the relevant information. He argues that this strategy may help to explain the enormous success, for example, of the Enter the Matrix videogame (Atari, 2003) which was eagerly sought out by fans even though most games critics trashed it.

Games, Both Virtual and Physical

Alternative reality games actively play on this interest in transmedia storytelling and are explicitly designed to tap the collective intelligence of these emerging fan communities. The Beast, a game developed to promote Steven Spielberg’s 2001 film Artificial Intelligence: AI, required players to band together, use the Internet and each others’ expertise to solve a fictional murder. In her 2004 book Digital Storytelling, Carolyn Handler Miller writes about the formation of a group of several thousand fans called the Cloudmakers who worked to solve the mystery of The Beast. The game may have been too niche to significantly impact the market for the film but it did foster a very active engagement from its core followers and pioneered a new model of marketing which is being exploited with greater success in subsequent iterations. Similarly, Zhan Li’s 2005 MIT thesis The Potential of America’s Army the Video Game as Civilian-Military Public Sphere argues that the U.S. military understood its sponsored game America’s Army as a means of expanding communications between service people and the civilian population, using it not simply as a recruiting tool to get young people to enlist but also as a means of building community relations. Li finds that the sites around the game also became an important site for discussions about the emerging war in Iraq. An upcoming C3 white paper will dig deeper into the phenomenon of alternative reality games.

Contemporary sports franchises are also taking advantage of collective intelligence. MIT graduate student and photojournalist Dan Bersak has conducted informal research on baseball fan communities. Bersak has been particularly interested in the ways these fan communities participate in and monitor radio talk shows. These groups share interviews and discussions on and by players and coaches, so that all the information sent out on the radio about games is recorded and compared for discrepancies, contradictions, and other potential insights by the fan community as a whole. ESPN has used fantasy baseball to engage the fans’ intense knowledge of the game and has thus extended the popularity of their brand: because the information is used through their fantasy play, these fans have a strong incentive to tune in to regular sportscasts on the network. Similarly, World Wrestling Entertainment has created a fantasy competition for fans to use their knowledge to compete with each other in creating and booking fantasy wrestling leagues using the WWE’s actual stars. Officially endorsed by major brand names in their respective industries, these activities encourage communication between the fan community and the entertainment producer/distributor. They
provide strong incentives for regular viewing and also create specialized markets for the sale or circulation of additional information.

**Fans as Collective Intelligence—Bottom Line**

When fans act as a collective body to gather and process information, they interact more actively with the content producers. This active involvement increases fan participation and fan loyalty. Those franchises which reward fan desires to collaborate in the production of meaning or the collection of new information create strong incentives for regular viewership and hypersocial contact. We have seen these principles at work across a range of different media sites – from *Survivor* to *Matrix*, from *The Beast* to *America’s Army*, and from baseball to fantasy pro wrestling leagues. The collective production and evaluation of program-related information helps to explain the growing interest in transmedia storytelling as media producers seek ways to encourage and prolong fan participation.

The bottom line is that collective intelligence is a powerful motive force defining why people seek out social contact with others who share their cultural preferences and interests.

The Beast (*the promotional ARG for Steven Spielberg’s Artificial Intelligence: AI*), America’s Army, *Enter the Matrix* and *WWE Fantasy* all rely on the collective intelligence of their audience.
Fans as Grassroots Intermediaries

Jenkins writes in *Convergence Culture* that collaborationist approaches see fans as “grassroots intermediaries helping to promote the franchise.” Often, programs develop a “cult following,” in part, because cult media producers have actively sought out preexisting fan communities and framed the new show around their preferences and interests; these communities, then, actively proselytize for the property both amongst other fans and casual viewers.

**Cult TV**

Kaarina Nikunen, a Finnish researcher who recently completed her doctoral dissertation at the University of Tampere, has identified three types of television fandom. One is trend fandom, where an active fan community emerges around a popular media property, such as *American Idol* or *Survivor* from the previous section on Fans as Loyals, or, in the case of Nikunen’s research, *Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997-2002), which already enjoys high visibility and broad-based audience interest. Such fandoms tend to be short-lived. Another type of fandom is star fandom, where the focus is on a performer or creative artist, such as Finnish star Marco Bjurström from Nikunen’s research. The final type of fandom is cult fandom, which involves a much more involved and devoted fan community centered around a particular show which may be more marginal to the culture at large, such as Finnish cult fandom surrounding *Xena: Warrior Princess* (syndication, 1995-2001).

These cult fans help create a buzz about the show amongst these other potential viewers while also demonstrating to networks the show’s extant market potential. This is the basis for Web sites such as *TV Shows on DVD*, where groups petition and vote trying to encourage the production companies which own their favorite series to release them onto the market.

Joss Whedon’s *Firefly*, which was cancelled after less than one season, gained new life thanks to the support of such fan followings. Whedon actively sought the support of his cult fan base, the so-called “browncoats,” which rallied behind the show and saw not only the first season eventually released on DVD but also the series developed into a feature film, entitled *Serenity* (Joss Whedon, 2005). Whedon arranged to host
advanced screenings of the film to audiences of his elite fans months before the feature was released into the theatres and provided access to exclusive information which helped fuel their enthusiasm for the project.

In his 2001 book *Interacting with Babylon 5*, Kurt Lancaster details how producer J. Michael Straczynski sought out the existing science fiction fan community before the show was ever approved for production. Straczynski made presentations at fan gatherings, such as Worldcon and the San Diego Comics Convention, as well as making himself, his cast and crew accessible to then emerging Internet fan communities. He told these fans that the series would never reach the air without their active lobbying of local stations to buy the syndication package. As the series went into production, Straczynski (known to his fans by username, JMS) went online on a daily basis to further communicate with his fan base and sustain their enthusiasm for the series.

In his 2005 essay “Exchanges of Value” in *Flow*, C3 faculty advisor Jason Mittell looks at how digital downloads of *Veronica Mars* (UPN, 2004-present) turned him into a grassroots intermediary for the program, even if allowing such downloads violates the prohibition model of corporate thinking. Mittell demonstrates how, in the current media climate, he was able to better demonstrate the popularity of *Veronica Mars* through online downloading sites, which rate the popularity of specific downloads, than he did by watching it on television, where only those few families with a Nielsen box have their preferences demonstrated.

The Internet offers powerful new resources for expanding grassroots movements. The emergence of weblogs and podcasts further expands the impact of these grassroots intermediaries, many of whom develop their own cult followings and can significantly impact the opening weekend grosses for feature films or the initial tune-in rate for new television series. Victor Castanon, an undergraduate student in Comparative Media Studies at MIT, has completed significant research on podcasting in Harry Potter fandom and found that podcasting among fans provides “a centralized, influential outlet for the avid fan community” that helps keep other loyals apprised of the latest *Harry Potter* events and upcoming book/film releases. These podcasts are becoming increasingly prevalent. For instance, fans are now using podcasts to create their own versions of audiobooks for public domain works and for authors willing to participate in using podcasts as a way to present their content to new audiences.

Journalists and PR workers have long talked about “cult followings” for entertainment properties or brands. These cult phenomena become stronger than ever when products become less about the commodity and more about the culture of the brand they represent. Douglas Atkin’s 2004 book *The Culting of Brands* looks into the way these cult relationships are developed in brand communities. The relationship between brand communities and fan communities will be developed in greater detail in a later section.

**Animation and Grassroots Fan Marketing**

Another illuminating example is the spread of anime into the American market, detailed by CMS alum Sean Leonard in his 2005 essay “Progress Against the Law.” Leonard finds that fans actively pirated anime
content into the American market, even though Japanese producers had shown little interest in the potential of selling anime to the United States. An informal infrastructure emerged around the unauthorized copying, subtitling, rating, criticizing, and circulating of animated films. This underground circulation helped to educate Americans about the distinctive features of this alternative animation tradition and to test the market to see which titles resonated with American tastes. Their efforts demonstrated the market potential for these goods. In almost every case, the first films released commercially were those which already had a following through underground circulation. As these titles became commercially available, the fans often withdrew the circulation of their pirated copies to ensure the economic viability of these fledgling efforts. In short, the underground circulation not only identified an unanticipated market but also helped to lower the risks of entering it.

The Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim nighttime block is another illuminating example of this process at work. In January 2003, The Cartoon Network expanded what began in 2001 as a one-evening block of programming into an expanded block of shows that airs five nights of the week, featuring cartoons for adult viewers. The Cartoon Network worked with campus representatives at universities across the country, encouraging fans throughout to band together in promoting the Adult Swim brand. Adult Swim’s embrace of anime further expanded its visibility in the American market.

This increasing use of the grassroots system by mainstream producers such as The Cartoon Network demonstrates what Jenkins writes in *Convergence Culture*: that grassroots participation is “starting perhaps with niche companies and fringe audiences but eventually moving toward the commercial and cultural mainstream.” Entrepreneurs have every reason to change the rules of the game, seeing building new relations to fans as a way of product differentiation; established companies may feel more at risk in altering their well-established practices, but will, in the end, have to shift if they want to keep up with consumer expectations.

**Pop Cosmopolitans**

As these two examples suggest, fans as grassroots intermediaries play an important role in enabling the expansion of media companies into new markets. C3 principal investigator Henry Jenkins has coined the term *pop cosmopolitanism* to refer to the tendency of contemporary young people to seek out media properties from other cultures and integrate them into their own everyday lives. He argues that there are two important forces within this process – immigrants who maintain ties back to their mother cultures while helping to educate new friends about these practices and fans who seek out materials from other cultures and also help to expand the consumer base for this media content.

Two recent essays on international communities of star fandom emphasize this rising trend of pop cosmopolitanism. Fabienne Darling-Wolf’s 2004 essay “Virtually Multicultural” examines the international fan community surrounding Japanese male celebrity Kimura Takuya while C3 advisor Aswin Punathambekar examines the fan community of Indian film composer A.R. Rahman in a September/October 2005 essay in *Biblio*. Both are interested in the role these fan groups play in expanding international interest in Asian media properties and in understanding how engagement with these performers and texts fits within the larger process of defining one’s cultural identity within diasporic or multinational contexts.
Fans as Filters

Within an increasingly segmented and oversaturated media marketplace, fans act as filters, helping audiences to identify content that more fully satisfies their needs and interests. Sites such as *Television Without Pity* warn viewers which television series to actively avoid and rank individual episodes. In this context, individual fans emerge as important thought leaders whose opinions are sought out by other media consumers and by media producers. Fans have taken the time to become experts on particular media properties or genres and in seeking their feedback, production companies are able to expand the expertise at their disposal. Consulting with these fans heightens the credibility of the media property with the larger fan community. The producers of *Dawson’s Creek* (WB, 1998-2003), for example, actively created a space on the program’s home page where fan experts could, for example, provide insights into the music played on the series. Some online publishers extend this relationship – using consumers as *de facto* co-editors who help to evaluate submitted material. In her Master’s Thesis for Comparative Media Studies entitled *Collaborative News Networks*, Anita Chan examines how Web site Slashdot.org created a system where readers evaluate and rank content and content gains visibility as it attracts more interest from committed readers. The new television network Current, mentioned in the section on Fans as Infringers/Poachers, similarly uses a system of user-moderation to rank content and in this case, content gets selected for broadcast on the basis of fan response on the Internet.

