

Henry Jenkins

Convergence Culture

Where Old and New Media Collide



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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: “Worship at the Altar of Convergence”: A New Paradigm for Understanding Media Change	1
1 Spoiling <i>Survivor</i> : The Anatomy of a Knowledge Community	25
2 Buying into <i>American Idol</i> : How We are Being Sold on Reality TV	59
3 Searching for the Origami Unicorn: <i>The Matrix</i> and Transmedia Storytelling	93
4 Quentin Tarantino’s <i>Star Wars</i> ? Grassroots Creativity Meets the Media Industry	131
5 Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the <i>Harry Potter</i> Wars	169
6 Photoshop for Democracy: The New Relationship between Politics and Popular Culture	206
Conclusion: Democratizing Television? The Politics of Participation	240
Notes	261
Glossary	279
Index	295
About the Author	308

Conclusion

Democratizing Television? The Politics of Participation

In August 2005, former Democratic vice president Albert Gore helped to launch a new cable news network, Current. The network's stated goal was to encourage the active participation of young people as citizen journalists; viewers were intended not simply to consume Current's programming but also to participate in its production, selection, and distribution. As Gore explained at a press conference in late 2004, "We are about empowering this generation of young people in the 18-to-34 population to engage in a dialogue of democracy and to tell their stories of what's going on in their lives, in the dominant medium of our time. The Internet opened a floodgate for young people, whose passions are finally being heard, but TV hasn't followed suit. . . . Our aim is to give young people a voice, to democratize television."¹ The network estimates that as much as 25 percent of the content they air will come from their viewers. Amateur media producers will upload digital videos to a Web site; visitors to the site will be able to evaluate each submission, and those which receive the strongest support from viewers will make it onto the airwaves.

The idea of reader-moderated news content is not new. Slashdot was one of the first sites to experiment with user-moderation, gathering a wealth of information with a five-person paid staff, mostly part time, by empowering readers not only to submit their own stories but to work collectively to determine the relative value of each submission. Slashdot's focus is explicitly on technology and culture, and so it became a focal point for information about Internet privacy issues, the debates over mandatory filters in public libraries, the open source movement, and so forth. Slashdot attracts an estimated 1.1 million unique users per month, and some 250,000 per day, constituting a user base as large as that of many of the nation's leading online general

interest and technology-centered news sites.² Yet, this would be the first time that something like the Slashdot model was being applied to television.

Even before the network reached the air, Current's promise to "democratize television" became a focal point for debates about the politics of participation. Cara Mertes, the executive producer for the PBS documentary program *POV*, itself an icon of the struggle to get alternative perspectives on television, asked, "What are you talking about when you say 'democratizing the media'? Is it using media to further democratic ends, to create an environment conducive to the democratic process through unity, empathy and civil discourse? Or does it mean handing over the means of production, which is the logic of public access?"³ Was Current going to be democratic in its content (focusing on the kinds of information that a democratic society needs to function), its effects (mobilizing young people to participate more fully in the democratic process), its values (fostering rationale discourse and a stronger sense of social contract), or its process (expanding access to the means of media production and distribution)?

Others pushed further, arguing that market pressures, the demand to satisfy advertisers and placate stock holders, would ensure that no commercial network could possibly be as democratic on any of these levels as the Gore operation was promising. Any truly democratic form of broadcasting would necessarily arise outside corporate media and would likely see corporate America as its primary target for reform. Even if the network remained true to its goals, they argued, those most drawn to the alternative media perspective would be skeptical of any media channel shaped by traditional corporate gatekeepers. A growing number of Web services—such as participatoryculture.org and ourmedia.org—were making it easier for amateur media makers to gain visibility via the Web without having to turn over exclusive rights to their material to a network funded by some of the wealthiest men and women in the country. In a society where blogs—both text based and video enhanced—were thriving, why would anyone need to put their content on television?

