

TRANSFORMATIONS OF FAN PRODUCTIVITY IN A SOCIAL NETWORK ENVIRONMENT: FAN CULTURE AS A KEY COMPONENT OF THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Sophie G. Einwächter / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract ¹
Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Within the field of Cultural Studies fan productivity has mostly been defined in aesthetic or counter-aesthetic terms and located within the sphere of subculture. In the age of digital communication media and global online networks, fan culture undergoes fundamental changes. Fans have ceased to be marginal actors in subcultural and hermetic niche communities. Rather they have become drivers of innovation through the production of media content that they distribute to mass audiences via online platforms such as YouTube. Although still pursued mainly on a voluntary, non-paid basis, the often-discussed “productivity” of fandom has now acquired a significant economic dimension.

This project aims to highlight the economic and cultural significance of fandom and fans within the context of the Cultural and Creative Industries. If we assume, with Potts and Cunningham ², that – largely thanks to the emergence of digital communication networks – the creative industries have become a meta-system of the economy analogous to the educational system rather than a specific branch of industrial production, and if we further assume, with Potts *et alii.* ³ that creative industries operate and evolve through social network markets, i.e. through consumer networks where information about the preferences of individual consumers inspires the choices of others, then fandom – which we may define as the ostentatious display of consumer preferences – is indeed a key site of cultural production in the age of digital network communication. Any study of fandom online, then, is likely to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of not only the peripheral areas, but the very logic of the contemporary cultural and creative industries.

Aiming to study how the recent emergence of digital network communication affects the fan as a creatively participating individual ⁴, this Ph.D.-project focuses on the activities of fans of popular media content such as films and TV-series. Which, if any, new forms of fan production do digital platforms and networks encourage, which fan aesthetics does the digital environment enable and which problems arise from it? These are the questions this project addresses within a framework that combines economic theory with ethnography and textual analysis.

The field of digitally-enabled fan practises include “remix creativity” ⁵, “fansubs” ⁶ and “fan-dubs” ⁷ which combine entertainment value with the potential to innovate. These developments have also fuelled the debate on copyright issues and fair use practices ⁸. In the study of these phenomena, an economic perspective significantly complements the Cultural Studies’ understanding of fan culture. The advertising industry has long recognized fans as a voluntary workforce and outsourced many campaigns to these willing and knowledgeable volunteers who – by spreading the word ⁹ and giving feedback ¹⁰ – contribute to the success of otherwise risk-taking ventures.

Fans may also gain importance as early adopters of new technologies, as well as playful and communicative opinion leaders in a networked environment¹¹. Looking at the semantics of *facebook* up to March 2010, one could even conclude that fandom was the preferred relationship between consumer and product. But are fans merely a voluntary workforce, a free creative and innovative input as they have been considered in the context of brand communities¹², co-creative product development, feedback platforms and marketing campaigns?¹³

Identifying the Creative Industries' key characteristic as a social network market structure¹⁴, this project addresses fans in their role as social network connoisseurs and key agents in the markets of cultural goods.

The following hypotheses guide the research undertaken:

- a. From an economic perspective fans can be regarded as *agents* and fan communities as *markets* of cultural goods¹⁵.
- b. In the digitally networked environment, fans represent media literate consumers¹⁶ and connoisseurs of popular culture as well as *producers and distributors* of innovative media content.
- c. It can be argued that productive fans provide important intellectual input and human capital which makes them key actors of the Creative Industries. Herein their contributions have to be discussed in the context of a "gift economy"¹⁷ as well as an online "attention economy"¹⁸.
- d. The interconnectedness of online communities provides a distribution infrastructure for fan-generated media which transcends the sphere of formerly hermetic fan communities.
- e. This structural premise encourages a meta-phenomenon of fandom: the "fan who has fans." By means of expressing their admiration in an original and/or entertaining way some fan personalities gain celebrity status, which makes them independent actors of the scene.

Methodology

The methodology of this project combines economic theory, Social and Media Studies – an ethnographic and descriptive approach with qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Quantitative research deals with subscribers of fans' channels on YouTube as they can be considered regular consumers of fan-generated content. How do they react to fan productivity? Has their attitude towards the original product (series, film, etc.) changed due to the consumed fan-made media? Did it do so in favour of the product? Did they only get to know the product due to the respective fan activities?

Over the last few years a German student and Harry Potter fan has dubbed Warner brothers' successful Harry Potter films in a satirical manner aimed at young adult audiences (many quirky jokes and strong sexual references). Her work has proved highly popular with the YouTube community. In early 2010 the young woman's channel counts over 110.000 subscribers, clearly signaling that she has a fan base of her own and that her initial fandom has resulted in a meta-phenomenon¹⁹. Many of her subscribers, she claims, have mentioned they had not been too keen on the Potter-books when they came across her fan-dubs. It was her satirical sense of humour that attracted them. Redubs, however, are only half as funny if you do not know the original text they refer to. Accordingly, a considerable number of subscribers have turned to the original films in order to understand the impact of the fan-made versions. The young woman's work has thus activated an audience outside the original target group. This project's intent in quantitative terms is

to locate such phenomena and to quantify the impact of fan-made objects on the circulation of cultural goods in general.

In addition to the quantitative survey amongst fan-fans, this project qualitatively inquires about the working conditions of fan personae who are more active than others, regularly producing media content. Interviews with actors of this kind (fans who have often gained web celebrity status) ought to provide an insight into the organizational, ethical and creative conditions of the fan turned producer.

The data and information thus acquired is to be complemented and backed up by an ethnography of a recently very active fan community, the “Twilight” fans. Observing and analyzing actions and transactions happening on 5 major fan platforms shall provide a macro-perspective of how a digitally networked fan community both feeds back into the distribution of the original work and creates network markets of their own.

- 1 Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Vinzenz Hediger.
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- 13 Mark Andrejevic, “Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans,” cit.
- 14 See: Jason Potts, John Hartley, Jean Burgess, Stuart Cunningham, Paul Ormerod, “Social Network Markets: A New Definition of the Creative Industries,” cit.
- 15 *Idem*.
- 16 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York-London, 2006, pp. 175ff.
- 17 Andrew Currah, “Managing Creativity: The Tensions between Commodities and Gifts in a Digital Networked Environment,” in *Economy and Society*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2007, pp. 467-494.

- 18 Michael Goldhaber, "The Attention Economy and the Net", in *First Monday*, vol. 2, no. 4, 7 April 1997, available at the address <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/519/440>.
- 19 Later, in October 2010, "Coldmirror" gets her own monthly TV show on the German digital channel Einsfestival. Consequently, the number of her YouTube channel's subscribers has risen close to 280.000 in May 2011.