Grassroots Fandom and Democracy

This grassroots aspect of fandom is not far removed from more political grassroots movements. The idea of grassroots democracy is at the heart of America’s political process. For instance, Revolutionary War communication was spread through an elaborate letter-writing system amongst the 13 disparate colonies. Increasingly, political activists are modeling their practices on what is happening in these fan communities. Michael Moore, a documentary-maker who straddles the line between politics and entertainment more than most others, developed a strong following for his 2002 *Bowling for Columbine* through an Internet campaign to get fans to spread the word and to encourage national distribution. This movement was successful not only in gaining Moore national mainstream recognition but in igniting a new fervor for the documentary genre. The Web site Meetup.com started as a communications network to support the trade of Beanie Babies and the gathering of X-Philes but emerged in 2004 as a key factor in the insurgency presidential campaign of Howard Dean. Conversely, wrestler-turned-governor Jesse Ventura won his bid in Minnesota in 1998 largely through a low-budget, grassroots campaign carried out through word-of-mouth and the Internet.

Fans as Grassroots Intermediaries—Bottom Line

Fans play important roles both in expanding the potential market for favorite media texts by sharing their enthusiasm with others and in filtering the cluttered media landscape to help identify the most interesting content. In both capacities, they are playing an ever more important role in helping to increase the global market for media content, especially as this relates to Asian popular culture. When fans act as grassroots intermediaries, they feel a greater stake in the success of the property. Smart media producers are learning to court thought leaders within the fan community and use them to expand audience interest in their properties.

The bottom line is that fans are willing to devote great time and effort to marketing a brand for free, especially if media producers work with them to provide exclusive or early access to information.
Fans as Lead Users

Studying fans may help media industries anticipate audience demands which have not been fully identified or fulfilled. In his 2005 book, *Democratizing Innovation*, Eric von Hippel, Head of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Group at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, focuses on what he calls lead users: consumers that are both early adopters, in the sense that they are quick to embrace new products, and early adapters, in the sense that they often retrofit those products to better serve their needs. He argues that anywhere from 10-40 percent of users actively modify products. Von Hippel advocates studying these adaptations to help anticipate and respond to needs which may be more widespread within the market.  

Fans may be seen as doing the same kind of work for media companies that Von Hippel’s lead users perform for other kinds of manufactured products – serving as a test bed for new ideas and mapping unanticipated uses and interests through the ways they modify or customize products. Another way to think about lead users is to see fan communities as Petri dishes – that is, as a series of cultural experiments, some of which can yield valuable results for media producers.

C3 faculty advisor Robert Kozinets argues that consumers of both traditional brands and entertainment products take advantage of online forums to share advice about how to retrofit products to better serve their needs. For instance, in “The Field Behind the Screen” (2002), Kozinets studies an online coffee newsgroup that helps foster a culture of connoisseurship around coffee but also seeks to better understand the steps in the production of quality goods and to advocate alternatives which better reflect the group’s tastes. Kozinets has adopted a similar approach to understanding the grassroots products produced by *Star Trek* fans and their relationship to commercially available alternatives.

However, companies do not always react well to their technologies being used for unintended purposes. Danah Boyd, an MIT alum who is currently pursuing her doctorate at the School of Information at the University of California-Berkeley, has examined the Friendster online social networking Web site in detail. In a 2004 presentation on Friendster, Boyd discussed the prohibitionist reaction of the site’s creators to fan creation of fictional identities. The intended purpose of Friendster was to allow its members the chance to meet compatible friends and romantic partners who were friends of friends, but many people
created fictional identities as a form of role play. The company sought to shut down such practices, seeing them as damaging to the intended purpose of the program, though in the process, they alienated an active and committed segment of their consumers. Instead, Boyd argues that companies should explore how to facilitate new uses which fans have helped to identify.

Lead Users and Complex Television

Lead users are valuable to understand because their tastes anticipate untapped potentials within the marketplace. Consider, for example, the issue of narrative complexity on American television. In *Textual Poachers* (1992), Jenkins argues that fans often read science fiction series as if they were soap operas, taking shows which consisted mostly of self-contained episodes and rereading them as if they were part of a much larger story arc. As the decade continued, cult television producers targeting these consumers began to produce more elaborate story arcs or make more complex appeals to program history. Fans, in turn, did the work of producing detailed program guides for the Internet which helped everyone keep up with the complex links in these series. Today, writers such as Steven Johnson and C3 faculty advisor Jason Mittell argue that American television has reached an unprecedented level of narrative complexity and that some of the most successful shows on television – *Lost* (ABC, 2003-present), for example – are structured more like cult series than like mainstream hits of the past decade. The success of these series suggest that narrative complexity is no longer a niche interest, one which rewards fan mastery, but is now something all consumers demand of popular entertainment.

Machinima’s Fan-Generated Beginnings and Potential Mass Appeal

Over the past five or six years, Machinima has emerged as an important example of a fan-based Petri dish. Fans have discovered that they can use in-game cameras, designed to allow them to record and review their game play, as a tool for generating animation in close to real time. The earliest Machinima emerged on a grassroots basis as fans discovered new potentials within commercial games, but producers are increasingly learning from these fan artists and drawing the Machinima aesthetic back into the commercial mainstream. For instance, in 2004, Volvo created an advertisement which combined live action sequences and Machinima-generated content. MTV2 features a show called *Video Mods* (2004-present) which features Machinima-generated music videos for major stars. The Web site also creates myriad opportunities for fans to mod themselves and runs contests for this Machinima content. The History Channel recently launched a series entitled *Decisive Battles* (2004-present) which uses video game engines to recreate classic battles from throughout history in authentic scale. In each case, these media professionals monitored grassroots creative communities in search of new styles, techniques, or content which might be experienced as fresh and innovative when pulled into the commercial mainstream.
**Fisher-Price’s Pixelvision Camera**

In her 2005 MIT Master’s thesis, *Toying with Obsolescence*, Andrea McCarty examines the ways that a toy video camera produced by Fisher-Price for children has emerged as an important production tool among alternative media-makers. Sold from 1987 to 1989, the Pixelvision camera was a plastic, battery-powered camcorder that was perceived as a flop. Fisher-Price no longer shows any interest in the camera and its users. Yet, McCarthy finds that, more than a decade later, there are film festivals focusing on Pixelvision films and Web sites providing enthusiasts with resources for sustaining the life of this obsolete technology. In return, the Pixelvision aesthetic has been pulled into a range of commercial and art house films.

**Fans as Lead Users—Bottom Line**

Fans are lead users – early adopters and early adapters, their modifications to media properties make visible otherwise unarticulated consumer demands and desires. They can become an important test site for experiments in new approaches to media content as well as early predictors of trends which may move from niche markets into the mainstream.

The **bottom line** is that media companies who monitor or even solicit direct feedback from fan communities may identify untapped market potentials and anticipate trends in consumer behavior.
Fans as Surplus Audiences

In many genres of entertainment, the overall fan community expands far beyond the target demographic – representing an alternative source of viewership and revenue. Fan communities retrofit the properties of the media franchise to better serve the interests of these surplus audiences. A strategy based on niche marketing may narrow the potential interest in a media property too much, whereas greater attention to its surplus audiences may reveal hidden crossover potential.

Female Fans of Action-Adventure

The action-adventure series has historically been understood as targeting 18-34 year-old male consumers. Yet over the past decade, several shows and a few films have sought to tap a previously unrecognized female market for these same shows, adding features which might reward their viewership. Shows such as *Alias* (ABC, 2001-present), *Veronica Mars*, *Smallville* (WB, 2001-present), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997-2003) and its spin-off *Angel* (WB, 1999-2004) actively and intentionally built up a strong female fan base to their shows by incorporating strong female characters or by including elements into the series that are generally considered “feminine,” such as a stronger focus on supporting characters and the personal lives of their heroes. Historically, themes of romance, friendship, and community have been central to series which attracted a strong female fan base. As the crossover potential of these series has been realized, more producers are integrating these elements into their action-adventure shows and aggressively making such series beyond their presumed demographic base.

Adult Viewers of Cartoons

Cartoons have long been considered child’s play, but the success of The Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim block (now airing on most evenings) has demonstrated a potential adult market for animation. Adult Swim may be one of the most impressive examples of the financial and critical success that can follow aggressive marketing to surplus audiences.
In his 2004 book *Genre and Television*, C3 faculty advisor Jason Mittell explores the shifting status of cartoons on television. The earliest network cartoons targeted families, but animation later became a staple for Saturday morning programming aimed at children. Only recently has television sought to re-establish adult interest in animation. In the 1990s, cartoons returned to primetime, resulting in a string of successful animated series that primarily targeted adults such as *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989-present) and later *King of the Hill* (FOX, 1997-present), *The PJs* (FOX/WB, 1999-2001), *Family Guy, Futurama* (FOX, 1999-2003), *Beavis and Butthead* (MTV, 1993-1997), and *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-present). Mittell specifically examines the ways that the programming and promotional strategies of the Cartoon Network built on this surplus audience and turned it into their primary market.

### Untapped Surplus Audiences

Many media companies still have not recognized the value of these surplus audiences or have been slow to cater to their interests, due to either ignorance of their existence or fear of alienating their core markets in their effort to broaden their demographics.

For instance, for most of 2005, the CBS daytime drama *As the World Turns* (1956-present) has been the third most popular “soap opera” of the nine currently airing on daytime television. However, the show is considered less successful by many in the industry because it ranks near the bottom of the ratings in the 18-49 female demographics and especially low in the 12-17 female demographics. *As the World Turns* has high viewership among women over 49 and, compared to other soaps, among male viewers. The series, however, has not actively built on this male viewership, even though men are increasingly taking on domestic duties and the purchasing decisions that surround them and thus represent an alternative market for the products being pitched.

Conversely, while World Wrestling Entertainment aggressively targets a male demographic and has shifted its focus within that demographic over time (male children in the 1980s, adolescents in the mid-1990s, and the 18-49 year old male today), C3 researcher Sam Ford has found that as much as 40 percent of the fan base attending their live events are female. There has been no effort to market to this surplus audience of women — and in fact, female characters are viewed almost entirely as sex objects and eye candy within male fantasies. Similarly, professional wrestling has long attracted a strong gay following which the company downplays for fear of alienating its core male market. In a 2005 essay, Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc find that female fans often deal with their marginalization by writing fan fiction, principally slash, a type of fan fiction that creates a homosexual romantic pairing with various characters. Brian Pronger, in his 1990 book *The Arena of Masculinity*, finds that homosexual wrestling fans can enjoy the text in a very physical manner by reading into the homoeroticism that wrestling shows actively downplay.
On the other hand, the WWE has marketed more successfully to another surplus audience—Hispanic-Americans. In an essay in her 2005 book *The Internet Playground*, Ellen Seiter notes that wrestling has often been the top-rated English-language programming for Hispanic-American homes. Seiter views the WWE and their Web sites as much more racially representative of Hispanic-American culture and as a result, finds that they are enormously popular with young Hispanic boys.

**Fans as Surplus Audiences—Bottom Line**

Almost any product has unintended audiences that appropriate content in ways that media producers never intended or even imagined. These surplus audiences almost always create some tension with the target demographic but they also represent potential opportunities to expand viewership or build up alternative sources of revenue.