Others expressed disappointment in the network's volunteeristic approach. Original plans to pay a large number of independent filmmakers to become roaming correspondents had given way to a plan to allow amateurs to submit material for consideration and then get paid upon acceptance. The first plan, critics argued, would have sustained

an infrastructure to support alternative media production; the other would lead to little more than a glorified public access station.

The network defended itself as a work in progress—one that was doing what it could to democratize a medium while working under market conditions. A spokesman for the network observed, “For some people, the perfect is always the enemy of the good.”⁴ Current might not change everything about television, they pleaded, but it could make a difference. Gore held firm in his beliefs that enabling audience-generated content had the potential to diversify civic discourse: ““I personally believe that when this medium is connected to the grassroots storytellers that are out there, it will have an impact on the kinds of things that are discussed and the way they are discussed.”⁵

At about the same time, the British Broadcasting Company was embracing an even more radical vision of how consumers might relate to its content. The first signs of this new policy had come through a speech made by Ashley Highfield, director of BBC New Media & Technology, in October 2003, explaining how the widespread adoption of broadband and digital technologies will impact the ways his network serves its public:

Future TV may be unrecognizable from today, defined not just by linear TV channels, packaged and scheduled by television executives, but instead will resemble more of a kaleidoscope, thousands of streams of content, some indistinguishable as actual channels. These streams will mix together broadcasters’ content and programs, and our viewer’s contributions. At the simplest level—audiences will want to organize and reorganize content the way they want it. They’ll add comments to our programs, vote on them, and generally mess about with them. But at another level, audiences will want to create these streams of video themselves from scratch, with or without our help. At this end of the spectrum, the traditional “monologue broadcaster” to “grateful viewer” relationship will break down.⁶

By 2005, the BBC was digitizing large segments of its archive and making the streaming content available via the Web.⁷ The BBC was also encouraging grassroots experimentation with ways to annotate and index these materials. Current’s path led from the Web—where many could share what they created—into broadcast media, where many could consume what a few had created. The BBC efforts were moving in the

other direction, opening up television content to the more participatory impulses shaping digital culture.

Both were in the sense promoting what this book has been calling convergence culture. Convergence does not depend on any specific delivery mechanism. Rather, convergence represents a paradigm shift—a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture. Despite the rhetoric about “democratizing television,” this shift is being driven by economic calculations and not by some broad mission to empower the public. Media industries are embracing convergence for a number of reasons: because convergence-based strategies exploit the advantages of media conglomeration; because convergence creates multiple ways of selling content to consumers; because convergence cements consumer loyalty at a time when the fragmentation of the marketplace and the rise of file sharing threaten old ways of doing business. In some cases, convergence is being pushed by corporations as a way of shaping consumer behavior. In other cases, convergence is being pushed by consumers who are demanding that media companies be more responsive to their tastes and interests. Yet, whatever its motivations, convergence is changing the ways in which media industries operate and the ways average people think about their relation to media. We are in a critical moment of transition during which the old rules are open to change and companies may be forced to renegotiate their relationship to consumers. The question is whether the public is ready to push for greater participation or willing to settle for the same old relations to mass media.

Writing in 1991, W. Russell Neuman sought to examine the ways that consumer “habit” or what he called “the psychology of the mass audience, the semi-attentive, entertainment-oriented mind-set of day-to-day media behavior” would slow down the interactive potentials of emerging digital technologies.⁸ In his model, the technology was ready at hand but the culture was not ready to embrace it: “The new developments in horizontal, user-controlled media that allow the user to amend, reformat, store, copy, forward to others, and comment on the flow of ideas do not rule out mass communications. Quite the contrary, they complement the traditional mass media.”⁹ The public will not

rethink their relationship to media content overnight, and the media industries will not relinquish their stranglehold on culture without a fight.