The **bottom line** is that alert content providers should monitor fan communities for potential surplus audiences, try to understand what draws them to the property, and then seek ways to expand this interest without alienating their core markets.
Fans as the Long Tail

*Wired Magazine* Editor-in-Chief Chris Anderson’s idea of the “Long Tail”—that “the future of entertainment is in the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream”—has been the focus of a 2004 *Wired Magazine* editorial, a weblog, and an upcoming book, due for release in 2006. Focusing on models such as Amazon, Netflix, and iTunes, Anderson argues that rather than focusing primarily on a small number of expensive properties which have generalized viewships, media producers might be wiser to put a broader and more diverse array of materials in circulation which may appeal to a range of consumption niches. While the most popular titles will still sell the most units and most physical stores can only fit these titles in their collection, online distribution can sustain a much larger backlist within which every title becomes a potential revenue source. Anderson argues that taken as a whole, the “long tail” of backlist titles will generate much greater revenue than the small fraction of the library represented by the most popular titles. The Long Tail argument suggests an important role for fans – as helping to shift through the backlist and identify properties which still have potential interest. Their role in promoting the backlist complements rather than challenges the aggressive marketing efforts which go into insuring the success of the most popular titles.

For example, consider the implications of the Long Tail theory for music distribution at a time when the recording industry is in upheaval and digital options, such as Apple’s iPod and the iTunes music store, are becoming ever more popular. There is now more than a century of sound recording and there are vast numbers of songs produced around the world which never reach the American market. As these songs become digitized, they each potentially generate some amount of revenue for their rights holders but fan annotators will play an important role in identifying which are going to be of interest to particular groups of consumers. Anderson’s Long Tail theory might suggest that the best strategy would be to find low cost ways of making as much of this content as possible available while keeping the price points low until the audience itself determined which content might generate the greatest interest. Such an approach will identify new value which will never emerge as long as music distribution and promotion are tied to mass market media.
Global Frequency

Does the long tail extend to television? One recent case suggests it might. The WB Network commissioned a pilot for a television series to be based on a comic book series by Warren Ellis, *Global Frequency* (Wildstorm, 2003). When there was a change in network management, the series was dumped from the lineup in 2005. An unauthorized copy of the unaired pilot was leaked onto the online file-sharing network BitTorrent. Fans who saw the pilot through illegal downloads were motivated to start a letter writing campaign to try to get it on the air or at least into distribution on DVD. Reverting to prohibitionist thinking, the network fiercely scolded the fans for violating their copyright.

As Henry Jenkins writes in his 2005 essay “I Want My Geek TV!” this example demonstrates the potential power of the Long Tail. The company had discovered a large and active niche of consumers who had an active interest in this property—perhaps not enough to support the show via broadcast but enough to sustain it through an alternative lower-cost mode of production such as direct-to-DVD or subscription-based content. Indeed, many of the creators of the series speculated that they might have sold the series directly to its fans rather than going through the networks. Jenkins argues that in such a world fans can become “collective bargaining units” who use their combined power to influence production decisions. Fans had a vested interest in promoting this series if enlarging its market ensured that they would get the content they wanted. In such a world, properties with such preexisting audiences might be delivered directly to consumers, but networks would still have a useful function because of their greater capacity to promote their content across a general audience. In C3 researcher Ivan Askwith’s November 2005 article on *Slate.com*, he outlines ways in which television producers can benefit from an online distribution model. Askwith finds that a model of distributing television shows online gives producers a chance to increase revenues through marketing prior episodes so viewers can get “caught up” while giving audiences a more active voice in selecting products along The Long Tail.

Retro Brands and Products

The growing success of retro brands might be another suggestion of the viability of the Long Tail model. C3 faculty advisor Robert Kozinets notes, for example, that the toy market is moving back to properties such as *Transformers*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, and *The Smurfs*, which were part of the childhood experiences of people who are now becoming parents. “These brands become myths and local religions that people want to pass on to the next generation,” Kozinets said in a December 2005 interview. In their July 2003 essay “Teaching Old Brands New Tricks,” Kozinets and his research partners study the success of marketing the new Volkswagen Beetle and the new line of *Star Wars* films which rejuvenated both brands in the past five years. The study finds that “retro brand management” involves a co-creative relationship between companies and their fans.
Often, fan communities are the first to recognize the continued or renewed value of these older brands – or in many cases, it would be more accurate to say that they are among the last to abandon brands which are being otherwise devalued. A particularly intriguing example of brand revival is Albert M. Muñiz Jr. and Hope Jensen Schau’s March 2005 essay “Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community,” in which a grassroots brand support movement grew around the Apple Newton, a product that has long been abandoned by the company. Adopting a mock religious tone, fans created their own advertising, developed their own businesses, and built up their own community around the Newton brand, keeping it alive even as its original creators were dumping it.

Yardena Rand writes about the Western film genre in the 2005 book *Wild Open Spaces: Why We Love Westerns*. Rand interviews fans of the genre from across the country and across demographics, finding both expected and unexpected fans. As a whole, though, these fans have kept the Western genre alive, especially considering how few Westerns have been made over the past few decades. Rand writes, for example, that more than two decades after his death, John Wayne consistently ranks as one of America’s all time favorite film stars and there is a burgeoning DVD market for classic western films and television series which might otherwise be invisible to the general population.

**Fans as The Long Tail—Bottom Line**

The Long Tail theory is being embraced because it represents an alternative model for thinking about how one might generate revenue and audience interest around media properties. Within this model, fans have a particularly active role to play in identifying valuable content and insuring its wider circulation. The expansion of the digital music archive, the success of online video and DVD distribution services like Netflix, the success of retro brands, and the intriguing media cult around *Global Frequency* all point to a future where the Long Tail may be a counter-force on the media industry’s fixation on blockbusters.

*The bottom line is* that monitoring fan communities may allow media producers and distributors to better anticipate which properties in their libraries might become new sources of revenue.
Fans as Tourists

Fans increasingly seek to travel to locations they have seen on television or in the movies, a practice known as tele-tourism. No wonder location plays an ever-central role not simply in reality television shows like *Survivor*, which is often set in some exotic paradise but also on dramas and sitcoms such as *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), which regularly showcases hot night spots in Manhattan.

I’m Going to Disneyland!

Disney has long been the frontrunner in understanding the drive for the fan as tourist. Walt Disney created Disneyland the theme park alongside Disneyland the television series, structuring the show’s themes around the various lands in the park and consistently setting episodes within the park to fuel tourist interest in the nascent attraction. In J.P. Telotte’s 2004 book *Disney TV*, he outlines the ways in which Disney has cultivated this relationship over the decades, creating what have become international attractions in Florida and California. It truly is a small world after all.

Disney continues this practice to the present day. On the one hand, the amusement parks are full of rides and activities that are spin-offs of the Disney cartoon features. On the other, recent Disney films such as Gore Verbinski’s *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) are based on rides at the theme parks.

Beyond Disney: Teletourism Fueled by a Desire to Visit an Imagined Space

Graceland is so intertwined with the star image of Elvis Presley that it remains a cultural icon more than 30 years after the death of “The King of Rock and Roll.” Similarly, Nashville has marketed itself as the home of the country music industry, Cleveland attracts fans from around the world to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and small Ohio County, Kentucky, is currently struggling over a way to draw tourist dollars into the rural area by promoting the home place of Bill Monroe, “The Father of Bluegrass Music.” Here, the entertainment property bolsters the tourist industry, and the tourist experience helps maintain support for the music. In Boston, the *Cheers* television franchise (NBC, 1982-1993) is represented through both the
original bar that inspired the series and also a replica *Cheers* bar. Tourists from across the globe stop by to have a burger—the best in Boston, some say—in a place where everybody is supposed to know their names. In Dyersville, Iowa, out Lansing Road, they come in droves every year to see the movie site for Phil Alden Robinson’s *Field of Dreams* (1989). In his 1997 book *Players All*, Robert Rinehart writes about the sports tourist in general. As Rinehart points out, sports fandom often requires extensive travel in order to attend live events and virtual travel for fans watching at home, especially for events such as the Olympics.

**Fans as Tourists—Bottom Line**

Media companies can build on fan interests by cross-promoting their properties with real world attractions. The travel industry is rapidly emerging as one of the real beneficiaries of the current trend toward cross-promotion and product placement. In return, the ability of fans to visit locations they have seen only through the media reinforces their attachment to the media property.

The **bottom line** is that media producers have only scratched the surface in terms of the potential revenues which can be generated through tele-tourism.
Fans as Performers

Fans may also be seen as performing their brand identities – that is, as seeking ways to signal or express their strong affiliations with particular properties. As they do so, they help to shape the experience of other fans and generate emotional intensity around concerts, sports events, and other live experiences. To cite a well-documented example, consider how fan performances have extended the shelf life and cultural centrality of Jim Sherman’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) or, more broadly, the ways that hip hop has moved from a category of music into an entire range of lifestyle and fashion products.

One particularly interesting arena for fan performance is a genre of entertainment that often blends fiction with reality: professional wrestling. The world of pro wrestling fandom provides a particularly salient example of performing fandom in three aspects: live events, the Internet, and “amateur” performance.

Wrestling Fans in the Arena

Casual observers often come away with the mistaken impression that wrestling fans don’t realize that events are “fake” because of their intense engagement with the spectacle. C3 researcher Sam Ford interviewed 50 wrestling fans and found that all of them understood wrestling as a staged entertainment. What, then, makes pro wrestling fans so eager to react to matches as if they are real?

Wrestling fans are an active part of the show—their job is to play the role of ardent sports fans, a role most wrestling fans who actively participate play to parody. Fans mimic the fervor of sports fans and cheer on their favorites against the villain—even though they know that their reaction has no bearing on who will win or lose. Instead, these fan performances are mutually reinforcing, insuring that everyone has an intensely pleasurable experience. Fans interact with the wrestlers and even with each other. Furthermore, the fans often even feud with themselves, with some fans actively supporting the villains, just to get a rise out of the heroes’ supporters.
Crowd response is one of the most important criteria for measuring the success of a performance. In other words, crowds can make wrestling matches taped for television seem better or worse and sometimes crowds have been known to intentionally make a bad match good or a good match bad. Furthermore, crowds know that wrestling promoters base their ideas of who to push to stardom and who to demote to the undercard based on fan reactions, so the fans perform accordingly.

**Wrestling Fans Online**

Online spaces provide a key forum for fans to interact with performers. For instance, Ford participates as a character in pro wrestling events. In the Universal Championship Wrestling promotion based in Hartford, Kentucky, he plays the role of owner and actively participates in the online message board of the Web site. On the site, fans actively interact with the owner. With the promotion being in Ford’s hometown, some of the posters know who Ford is, so the posts become an interesting blend of fiction and reality, with both “official” performers like Ford and the fan performers adopting fictional personas. Here, fans have the chance to actively engage with the text and enter into a dialogue with characters as part of the fictional universe.

**Wrestling Fans at Home**

Fans not only play the role of fans; they may also play the role of wrestlers. Children who watch wrestling have long been known to try to imitate some of the play in unofficial matches, almost always incorporating many of the more flamboyant and imaginative aspects of the wrestling performance.

However, some fans have increasingly extended this play to what has become known as “backyard wrestling,” setting up makeshift rings or even buying actual wrestling rings and staging elaborate productions. The WWE has urged fans “not to try this at home,” and many journalists and social reformers have set out to excoriate wrestlers and petition the government to protect youth against this urge to perform wrestling texts without proper training. These performances, though, have propelled some people into successful professional wrestling careers, another example of fandom as a training and recruiting ground for new talent.

**Fans as Performers—Bottom Line**

Some media franchises actively create openings for fan performance. Fans take on responsibilities for intensifying the experience for each other. They also see their own performances as a way of giving feedback to the media producers and these fan performances may help promoters to identify new talent. In the case of pro wrestling, fans become performers in the arena, in online communities, and – sometimes – even at home.

The **bottom line** is that fans embody the market for particular products, helping to shape the experience and expectations of other consumers (both current and potential).
Fans as Content Generators

More than simply lead users, fans often directly generate content which is increasingly becoming a source of commercial interest. In some sectors, say, television, fan creative efforts have largely been cut off from the commercial developments (in part because of anxieties about intellectual property) whereas in the games industry, fan creativity has been seen as vital to the success of many franchises.

User-Generated Content within the Games Industry

Some entertainment franchises are allowing fans to play a more active role in the initial design process, seeking fan input into works still under development. The games industry, by its very nature, depends on audience participation to create value within the entertainment experience. As C3 faculty advisor Kurt Squire has suggested, companies increasingly partner with their consumers in shaping the initial design of games or the policies which govern their participation.74

Game companies are increasingly allowing fans direct access to the game engines and other tools used in creating the game, encouraging them to actively modify the content. As J.D. Lasica writes in *Darknet*, “players become designers and artists, taking game play in directions the original game makers never intended or imagined” (250). The Machinima movement emerges as players use in-game cameras to create and circulate their own animation. Other game modders create their own game scenarios or even build games from scratch using these game engines. Activision’s game *The Movies* (2005) extends its core movie mogul fantasy to allow players to make their own movies and circulate them with other fans.

Perhaps the most actively co-designed and defined games, though, are the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) Jenkins writes about in *Convergence Culture*. These games, such as Raph Koster’s *Star Wars Galaxies* (LucasArts, 2003), create “the preconditions for spontaneous community activities.” In this case, Koster actively treated the fan community as his client team, circulating early design documents online and allowing fans to make suggestions or criticisms. By the time it was released, the product more perfectly reflected the tastes and interests of its intended market.
The success of *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 1999), which remains the most successful video game franchise of all time, has been ascribed to creator Will Wright's innovative approach to consumer-generated content. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins cites Wright as claiming that more than 60 percent of the content for the game came not from commercial designers but from grassroots contributions. Wright argues that game companies are in effect competing to attract the most creative communities, counting on them to extend the shelf life of their products and often to take risks in terms of generating content which companies are unlikely to take.

**Star Trek, The L Word and Fan Fiction**

Fan fiction could serve similar functions for television producers were we to take away some of the legal walls erected to isolate creators from consumers. First, trends in fan fiction may help authors to better understand how consumers perceive characters and allow them to identify subplots likely to spark greater audience enthusiasm. Second, there is a strong history of authors developing followings on the basis of their fan fiction and then moving into commercial publishing, either selling books based on popular television series or writing original stories. These writers often have a greater understanding of what other readers want from the franchise and may also come with existing followings which boost the sales of their titles. Third, fan fiction may keep alive interest in a media franchise which has fallen out of active circulation, allowing it to be subsequently revived and remarke ted, as occurred with Todd Phillips' 2004 film remake of the *Starsky and Hutch* television series (ABC, 1975-1979). In a December 2005 *Wired Magazine* article, Chris Suellentrop documents recent efforts of fan filmmakers to produce original full-length episodes set in the world of classic *Star Trek*, including guest appearances by some of the original cast members.75

One interesting test case is a contest from the producers of *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-present) in which fans are given the power to make shows themselves.76 Beginning in February 2006, the creative forces behind the show will be working with fans to create a “fanisode.” Each week, the producers will post a scenario for a scene, and fans will write potential scenes. The best of those scenes will be selected and displayed for the entire fan base to vote on those favorites. Each week, another scene will be created in this manner until, by the end of March, the producers will have a full episode, with all scenes written by various members of the fan community. Winners receive prizes, and the producers have hinted at the potential of actually airing the “fanisode” as a regular episode on Showtime. Contests like this are only beginning to examine the potential in tapping fan fiction and the creative abilities of the fan base in meaningful ways. C3 researcher Sam Ford intends to further explore the potential of using the collective creative knowledge of the fan community surrounding soap opera *As the World Turns* in transmedia storytelling opportunities in an upcoming research project.77
Fans as Content Generators—Bottom Line

Moore and more fans are seeking to become active partners in the design process. So far, the games industry has taken the lead in empowering these kinds of fan participation and in the process reaping strong benefits in terms of audience commitment and engagement. By treating media texts as open source, media producers encourage fans to identify and debug what might otherwise be costly mistakes in the official content, in the process providing valuable insights into what they want from the products they buy. Fans can make valuable contributions not simply after a product reaches the market but also before, offering important insights which might help producers refine their design decisions or explore previously unrecognized potential in their material.

Fans also generate their own unofficial content to supplement or expand on commercially circulated materials. Prohibitionist thinking seeks to shut down such grassroots creativity or at least hide it from view, seeing it as a threat to the commercial marketplace. The games industry is reaping the economic returns that come from adopting a collaborationist stance, creating space for fan creativity, monitoring and showcasing it, and using it to generate new content. Such processes yield many opportunities for success. A similar attitude might be applied to fan fiction which can be seen as offering clues to audience taste, as providing a recruiting ground for new talent and new concepts, and as prolonging the shelf life of media franchises.

The bottom line is that fans are going to generate content, whether authorized or not, and cultural producers gain more by authorizing, facilitating, and even distributing the best of that fan-produced work.
Fans as Future Talent

Most professional media makers began their lives as consumers, even fans. Corporations have a lot to gain by encouraging, facilitating, and evaluating fan-generated content as they seek out the next generation of talent. Recruiting fans to generate content means corporations will get people who have developed and honed skills, have a deep knowledge of the property and an emotional stake in the industry.

Classic Country Music

Take for example the case of classic country music, where multiple artists performed several standard songs. Thus, a tune like “City of New Orleans” is famously sung by folk and country singers Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Arlo Guthrie, Judy Collins, and composer Steve Goodman. Emerging talent proves their abilities by performing these old standards and then gradually reworking them to reflect their own style. Elvis Presley developed a style and following based largely on incorporating the sounds and songs of those who came before him in rock and roll, country, blues, gospel, and various other forms. Think of the process as a kind of apprenticeship where performers refine their skills by building on existing work before moving on to generate totally original material.

Manga

In Japan, there is a flourishing underground (and increasingly above ground) market in amateur-produced manga (comics), which often directly pirates content from commercial manga publishers. Salil K. Mehra argues in a forthcoming essay for Rutgers Law Review that the commercial companies have decided against taking legal action against these amateur publishers in part because they find it useful to monitor their output as a way of quickly identifying emerging talent; these artists and writers refine their craft, learn what interests readers, and experiment with alternative approaches without costing the manga publishers anything. When they feel the artist is ready, they recruit them to enter the industry.
The Gaming Community

Something similar occurs within the gaming community. J.D. Lasica writes in *Darknet* that, “while players have long created mods that breathe new life into old games, it has only been recently that their activities have been encouraged by the industry” (251). For example, a Canadian college student modified Valve Software’s popular game *Half-Life* (1998) into *Counter-Strike* (1999). Valve subsequently purchased *Counter-Strike* and marketed it, resulting in more than $40 million in new revenue. The mod movement first began with id Software’s *Doom* in 1993, when fans began to create and post to the Internet new levels for the game. Now companies are actively building games that are openly modifiable. These companies know that today’s “modders” may be tomorrow’s game designers. In his 2005 thesis, CMS Master’s student Brett Camper writes about the relationship between these modding communities and content producers. Even though most existing game designers emerged from the ranks of amateurs, Camper writes that “amateur practice is found to be tangential to corporate interests, ignored both by the disinterest of corporations and in blanket policies targeting piracy.” While the games industry seems in some ways to be adopting a collaborationist approach, it is still marred by a residual of prohibitionist thinking.

Fans as Future Talent—Bottom Line

The most active and talented fans of a media franchise are likely to be valuable future employees for media companies. Historically, creative artists have needed a place to be “bad,” that is, to make their novice mistakes without damaging their own careers or wasting other people’s money. Fandom provides precisely this kind of outlet, providing a kind of apprenticeship for emerging talents. Smart companies will monitor fan productions and draw into the industry those artists who seem most skilled, original, and popular.

The bottom line is that fan culture should be sustained as a training ground and recruiting site for new talent.
Fan Communities/Brand Communities

Throughout this essay, we have moved back and forth between examples of fans of broad entertainment genres (science fiction, country music), fans of specific media franchises (Star Trek, WWE), fans of specific performers (Kimura Takuya, A.R. Rahman, Marco Bjurström, Elvis Presley), and fans of specific brands (Newton, Pixelvision). C3 faculty advisor Robert Kozinets’ writings about brand communities bridges the gap between branding research in marketing and fan communities research in media studies. Kozinets writes in his 1999 essay “E-Tribalized Marketing” that “loyal customers are increasingly creating their tastes together, as a community” (12). He finds that “the more marketers can provide the virtual community of consumption members with the meaning, connection, inspiration, aspiration, and even mystery and sense of purpose that is related to their shared consumption identities, the more these consumers will become and remain loyal” (14).

Kozinets is currently co-editing a new book entitled Consumer Tribes: Theory, Practice, and Prospects, scheduled for publication in December 2006. While much of Kozinets’ past work has involved applying fan community research to brands, this new research applies market research on building brands to content producers hoping to build fan communities. In a recent interview, Kozinets said, “Through the cultural studies projects Henry Jenkins is doing and the brand work that myself and Grant McCracken and others have been doing, we have a chance for real synergy and the chance to put our heads together and find the basis for emotional commitment. What we are most often finding, though, is the role of the active and productive consumer in that.”

Fan Community Support of Sponsors

In an era when brand identities are becoming more closely linked with entertainment content, a core question is whether the feelings fans have toward specific media properties can be transferred to the sponsors who help generate and sustain that programming. Early research suggests that fans or loyals are more apt to remember and discuss advertising while watching a show, more apt to seek out additional information about the program and thus have further encounters with affiliated brands, more apt to incorporate information
about the brands in their ongoing discussions of the show with other fans and thus help generate buzz about
the promotional campaign, more likely to have positive feelings about the brand, and, in some cases, even
more likely to actively buy products as part of their efforts to demonstrate that there is a desiring market for
the show.

These attitudes and actions are intensified in those cases where fans perceive the show as marginal or
threatened with cancellation and represent an important part of the moral economy that emerges around
a media property. As mentioned in the section on Fans as Infringers/Poachers, historians coined the term
moral economy to talk about the informal understandings which emerge between traders and consumers
within traditional societies, the informal checks on excesses which shape economic relations in a context
where both sides must continue to live together within the same community over a prolonged period and
thus have strong disincentives to abuse their relationships. In the modern sense, a moral economy might be
described as the way consumers understand their obligations to producers and vice-versa.