Today, we are more apt to hear the opposite claim—that early adapters are racing ahead of technological developments. No sooner is a new technology—say, Google Maps—released to the public than diverse grassroots communities begin to tinker with it, expanding its functionality, hacking its code, and pushing it into a more participatory direction. Indeed, many industry leaders argue that the main reason that television cannot continue to operate in the same old ways is that the broadcasters are losing younger viewers, who expect greater influence over the media they consume. Speaking at MIT in April 2004, Betsy Frank, executive vice president for research and planning at MTV Networks, described these consumers as “media-actives” whom she characterized as “the group of people born since the mid-70s who’ve never known a world without cable television, the vcr, or the internet, who have never had to settle for forced choice or least objectionable program, who grew up with a what I want when I want it view attitude towards media, and as a result, take a much more active role in their media choices.”¹⁰ Noting that “their fingerprints are on the remote,” she said that the media industry was scrambling to make sense of and respond to sharp declines in television viewership among the highly valued 18–27 male demographic as they defected from television toward more interactive and participatory media channels.

This book has sought to document a moment of transition during which at least some segments of the public have learned what it means to live within a convergence culture. Betsy Frank and other industry thinkers still tend to emphasize changes that are occurring within individuals, whereas this book’s argument is that the greatest changes are occurring within consumption communities. The biggest change may be the shift from individualized and personalized media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice.

Personalized media was one of the ideals of the digital revolution in the early 1990s: digital media was going to “liberate” us from the “tyranny” of mass media, allowing us to consume only content we found personally meaningful. Conservative ideologue turned digital theorist George Gilder argued that the intrinsic properties of the computer pushed toward ever more decentralization and personalization. Compared to the one-size-fits-all diet of the broadcast networks, the com-

ing media age would be a “feast of niches and specialties.”¹¹ An era of customized and interactive content, he argues, would appeal to our highest ambitions and not our lowest, as we enter “a new age of individualism.”¹² Consider Gilder’s ideal of “first choice media” was yet another model for how we might democratize television.

By contrast, this book has argued that convergence encourages participation and collective intelligence, a view nicely summed up by the *New York Times*’s Marshall Sella: “With the aid of the Internet, the loftiest dream for television is being realized: an odd brand of interactivity. Television began as a one-way street winding from producers to consumers, but that street is now becoming two-way. A man with one machine (a TV) is doomed to isolation, but a man with two machines (TV and a computer) can belong to a community.”¹³ Each of the case studies shows what happens when people who have access to multiple machines consume—and produce—media together, when they pool their insights and information, mobilize to promote common interests, and function as grassroots intermediaries ensuring that important messages and interesting content circulate more broadly. Rather than talking about personal media, perhaps we should be talking about communal media—media that become part of our lives as members of communities, whether experienced face-to-face at the most local level or over the Net.

Throughout the book, I have shown that convergence culture is enabling new forms of participation and collaboration. For Lévy, the power to participate within knowledge communities exists alongside the power the nation-state exerts over its citizens and corporations within commodity capitalism exert over its workers and consumers. For Lévy, at his most utopian, this emerging power to participate serves as a strong corrective to those traditional sources of power, though they will also seek ways to turn it toward their own ends. We are just learning how to exercise that power—individually and collectively—and we are still fighting to define the terms under which we will be allowed to participate. Many fear this power; others embrace it. There are no guarantees that we will use our new power any more responsibly than nation-states or corporations have exercised theirs. We are trying to hammer out the ethical codes and social contracts that will determine how we will relate to one another just as we are trying to determine how this power will insert itself into the entertainment system or into the political process. Part of what we must do is figure out

how—and why—groups with different backgrounds, agendas, perspectives, and knowledge can listen to one another and work together toward the common good. We have a lot to learn.