Soap operas have long recognized the benefits of building up strong
emotional links between desired entertainment content and affiliated
brands. Two of the longest-running soap operas—*As the World Turns* and
*Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952-present)—are owned by Procter & Gamble,
and as the name “soap opera” suggests, this genre exists in part to create
interest in the sponsor’s own products. Increasingly, these shows have also
attracted other product placements which also build on the emotional
connection fans feel to the entertainment content. For instance, C3
researcher Sam Ford has studied a situation where Tyson Foods decided
to advertise during the daytime drama *As the World Turns* using an ad that featured a program character
speaking from the set. The character, a villain on the show named Barbara Ryan, was shown discussing
all of the evil deeds that she had partaken in over the past year’s worth of storylines, with Tyson’s slogan
appearing at the bottom of the screen—“Powered by Tyson.” The brief advertising campaign was likely
shot very cheaply at the studio during a typical day’s production for the *ATWT* team, but it garnered
strong reaction form the show’s fans, who then discussed the creativity of Tyson. A detailed look at the
reinforcement creative product placement can give to both the brand being advertised and the entertainment
property is provided in the Spring 2006 C3 white paper on product placement.

Similarly, Saturn developed a special DVD which was distributed to people who visited their dealers which
provided information about the cast of one of the *Survivor* seasons. When fans online discussed the series,
they often found themselves referencing information which they could only access through the Saturn DVD,
and Saturn consistently surfaced as a positive reference point in their discussions.

As these two examples suggest, there are unique marketing opportunities emerging where sponsors tap fan
interests and emotional investments in the series or even provide fans with access to exclusive information
which helps sustain their relationship to the entertainment properties.

**America’s Army and the Intersection Between Fan and Brand Communities**

Many of these products also have their own loyal supporters—the so-called *brand community*—who may
have their own impassioned relationship with the product. What happens when the fan community for an
entertainment property comes face to face with the enthusiasts for a particular brand? What happens when,
say, Coca-Cola collectors (widely cited as a prime example of brand communities) interact with the popular
music fans drawn to American Idol? The Convergence Culture Consortium sees this question as a central focus for further research.

The previously cited example of America’s Army suggests one glimpse of the intersection between these two groups, bringing together gamers with veterans, service men, and other strong supporters of the U.S. Army.

In their 2003 essay “Together We Brand: America’s Army,” C3 advisor Shenja van der Graaf and her collaborator, David B. Nieborg discuss the implications of branding the game. In the essay, the authors solicited preexisting supporters of the military to heighten interest in the game. The authors find “an increasing awareness on the side of the officials of the importance of the community for the success of the Army—and its creation of brand awareness—through the game” (336). Actual service people were given special recognition as game characters which helped other players to identify those who had real world military experience; the players often sought out these service people for advice about how to do better in the game as well as insights about how the game related to their own experiences in the armed services. In effect, these service people and veterans helped to forge the links between the brand and the entertainment property.

Fan Communities/Brand Communities—Bottom Line

There are strong similarities between fan communities surrounding entertainment properties and brand communities surrounding products and services. Most importantly, both groups show loyalty and emotional commitment which exceed any rational assessment of the economic value of the properties. They also value their social relations with others who share their common interest and seek to master additional information which can further intensify their connection with the brand/property. There is growing urgency in understanding how companies can fuel these kinds of loyalty and encourage the interplay between brand/fan communities as we move into an era of increased brand integration into entertainment properties. In some cases, such as America’s Army, the line between fan and brand communities increasingly blurs as both groups seek out further interactions with each other as they work to sustain enthusiasm about valued properties.

The bottom line is that there are unique marketing opportunities that can emerge at the intersection between brand and fan communities if both content providers and brand managers learn to respect the moral economy which governs such groups.
Growth Areas and Future Applications

This white paper has:

1. made the case for a collaborationist rather than prohibitionist response to fan communities, showing some of the many ways that these relationships can be valuable both to media producers and brand managers.

2. summarized key findings from existing academic research on fans and identified key areas for further research which will help lay the foundation for subsequent C3 case studies.

3. provided a road map to the work being done by C3 affiliated researchers on this important topic, which can help prompt further conversations with member companies.

Our member companies are already aware of the importance of fan communities and the value of fostering their emotional capital; it was this forward thinking that led to our research initiatives in the first place. Our hope, though, is that this outline of the many sides of fan communities can spark some genuine discussion as to how entertainment companies and brand managers can better react to the needs and desires of these fan communities. Many have debated whether one can set out to build a cult media property or a lovemark or whether they simply must be discovered by their audience. We do know that one can destroy a cult property or erode a lovemark by inappropriate responses to fan communities—which may range from neglect to hostility. Early research suggests that media companies need to develop a strong understanding of the needs and interests of their fans, provide them with materials which sustain their engagement, adopt policies which strengthen the moral economy, and empower them to become a more active contributor in sustaining the property or even a co-creator whose insights shape future creative decisions.

Good Lord!—Media Implications for Time-Warner’s Mama’s Family

For instance, the Turner Broadcasting group has already demonstrated a strong understanding of marketing to surplus audiences through grassroots intermediaries, as evidenced by the Adult Swim block mentioned throughout this essay. But how might the company take advantage of the fan communities surrounding retro shows that air on TBS, for instance? C3 researcher Sam Ford has conducted preliminary research
on a vibrant fan community surrounding the show *Mama’s Family* (NBC, 1983-1984; syndication, 1986-1990). Fans are participating in the *TV Shows on DVD* Web site, trying to get the show released on DVD and moving it up toward the Top 10 shows not yet released. The fans are circulating Internet petitions for a DVD release; posting online guides to which episodes of *Mama’s Family* will be airing when on TBS; providing a collective intelligence to answer questions about storylines, character motivation, and actors’ backgrounds and lives after the show; and participating in a discussion forum built around the show that draws in hundreds of viewers each week, all for a show that quit releasing original content over 15 years ago and was only a marginal success when it initially aired.87

Time-Warner owns the rights to *Mama’s Family* and currently airs the show at 6 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. EST on TBS. Despite the extremely early timeslot, the show retains a dedicated fan base, many of them who have seen each episode repeatedly and still tune in every day. Throughout 2005, the movement to get *Mama’s Family* on DVD grew steam.88 Recently, there has been some development, as *TV Shows on DVD* reported that Time-Warner executives were considering releasing the show on DVD.89

Might we see the cult following of the series as a vivid example of the Long Tail at work? Could Turner expand the potential revenue of the series through a more active engagement with these fans? How could they deploy these fans as grassroots intermediaries to expand the base of support for the series? How could Turner extend their loyalty to this particular series into a broader loyalty to the network by strengthening the moral economy?

**The Aging of an MTV Generation**

We have been tossing around ideas for MTV in recent informal discussions at C3. Many of the C3 researchers grew up viewing MTV as a musical “cool hunter,” and the team realizes that MTV remains the cool hunter for a new generation. On the other hand, some of the oldest viewers of MTV who were around when it was a radical new movement, even before the days of “Rock ’N Wrestling,” are watching as they move out of the target demographic audience: we have become a surplus audience of MTV. This surplus audience, however, increasingly feels disconnected from the musical programming on MTV. Not only is the group more likely to enjoy retro music – the music they watched on MTV in their youth – but their taste also expands and broadens as they enter young adulthood and we do not feel that the programming keeps up with this broader repertoire of musical genres.

One way MTV might be able to capture these surplus audiences is to find a way to retain that aspect of MTV’s brand identity of being a musical cool hunter and to move that brand toward discovering musicians with the MTV spirit, even if their musical form is outside the traditional MTV genres of music.

For instance, MTV would likely not be interested in promoting the classical music of a Beethoven or a Bach, already accepted as highbrow art. But what about the “classical” music of Zoë Keating?90 Keating is a San Francisco-based cellist who certainly displays some of the MTV spirit with her unkempt hair and non-formal attire. In addition to her solo performances, she has played with Melora Creager’s cello-rock ensemble Rasputina, further blurring the lines between popular and classical music. Something in the rebellious spirit of this cellist rings true with the brand DNA MTV has so carefully cultivated.
The same could be said of the music of country outlaws. Performers like Johnny Cash and even Willie Nelson have always challenged the generic distinction between “rock” and country, and Cash has more Billboard hits on pop charts than Michael Jackson or Simon & Garfunkel. The same could be said for several of today’s country/bluegrass performers, such as Kentucky-based artist and well-known country singer Dwight Yoakam. With his acoustic sound and his distinctive look, Yoakam has challenged mainstream country music but also ensured some degree of crossover success.

Might we see MTV’s tone and attitude as more defining than its genre preferences? Might MTV play an important role in shaping the crossover potential of these musical rebels? Similarly, might they use their emerging networks, such as MTV Chi and MTV Desi, to fuel the pop cosmopolitanism associated with the world music and global fusion movements? We might see both as paralleling the success which hip hop culture has enjoyed in recent years with white suburban consumers who were clearly seen as surplus audiences at one point in the development of the genre and now represent a core demographic.

**GSD&M and Brand Building**

While this paper has been primarily about fan communities, we have suggested that many of the practices described here might equally apply to brand communities. Krispy Kreme is a textbook example of a cult brand – the company does very little advertising but generates almost fanatical enthusiasm from its most regular consumers. How might the company better leverage that relationship?

The Krispy Kreme Web site advertises foods and promotions and includes links for investors and potential franchise owners. The site also allows for fans to sign up for a newsletter in its “Friends” section which keeps them up-to-date with merchandise and promotional events. But it is not as active as it could be in constructing a community around the brand or providing any real mechanism for communication among consumers. Contrast this with the Web site of White Castle, where customers are asked not only to send in their e-mail address to “join the growing White Castle community,” but also to take polls, enter stories of their own White Castle memories for a competition in the White Castle Hall of Fame, etc.

Customers have this level of fascination with Krispy Kreme as well, but White Castle has turned itself into a greater national presence and a more interactive brand by opening the lines of communication between the brand community and the franchise.

Why not provide a place for a Krispy Kreme community, where people share how far they have been willing to drive for the closest Krispy Kreme locations? Where people describe how they have been willing to sit outside a Krispy Kreme until the Hot sign lights up to indicate a new round of fresh-baked donuts ready to serve? Most importantly, this could become a site where people not only share their experiences but bring their friends and family. How might the site provide incentives for brand enthusiasts to become an active grassroots intermediary for Krispy Kreme?
“Fans of brands” are often confused with another valuable and highly sought-after community of loyal customers, or “brand loyalists.” Although both groups display what was described by Kevin Roberts in *Lovemarks* as “loyalty beyond reason,” the difference between the two groups is important, albeit subtle.96 To sum this difference up, loyalists like the toys, while fans like the stories and play sets that come with the toys.

Brand loyalists are attracted to the product’s unique selling proposition. They value what the product can do for them; the reasons for their affection lie within the product itself—its features. The high quality of playback of an iPod is a feature and so is the socially constructed coolness factor. The former heightens the consumers’ enjoyment of music, while the latter adds to their status. Loyalists’ relationship with iPod is deep but is largely product-oriented.

Some of the fans’ affinity could also be centered on the product itself, but the heart of their relationship with the brand lies in the secondary set of meanings that may or may not have been implied by the brand’s creators but are recognized by and have resonance with the fans. Like the fans of the media properties, fans of brands are attracted by the possibilities of transformation and expression offered by the brand narrative. Fans appreciate the brand for what it can do to them and what they can do to the brand. Fans appropriate and internalize the brand, often imbuing it with new sets of meanings derived from personal experiences. This explains why not all loyal customers become fans – the brand’s narrative may not fit or fully resonate with their own internal world.

Some brand narratives come from the advertising kitchens and are explicit, such as the one offered by Budweiser through its famous “Wassup?” campaign that inspired an avalanche of fan-created parodies and imitations.97 Other narratives are implicit and develop organically over time, with the help from marketers but impossible without fans’ participation. Few can remember a single commercial for Harley-Davidson bikes, yet the brand has set a stage for a rich narrative eagerly written and performed by the brand’s fans.98 The third kind of narratives is created by the fans themselves and is often actively discouraged by the marketers concerned that their brand communication, when impacted by these narratives, can go off the strategic track. FedEx sending a cease-and-desist order to the man who created furniture out of its boxes99 and Mattel suing the artist behind the Barbie erotica are such marketers.100

The relationship between brand fans and the branded product is different from that between fans and a media property because the media property is both the product to be consumed and the narrative to be internalized. In the “physical” world, it often happens so that something other than the product – advertising material, perhaps - is the source of the brand narrative, and, therefore, the product doesn’t have to be paid for and consumed for the fans to participate in the narrative. Bud’s “Wassup?” campaign is one such example of fans performing the “Wassup?” sketches without any relation to the beer these sketches were supposed to advertise. It follows that making product
Recommendations: GSD&M

consumption a prerequisite for participation in the unfolding brand story is the primary concern for a marketer interested in “monetizing” the fan community directly.

Generally, most of the recommendations for managing relations with media fans apply to brand-based fan communities as well, although it is important to recognize the differences outlined above. Here are some ideas for tapping into each of the 10 roles that fans play in their interactions with brands:

• **Loyals.** Recognize their special relationship with the brand. The more publicly the better. Southwest Airlines’ 1554 Club is a great example. As mentioned in the detailed section on Krispy Kreme earlier in this paper, the company’s Web site has a “Friends” section that offers subscription to an email newsletter, but little is done to recognize such grassroots initiatives as Krispy Kreme Challenge, a charity marathon organized by a North Carolina State University student that was mentioned in *Sports Illustrated: On Campus.* Recognize your fan base as the brand’s inner circle. Drop insider jokes that are invisible to the uninitiated. Hide Easter eggs. Marketers can also pour oil in the fire of fan love by making the brand’s biggest fans rich and famous. The sneakers maker Converse paid $10,000 to each winning author of the amateur films created around the brand. The company then bought airtime to show the best films on TV and have collected them in the Converse Gallery on their Web site. The value of such an approach would be immediately apparent for DreamWorks, but a company like MasterCard could consider doing something similar as well.

• **Collective Intelligence.** Effective utilization of the fans’ collective intelligence means more than just running sporadic multiple-choice polls online. Strike their ego by asking them a really challenging question and letting them demonstrate their mastery. Last year, Lego turned to its most loyal fans to help designing the new version of Mindstorms programmable robotics kit. Need to come up with an innovative media plan for BMW? Ask BMW’s fans where they would like to see the ads. Ask them how to reach their friends. You never know what you may learn.

• **Grassroots intermediaries.** The potential of fans’ social network has already been recognized by “viral” marketers who count on these fans to spread brand-related evangelism. Make their job of sharing information easier and more fun. Such an approach is already what is at the heart of groups like AARP, but the organization can find new ways to reach out to AARP members to get friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances to join as well. Similarly, Sam’s Club is a group that already benefits from viral marketing, but there are a variety of ways the company could work to stimulate the spread of positive word-of-mouth. But how could a company like Kohler work with current Kohler fans to even more actively spread the word about the company’s “bold look?”

• **Lead Users.** These people are ahead of the branding curve. They got the brand message first and are now looking for more. Give them more. Wal-Mart Singles was a great idea. Now people take their iPods equipped with FM transmitters to Wal-Mart’s electronics aisle for improvised dance parties, flashmob style. Can these happenings be turned into high-tech Tupperware parties, an opportunity to showcase electronics?
Recommendations: GSD&M

- **Surplus audiences.** Satisfy fans’ craving for brand fetishes. Bavarian Autosport’s Web site is a self-proclaimed “catalog for BMW enthusiasts.”\(^{109}\) It features everything BMW, from baby racers and iPod cases to an extensive library containing books on such diverse topics as the brand’s history and fuel injection. Take a page from the media’s merchandizing playbook and capitalize on the power of brand-related collectibles and memorabilia to sustain and extend the brand story, function as free display ads, and add an additional revenue stream. These ancillary products capture not only the brand fans who can purchase the primary product but also future buyers and even those who will never buy BMW but who can participate in further promoting the BMW’s image as a status symbol through their fetish for the elite brand.

- **The Long Tail.** Anderson’s Long Tail theory was intended for the entertainment market, but it could also apply to consumer goods and services. Allow a brand’s fans to create their own artifacts, provide a marketplace, and take a cut of the proceeds. Currently, eBay is the company making money from auctions on Wal-Mart coupons. It could have been Wal-Mart.

- **Tourists.** For some GSD&M clients, such as the PGA Tour, the U.S. Olympic Committee, or the Norwegian Cruise Line, chances for fan/brand tourist interaction is fairly obvious and should be aggressively capitalized on. However, some less likely brands have also found potential ways to develop greater fan involvement through tourism. The National Museum of the United States Air Force is a great branding tool.\(^{110}\) So is the Tacoma Pioneer Telephone Museum located on the first floor of AT&T’s office building in Tacoma, WA.\(^{111}\) A brand’s history is a powerful source of brand narrative. Don’t let each new rebranding exercise replace earlier cultural meanings and artifacts that have grown around the brand. Instead of hiding the brand history into a marketing closet, display it in a showcase. Then merchandise it. Make your brand a destination by presenting the brand experience in a new light. Perhaps Southwest Airlines could install a cockpit camera that captures the sky from the pilots’ perspective and show it on on-board screens.

- **Performers.** In the words of Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, “Offer people a new creed with a costume and their hearts and minds will follow.”\(^{112}\) Give performers access to the props, and their stories will be that much more convincing. Props also increase the brand’s exposure. In 2004, Chili’s “Baby Back Ribs” jingle was recognized as one of “The 10 Songs Most Likely to Get Stuck in Your Head.”\(^{113}\) If made into a downloadable ringtone, it could be even more ubiquitous and heard publicly every time a Chili’s fan receives a call.

- **Content Generators.** Since brand advertising is often connected to brand narrative, by giving the fans tools to create their own stories set in your brand universe, you also turn them into mini-advertising agencies that might not have your strategy but can certainly enhance the brand’s reach. For instance, giving fans creative tools to share their own stories of cravings for Tostitos or having contests by giving fans the tools to create pitches for Sam’s Club increases messages for the brand while also increasing emotional capital within the brand community.

- **Future Talent.** Once you have fans helping to make advertising pitches and demonstrating their talents and their love for particular companies, they become a potential talent pool for both the advertiser and the advertising agency.
Recommendations

**MTV**

- **Loyalists.** MTV was an early specialist in inspiring fan loyalty. (“I want my MTV” lasted for many years as a cultural catchphrase.) However, the question remains how you can further inspire loyalty. Based on the results of the findings of the MIT/Initiative Media *American Idol 2* survey, MTV should continue to aggressively explore how to create more spaces for group viewings of shows. This early evidence indicates that brand loyalty and viewer expressions increase (and emotional capital in the MTV brand correspondingly) when the viewing experience becomes a social event instead of just a program offering. Taking advantage of the hypersociality of loyal fans could serve the brand well.

- **Collective Intelligence.** In the realm of alternative reality games, it could be interesting to start using the network to quietly disseminate clues for a game that ties into one of the partner properties. Given the current relationship between MTV and the XBOX-360, it would be interesting to see the promotions for the inevitable *Halo 3*. Promotion for the game is likely to follow in the tracks of the *ilovebees* alternative reality game which promoted *Halo 2* (Microsoft, 2004). How could this extend into MTV’s programming space? The forthcoming C3 white paper on alternative reality gaming will address this concept in much greater detail.

- **Grassroots Intermediaries.** For the past several years, MTV has worked hard to expand the power of the overall MTV brand to several partner networks, such as MTV2, MTV Chi, and MTV Desi. For each of these smaller networks within the large MTV brand to develop their own unique brand identity, the bulk of the work will have to be done through word-of-mouth and through the fan communities themselves. There is only so much the company can do in regard to aiding in this process, but the ancillary MTV networks should look at their most ardent current fan base and think of more and more ways they can be used as intermediaries for the brand. The company already has many in-roads to college campuses, but these informal links to the most ardent fans could be used to help develop an even more distinctive brand aura for the other MTV networks.

- **Lead Users.** The concept of lead users may not be as useful to MTV as some of the other categories presented here, but it is valuable insofar as MTV is interested in leaping into the gaming space, for instance. The more open a company is in its initial stages of launching into a new area, the more goodwill MTV might garner with the already sizeable gamer/MTV fan crossover audience, which would serve to be lead users for any MTV-branded gaming initiatives. Otherwise, MTV already has an extensive network into which it looks to fans as “cool hunters,” which are lead users in a cultural sense.

- **Surplus Audiences.** As mentioned in the detailed example earlier, one of the most challenging questions for the MTV brand is how to keep the interest of fans once they leave what is perceived as the target MTV demographic—teenagers. Other examples have already mentioned the possibility of fully utilizing the
Recommendations: MTV

MTV library and taking the rebellious spirit of MTV music and crossing it into other genres as a “cool hunter” itself for long-time fans who may not be as interested in the current teenage music trends, but MTV might greatly benefit from devoting serious time and energy to figuring out how to keep from hemorrhaging fans once they become disinterested in the current youth trends but still want to retain some degree of the MTV spirit.

• **The Long Tail.** MTV Overdrive might be utilized as a space for “test-driving” new programming concepts—those shows which seem to gain a significant following online would be logical candidates, with some modifications, to add to the cable programming slate. Insofar as retro-nostalgia brands are showing a resurgence of popularity, there might be room for further utilizing the rich MTV library in meaningful ways, from Cindi Lauper and Rock ‘N Wrestling to “vintage” episodes of *Total Request Live* (1998-present).

• **Tourists.** In conjunction with reality series like *Road Rules* (MTV, 1994-present), perhaps consider negotiating contracts for “MTV visit packages” with tourism offices, letting fans relive the locations from the shows they watch. This might also work with something like *Laguna Beach* (2004-present). Also, the growth of the pop cosmopolitanism movement has interesting implications for the new “hyphenate” networks like MTV Desi and MTV Chi – their content might appeal to a broader audience than MTV is currently anticipating, and could make MTV seem relevant to global culture.

• **Performers.** MTV has already been a long-standing leader in turning its audience into participants, from the early presence of reality shows to the current slate of programs like *Score* (2005-present), *True Life* (1998-present), *I Want a Famous Face* (2004-present), and *Pimp My Ride* (2004-present). The Web site for *Trippin’* (2005-present) already profiles a “Featured Activist” each week, a teen or young adult who is taking positive action. Now take it a step farther, and send them on the show with the celebrities—if they aren’t starstruck and deferential, it could make for some interesting conversation or tension.