Right now, we are learning how to apply these new participatory skills through our relation to commercial entertainment—or, more precisely, right now some groups of early adopters are testing the waters and mapping out directions where many more of us are apt to follow. These skills are being applied to popular culture first for two reasons: on the one hand, because the stakes are so low; and on the other, because playing with popular culture is a lot more fun than playing with more serious matters. Yet, as we saw in looking at Campaign 2004, what we learn through spoiling *Survivor* or remaking *Star Wars* may quickly get applied to political activism or education or the workplace.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cultural scholars, myself included, depicted media fandom as an important test site for ideas about active consumption and grassroots creativity. We were drawn toward the idea of “fan culture” as operating in the shadows of, in response to, as well as an alternative to commercial culture. Fan culture was defined through the appropriation and transformation of materials borrowed from mass culture; it was the application of folk culture practices to mass culture content.¹⁴ Across the past decade, the Web has brought these consumers from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight; research into fandom has been embraced by important thinkers in the legal and business communities. What might once have been seen as “rogue readers” are now Kevin Roberts’s “inspirational consumers.” Participation is understood as part of the normal ways that media operate while the current debates center around the terms of our participation. Just as studying fan culture helped us to understand the innovations that occur on the fringes of the media industry, we may also want to look at the structures of fan communities as showing us new ways of thinking about citizenship and collaboration. The political effects of these fan communities come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas (the critical reading of favorite texts) but also through access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural production (participatory culture).

Have I gone too far? Am I granting too much power here to these consumption communities? Perhaps. But keep in mind that I am not really trying to predict the future. I want to avoid the kind of grand claims about the withering away of mass media institutions that make

the rhetoric of the digital revolution seem silly a decade later. Rather, I am trying to point toward the democratic potentials found in some contemporary cultural trends. There is nothing inevitable about the outcome. Everything is up for grabs. Pierre Lévy described his ideal of collective intelligence as a “realizable utopia,” and so it is. I think of myself as a critical utopian. As a utopian, I want to identify possibilities within our culture that might lead toward a better, more just society. My experiences as a fan have changed how I think about media politics, helping me to look for and promote unrealized potentials rather than reject out of hand anything that doesn’t rise to my standards. Fandom, after all, is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn’t fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn’t frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it. Today, I hear a great deal of frustration about the state of our media culture, yet surprisingly few people talk about how we might rewrite it.

But pointing to those opportunities for change is not enough in and of itself. One must also identify the various barriers that block the realization of those possibilities and look for ways to route around them. Having a sense of what a more ideal society looks like gives one a yardstick for determining what we must do to achieve our goals. Here, this book has offered specific case studies of groups who are already achieving some of the promises of collective intelligence or of a more participatory culture. I do not mean for us to read these groups as typical of the average consumer (if such a thing exists in an era of niche media and fragmented culture). Rather, we should read these case studies as demonstrations of what it is possible to do in the context of convergence culture.

This approach differs dramatically from what I call critical pessimism. Critical pessimists, such as media critics Mark Crispin Miller, Noam Chomsky, and Robert McChesney, focus primarily on the obstacles to achieving a more democratic society. In the process, they often exaggerate the power of big media in order to frighten readers into taking action. I don’t disagree with their concern about media concentration, but the ways they frame the debate is self-defeating insofar as it disempowers consumers even as it seeks to mobilize them. Far too much media reform rhetoric rests on melodramatic discourse about victimization and vulnerability, seduction and manipulation, “propaganda machines” and “weapons of mass deception.” Again and again,

this version of the media reform movement has ignored the complexity of the public's relationship to popular culture and sided with those opposed to a more diverse and participatory culture. The politics of critical utopianism is founded on a notion of empowerment; the politics of critical pessimism on a politics of victimization. One focuses on what we are doing with media, and the other on what media is doing to us. As with previous revolutions, the media reform movement is gaining momentum at a time when people are starting to feel more empowered, not when they are at their weakest.

Media concentration is a very real problem that potentially stifles many of the developments I have been describing across this book. Concentration is bad because it stifles competition and places media industries above the demands of their consumers. Concentration is bad because it lowers diversity—important in terms of popular culture, essential in terms of news. Concentration is bad because it lowers the incentives for companies to negotiate with their consumers and raises the barriers to their participation. Big concentrated media can ignore their audience (at least up to a point); smaller niche media must accommodate us.