• **Content Generators.** As MTV begins a more active courtship of the gaming community, one early strategy might be to help publicize and “mainstream” the modding culture which exists in this community. *Video Mods* has an online section which allows site visitors to make their own mod; the next logical step would be to allow submission and voting on these user-generated works, and to broadcast the best entries on the air.

• **Future Talent.** Perhaps coordinate with musical artists to run contests which foster these creative tendencies (e.g. competitions to propose alternate video concepts for mainstream singles, which MTV would then give fans the budget to produce if they were selected – and you’d get to meet the star, etc.)
Recommendations

Turner Broadcasting

• **Loyals.** For many loyals, watching their favorite programs is a social experience. Watching a favorite movie alone is fun, but watching it with five, ten or fifteen fellow fans is a party. Therefore, Turner Classic Movies could provide “party kits” on their Web site or via monthly mailed packages to fan club members. Such kits might include cards of trivia questions, rules for a drinking game, or even special board games based around the featured films of the month. Such mailings should also include special promotions from that month’s strategic partners and sponsors.

• **Collective Intelligence.** One of the biggest challenges for a storyteller is maintaining the suspension of disbelief in the audience – a problem made a hundred times more difficult when the character already has an established history, and the storyteller is new to the property. Nothing is more frustrating for a fan than having one of their favorite characters behave in a manner not in keeping with the character’s established history, something that often happens when a property undergoes a change of writing staff. Therefore, why not create a wiki to serve as a user-editable continuity encyclopedia? Comic book companies often have someone in place to serve as a continuity editor – Turner could do something similar by appointing an editor that would approve all submissions to the wiki.¹¹⁶

• **Grassroots Intermediaries.** For those fans who want to spread the word about their favorite shows to others, Turner has plenty to offer. The first, and arguably easiest, thing that Turner could do: take a page from the independent bands distributing free sample MP3s and create sample episodes intended to be spread online. Each episode should be tagged with the URL of the show’s Web site, the time that the show is aired every week, and could even include ads. Fast-forwarding through ads in an MPG file is no harder than fast-forwarding through them on a TiVo. However, when a viewer is sitting back in his chair with no remote control or working on something else with the show in the background, it becomes more of a pain to jump past the commercials than to simply let them play. Shows available for purchase shouldn’t have ads, but shows distributed freely online could certainly include them – the existing moral economy suggests that most fans will tolerate ads in an episode made easily downloadable for free.

A second option, which is more expensive but more concrete, is to produce materials for fans to distribute to others in hopes of creating new fans. Loyals are likely to visit the Web site for a show they enjoy, so why not give Cartoon Network viewers the chance to sign up for a free bag of buttons with show logos that they can give out at school? Owning thirty buttons with an alchemical sign from *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2004-present) isn’t going to do anyone but the most rabid collector much good, but giving them to friends to put on their backpacks is fun—and recognizing a stranger displaying the same symbol (and allegiance) usually provides a frisson of allegiance. Giving the trinket to a friend that doesn’t watch the show might spark their interest in it, and seeing the same symbol appear on hordes of other people is bound to pique the curiosity of others.
A third option could be a pyramid scheme masquerading as a “minion recruiting” game. Picture this: the Web site for *The Venture Brothers* (2004–present) posts a scenario where villains from the show compete to recruit the most new members. Fans are allowed to choose which villain they want to follow – The Monarch or Baron Underbheit – and are then given codes and custom URLs to pass out to their friends. When their friends access that page and type in the code, they can redeem it for free swag (buttons, for example), and then they themselves are given unique codes to pass on to their friends. An online database records who originated the codes and how many new unique codes are generated, tracking them back to the original fans and building up their credibility. Finally, the team with the most recruits gets an additional prize (maybe a shout out in an episode, or the outcome of the competition determines something that happens on the show).

**Lead Users.** One upside to importing content from overseas is that the back catalog of potential properties is huge. How, then, to determine what properties are going to hit it big with American audiences? One possible solution is to use fans as lead users and create a special fan club mailing list that delivers pilot episodes for fans to watch online, use to throw viewing parties, or just share them with friends. The resulting buzz for any truly hot properties should serve as a good barometer for how the show will do when it is fully launched to the public.

**Surplus Audiences.** Turner does some cross-promotion already, but they could push the envelope even further still. If Turner Classic Movies is going to do a run of Akira Kurosawa films, it’s a perfect cross-promotion for airing during *Samurai Champloo* (2005–present) on Cartoon Network and vice-versa. By keeping an eye on the forums and watching for strange outlier members, it’s possible to seek out new markets for existing properties. By the same token, there are some interesting opportunities for cross-promotions with Blockbuster, Gap, even Starbucks. Many cable operators don’t offer Boomerang as a channel, but if Turner were to make its more obscure channels available for online streaming, then ads for these shows (with their own ads intact) could be placed in such places as the dividers between the rows of the children’s video racks in Blockbuster. A special month of James Dean movies at Turner Classic Movies could be occasion for a cross-promotion with jeans and leather jackets at the Gap, and a promotion for *Friends* (originally aired NBC, 1994–2004), *Sex and the City*, and *Seinfeld* (originally aired NBC, 1990–1998) in syndication on TBS could do very well in a free CD of 90s pop music being given away nationwide at Starbucks. Online stores for each channel should also offer swag targeted to surplus audiences, produced in small runs but catering to adults who really like certain properties—like really subtle oxford business shirts for fans who want to show a little character but still dress nicely for work. Offer t-shirts one level of maturity up from the offerings at Hot Topic, perhaps with just a character or logo on the left breast and nothing more. The tribal recognition in the world will increase, and, if enough people wear it, curiosity about the character will as well.
Recommendations: Turner Broadcasting

- **The Long Tail.** Perhaps the biggest thing Turner can do in the Long Tail economic model is start up its own full-fledged Adult Swim channel. Adult Swim is already becoming a business case study in how to generate hits for smaller niche markets and then leverage those niche properties for solid profitability. When producing entertainment with Long Tail economics in mind, the key is to aim for a smaller initial market but continue to sell greater amounts of product to that niche for lower cost.

Consider perceived niche properties like *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* actually has a fairly large audience, but the number of hardcore Trekkers is only a small percentage of that. If those Trekkers were the only people who watched it, the property could still be enormously profitable due to the amount of product consumed by each member of that core audience. This is where transmedia entertainment comes into play. Imagine a story told with the same cheap animation style as *Robot Chicken* (2005–2006) or *Tom Goes to the Mayor* (2004–present)—perhaps even an extremely rough, minimalist approach similar to the pictures being drawn to narration like on *Reading Rainbow* (PBS, 1983–present). C3 researcher Geoffrey Long has conducted an experiment in such an animation style, a sample of which is available online.\(^{119}\)

Produce the video component cheaply but sell the ads at the same cost (a business model similar to *Tom Goes to the Mayor*), but then extend the narrative world to books, affordably produced video games or straight-to-video DVDs. Multiple revenue streams built off a small niche market can be extremely profitable – if the story is strong enough and the niche is properly targeted, large amounts of revenue can be generated from a relatively small but happy audience.

- **Tourists.** Much like the explosion of new tour packages offered in New Zealand to *Lord of the Rings* fans, Turner Classic Movies could offer “travel packages” for classic movies like Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca* (1942). Each package could include a trip to where the film was set (or shot) hosted by a film historian or someone involved in the making of the original film, such as location scouts. These packages could be regular offerings cosponsored by a travel company or perhaps offered as contest prizes. Similarly, TBS could offer tourist packages in New York City based around *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, and *Seinfeld*.

- **Performers.** Fans like to feel like they’re in their favorite properties, so Turner should make replicas of props available to fan clubs. *Star Wars* does this to great effect, as does Marvel Comics (T-shirts emblazoned with the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning logo, for example).\(^{120}\) Some properties are easier adapted to this approach than others; *The Venture Brothers*, for instance, would lend itself to swag emblazoned with the Venture Enterprises logo or “I VOTED FOR THE MONARCH” bumper stickers; the NBC store in New York used to offer coffee mugs with the Central Perk logo from *Friends*. Now that the show is in syndication, the licensing torch could be carried forward by TBS.
• **Content Generators.** Adult Swim has a fantastic opportunity to use fans as content generators by creating a show offering fansubbed anime episodes. This could be pitched either as a test to see what shows audiences might enjoy as a full series, or could be played for comic relief—what silliness could ensue from either deliberately corrupted episodes or correctly fansubbed episodes of the silliest, most random shows to ever hit Asian airwaves?

A similar option would be to create a “generate new old TV” show for TNT. If Turner were to open up the archives of footage for old syndicated shows like *The Cosby Show* (originally aired NBC, 1984-1992), *The Golden Girls* (originally aired NBC, 1985-1992), *Cheers*, and so on, fans of these old shows could ‘remix’ the footage into new episodes. These episodes could be aired in the context of a weekly contest show that picks a different old show every week and awards prizes (and airtime) to the best submissions. Similarly, Turner could offer musical remix competitions by providing MP3s of show theme songs on their site, allowing fans to download, remix, and resubmit them. The company could then put the winners either on the competition site or sell them on iTunes.

• **Future Talent.** Each of these aforementioned competitions could offer internships (or even jobs!) as prizes. Authors of the best submissions to the continuity wiki could be hired as advisors to the writers for each show, and eventually as writers themselves. No one knows these properties better than the fans.
General Recommendations

In conclusion, remember the bottom lines:

- Developing emotional capital is more profitable in the long run than being overly concerned with intellectual property.

- Paying more attention to viewer expression rather than impressions helps one to better appreciate the value of loyals within the total viewing population.

- Encouraging fans to act as a collective intelligence strengthens ties within the fan community and thus fosters greater emotional bonds with the property.

- Working with the fan community directly leads to a lot of free publicity as fans act as grassroots intermediaries to promote the series or brand.

- Working actively with lead users helps media companies to anticipate demands, identify surplus consumers, track properties which might be ready for revival, and otherwise create better and more innovative products.

- Identifying and responding to surplus audiences can help ensure the crossover success of your properties, even as you are attentive to those elements essential for appealing to your core demographics.

- Embrace the Long Tail. It’s here, whether you do or not.

- Fans are tourists, and tourists are fans. The link is often overlooked but can expand growth exponentially.

- Legitimating and facilitating fan performance may create the most devoted fan base of all.

- Fans are often more knowledgeable than producers. Corporations should use that to their advantage and make fans a part of the designing process when possible.

- The most talented members of a fan base are often also the best talent pool for future employees.

- Remember the strong connection between fan communities and brand communities. Use one to strengthen the other.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A prohibitionist stance damages your ties with the fan community, erodes their loyalty to your property, and encourages them to take actions which further damage your brand. A collaborationist stance reconnects you with your consumers, increases the value of your property, and strengthens the moral economy which is needed to ensure respect for intellectual property concerns. Keep in mind that in the current cluttered media landscape, consumers have choices. If you don’t embrace a collaborationist stance, assume that one of your competitors will – and, in doing so, will strengthen their brand at your expense.
References and Further Reading


Steven Johnson, Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter, New York: Riverhead Books, 2005


Robert V. Kozinets, personal telephone interview, 01 December 2005.


Footnotes

1 Grant McCracken, “‘Consumers or ‘Multipliers’ A New Language for Marketing?,” This Blog Sits… Weblog, 10 November 2005, <http://www.cultureby.com/trilogy/2005/11/consumers_or_mu.html>. Both a corporate consultant and public intellectual, Grant McCracken writes his entries with a blend of marketing, economics, cultural studies, and anthropology.

2 The term brand communities takes the concept of fandom and applies it to brands. Kozinets, who has previously researched Star Trek fans, has brought fan community scholarship into the marketing world and has published multiple essays about understanding consumers as fans.

3 Grant McCracken, Plenitude: Culture by Commotion, Toronto: Periph.: Fluide, 1997. McCracken’s notion of plenitude illuminates the great diversity of choice currently in the culture and the strength that lies within that choice even if it causes particular struggles for certain members within that group. The idea of plenitude creates both benefits and challenges both to the large conglomerates, who must market simultaneously to myriad niche markets, and small companies, who may try to identify themselves as for a particular niche.

4 Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Intersect, New York: New York UP, Forthcoming 2006. Henry Jenkins’ book is one of the inspirations for the spirit of the research we are doing in this consortium and is one of the essential texts for understanding the prohibitionist vs. collaborationist battles currently being waged in the international entertainment industry.

5 J.D. Lasica, Darknet: Hollywood’s War Against the Digital Generation, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005. Darknet examines, in detail, both the world of Internet pirating and distribution and the reactions of Hollywood and music executives. The book is one of the most essential texts to read for gaining a balanced understanding of the prohibitionist vs. collaborationist battle.

6 Simone Murray, “‘Celebrating the Story the Way It Is’: Cultural Studies, Corporate Media and the Contested Utility of Freedom,” Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies 18.1 (March 2004), 7-25. Murray compares the way New Line Cinema actively worked with and communicated with fan communities for LOTR, while Warner Bros. actively sought out and threatened prosecution toward Harry
Potter fan communities regarding copyright issues. Murray details the divergence in these two strategies, even though New Line Cinema and Warner Bros. are both part of Time-Warner.

7 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1992. Jenkins’ book is often credited with changing the course of academic study relating to understand fan communities and providing a more nuanced view of fans as active and creative instead of obsessed and detached from reality.


10 Brian Larkin, “Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy,” *Public Culture* 16.2 (2004): 289-314. Larkin emphasizes that piracy does have real and damaging effects on profits but focuses his study on the often-neglected benefits and messages of piracy as indicating consumer needs not being fulfilled and as providing the infrastructure to respond to consumer demand.

11 Nike iD Web site, <http://www.nikeid.com/>. The Web site provides various basic sneaker outlines and then lets the visitor customize their own version of the sneaker and purchase their customized version online.

12 Create with the BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/create/>. This Web site encourages fans of the BBC to create their own media content and send it in, write their own reviews, share stories, create ringtones, and report news. These products are distributed both on the network at various times and through the Web site, with various contests for commercial deals for the best fan-produced content.

13 Current TV: The TV Network Created by the People Who Watch It, <http://www.current.tv/>. This small television network is making its name by showing principally viewer-created content. Viewers are paid for content they create that is aired on the network.

14 Loyal are the most devoted fans of a media property who consider their fandom a part of their identity, who are members of active communities of fandom, and who have a stronger emotional connection to a product, as opposed to casuals or zappers.


16 The research teams sought to understand how audiences engage with television and used ethnographic research of *American Idol* viewers, both in college dorms and in homes, to understand more completely how viewers interact with the show and to create new terms of measurement for audience response. The research was presented at the ARF/ESOMAR WAM Conference in 2002 and fleshed out in the white paper “Walking the Path: Exploring the Drivers of the Expression.”

17 Chapter 2, “Buying Into *American Idol*: How We are Being Sold on Reality Television.”

18 According to the “Walking the Path” white paper resulting from the study, the expression is “a conceptual model of understanding the complex relationship between advertising message delivery, media channels, and audience engagement” and is used “as a means of factoring the myriad ways that audiences consume
and relate to media, and how such insights can be translated into more effective media measurement
techniques.”

19 Hypersociality is the tendency of the current mix of multiple media forms to encourage heightened social
interaction amongst members of the fan community, as opposed to former views of media consumption
which focused on individual consumers in isolation.

20 Mizuko Ito, “Technologies of the Childhood Imagination: Media Mixes, Hypersociality, and
org/programs/publications_editors/publications/items/online4-4/ito-childhood.pdf>. Ito’s study results
from fieldwork conducted in Tokyo from 1998-2002, ethnographic research with both members of the
media industry and children and parents, examining the success of Yu-Gi-Oh.

21 Famous examples include FOX’s The Family Guy (Fox, 1999-present), Firefly (FOX, 2002-2003), and
Arrested Development (FOX, 2003-2006), to name a few.

22 For more of Levy’s scholarship on the concept of collective intelligence, see Pierre Levy, Collective

cultureby.com/trilogy/2005/10/story_time_14_s.html>. McCracken explains an idea he had for Coca-
Coca, providing the character of a teenage girl in an interactive online game that would only very vaguely
point to the sponsor through light product placement.

24 Carolyn Handler Miller, Digital Storytelling: A Creator’s Guide to Interactive Entertainment, Woburn,
entertainment through personal experience and various case studies, including her chapter on The Beast.

25 Zhan Li, The Potential of America’s Army the Video Game as Civilian-Military Public Sphere, Master’s
gamasutra.com/education/theses/20040725/>. Li provides ethnographic information from the online
America’s Army fan community to understand how the game functions as a gravity point for the formation
of a public sphere of discussing related issues.

26 Dan Bersak often covers Boston Red Sox games and has a strong professional and personal interest in the
baseball fan community. Although he has not conducted any formal research on the issue, his knowledge
on sports fan communities is reputed throughout the CMS community.


29 Kaarina Nikunen, Fan Time: Television, Fan Cultures and Popular Publicity, Doctoral dissertation,
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Tampere University, 2005.

30 Kaarina Nikunen, “Xena—The Cult Princess?,” Paper presented in Gender, Action, Entertainment:
Seminar on Popular Media with Yvonne Tasker, Tampere University, 30 January 2004.


32 Kurt Lancaster, Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe, Austin, TX: U of Texas
P, 2001. The book begins with detailing the communication and collaboration between the producer
and the fan community that established Babylon 5 before spending the book looking at the performance
of fans through fan fiction and role-playing games, reenacting or adding to stories established in the
television series.

Victor Castanon has studied the effects of podcasting on online Harry Potter fan communities. Although his research has not formed into a formal paper, his insights on the subject are known throughout the Comparative Media Studies department and were instrumental in forming this section of the paper.


Sean Leonard, “Progress Against the Law: Anime and Fandom, with the Key to the Globalization of Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8.3 (2005), 281-305. Leonard’s essay examines the copyright infringement of American fans of anime in pirating Japanese animation into the country from 1976 until 1993, creating a viable market through grassroots proselytization. Leonard introduces the concept of *cultural sinks* through this essay, which he defines as “a void that forms in a culture as a result of intracultural or transcultural flows” (283), explaining the developing of a booming anime market in America in these terms.


Meetup.com is an online resource to form local groups organized around a particular issue. <http://www.meetup.com>.


Robert V. Kozinets, “The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 39.1 (February 2002), 61-72. Kozinets uses the example of an online coffee newsgroup to demonstrate the strengths of using online ethnography, or “netnography,” as a marketing research tool.


Steven Johnson, Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today’s Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter, New York: Riverhead Books, 2005. Johnson’s book details the many ways that various forms of popular culture have served to increase cognitive abilities, develop new skills, etc., for Americans. The book is a useful overview of the arguments against dismissing popular culture as detrimental for society.

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63 Robert V. Kozinets, personal telephone interview, 01 December 2005.

64 Stephen Brown, Robert V. Kozinets, and John F. Sherry, Jr. “Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning,” Journal of Marketing 67 (July 2003): 19-33. The authors use netnographic analysis to study the ways these retro brand meanings are established and the nature of the relationships between fans and media producers in these situations.

65 Albert M. Muñiz, Jr. and Hope Jensen Schau, Religion in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community, Journal of Consumer Research 31 (March 2005): 737-747. By examining online communities of Newton users, the authors use netnography of this Apple product in particular to demonstrate “important properties of brand communities” and the deep religious needs underneath such brand affiliations (737).


67 J.P. Telotte, Disney TV, Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2004. Telotte’s book particularly focuses on Disney’s use of television, from its early shows on network television to the Disney Network, and the ways that the television program served as both a venue for promoting new feature films and airing old film shorts and as a hype machine for other Disney ventures.


69 Robert E. Rinehart, Players All: Performances in Contemporary Sport, Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1998. Rinehart’s sociological study of the significance of sports in American society focuses on the importance of all the players in the performance of professional sports, from spectators to coaches to players to vendors to sportswriters and the innumerable other people involved in the process.

70 For instance, see Kurt Lancaster, Interacting with Babylon 5. This book, referenced earlier in the section regarding Fans as Grassroots Intermediaries, focuses on reenactments and role-playing in fan communities based on the stories from the Babylon 5 television series.

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Fanning the Audience's Flames: Ten Ways to Embrace and Cultivate Fan Communities

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Chris Suellentrop, “To Boldly Go Where No Fan Has Gone Before,” *Wired Magazine* 13.12 (December 2005), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.12/startrek.html?tw=wn_tophead_6>. Suellentrop finds that fans are creating video content to fill in gaps in the official *Star Trek* canon and to continue adding to the body of work of the *Star Trek* universe, even if the content is not considered “official.”


Robert V. Kozinets, “E-Tribalized Marketing?” The Strategic Implications of Virtual Communities of Consumption,” *European Management Journal* 17.3 (1999), 252-264. This essay looks at ways to more effectively target virtual brand communities, a rapidly growing aspect of brand growth and promotion.


Robert Kozinets, personal telephone interview, 01 December 2005.


For two examples of the more active Web sites from this fan community, see The *Mama’s Family* Tribute Site, <http://mamasfamily.freewebspace.com/index.html>; and The *Mama’s Family* Site, <http://www.televisionhits.com/mamasfamily/>. Both sites include information, constant updates, and active areas for discussion about the show, where people post daily in discussion of the show’s place in their lives.


For more information on Zoë Keating’s music, visit <http://www.zoeketeating.com/>.


For more information on Dwight Yoakam’s music, visit <http://www.dwightyoakam.com/>.

See the Krispy Kreme Web site at <http://www.krispykreme.com/>.


The commercials are archived on several fan community Web sites. They can be found at Wassup Collection, Completely Different Web site, <http://www.completelydifferent.co.uk/ collections/wassup/>.


For some idea of what might be necessary in such a position, see this article about editor Geoff Johns during the DC Comics Infinite Crisis crossover storyline. Matt Brady, “Geoff Johns’ Expanded Crisis Role,” Newsarama Web site (15 June 2005), <http://www.newsarama.com/forums/showthread.php?s=ee4e193b1133d7647022c16eb18bc64&threadid=35963>.


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The Convergence Culture Consortium at MIT (C3) is a partnership between thinkers and researchers from/affiliated with the Comparative Media Studies program at MIT and companies with a keen interest in deciphering convergence culture and the implications it can have for their business. Members of the consortium gain new insights and ideas about a very intractable and urgent set of questions that they are already grappling with in the current business environment. We aim to expand the role of industrial leaders by informing them of dynamic humanistic scholarship while providing them with early access to the cutting-edge ideas that emerge through the consortium. For more information, please visit www.convergenceculture.org.