That said, the fight over media concentration is only one struggle that should concern media reformers. The potentials of a more participatory media culture are also worth fighting for. Right now, convergence culture is throwing media into flux, expanding the opportunities for grassroots groups to speak back to the mass media. Put all of our efforts into battling the conglomerates and this window of opportunity will have passed. That is why it is so important to fight against the corporate copyright regime, to argue against censorship and moral panic that would pathologize these emerging forms of participation, to publicize the best practices of these online communities, to expand access and participation to groups that are otherwise being left behind, and to promote forms of media literacy education that help all children to develop the skills needed to become full participants in their culture.

If early readers are any indication, the most controversial claim in this book may be my operating assumption that increasing participation in popular culture is a good thing. Too many critical pessimists are still locked into the old politics of culture jamming. Resistance becomes an end in and of itself rather than a tool to ensure cultural diversity and corporate responsibility. The debate keeps getting framed as if the only true alternative were to opt out of media altogether and live in

the woods, eating acorns and lizards and reading only books published on recycled paper by small alternative presses. But what would it mean to tap media power for our own purposes? Is ideological and aesthetic purity really more valuable than transforming our culture?

A politics of participation starts from the assumption that we may have greater collective bargaining power if we form consumption communities. Consider the example of the Sequential Tarts. Started in 1997, www.sequentialtart.com serves as an advocacy group for female consumers frustrated by their historic neglect or patronizing treatment by the comics industry. Marcia Alias, the current editor of Sequential Tart, explained: "In the early days we wanted to change the apparent perception of the female reader of comics. . . . We wanted to show what we already knew—that the female audience for comics, while probably smaller than the male audience, is both diverse and has a collectively large disposable income."¹⁵ In her study of Sequential Tart, scholar and sometime contributor Kimberly M. De Vries argues that the group self-consciously rejects the negative stereotypes about female comics readers constructed by men in and around the comics industry but also the well-meaning but equally constraining stereotypes constructed by the first generation of feminist critics of comics.¹⁶ The Sequential Tarts defend the pleasures women take in comics even as they critique negative representations of women. The Web zine combines interviews with comics creators, retailers, and industry leaders, reviews of current publications, and critical essays about gender and comics. It showcases industry practices that attract or repel women, spotlights the work of smaller presses that often fell through the cracks, and promotes books that reflect their readers' tastes and interests. The Sequential Tarts are increasingly courted by publishers or individual artists who feel they have content that female readers might embrace and have helped to make the mainstream publishers more attentive to this often underserved market.

The Sequential Tarts represent a new kind of consumer advocacy group—one that seeks to diversify content and make mass media more responsive to its consumers. This is not to say that commercial media will ever truly operate according to democratic principles. Media companies don't need to share our ideals in order to change their practices. What will motivate the media companies is their own economic interests. What will motivate consumer-based politics will be our shared cultural and political interests. But we can't change much of anything if

we are not on speaking terms with people inside the media industry. A politics of confrontation must give way to one focused on tactical collaboration. The old model, which many wisely dismissed, was that consumers vote with their pocketbooks. The new model is that we are collectively changing the nature of the marketplace, and in so doing we are pressuring companies to change the products they are creating and the ways they relate to their consumers.

We still do not have any models for what a mature, fully realized knowledge culture would look like. But popular culture may provide us with prototypes. A case in point is Warren Ellis's comic book series, *Global Frequency*. Set in the near future, *Global Frequency* depicts a multiracial, multinational organization of ordinary people who contribute their services on an ad hoc basis. As Ellis explains, "You could be sitting there watching the news and suddenly hear an unusual cell phone tone, and within moments you might see your neighbor leaving the house in a hurry, wearing a jacket or a shirt with the distinctive Global Frequency symbol . . . or, hell, your girlfriend might answer the phone . . . and promise to explain later. . . . Anyone could be on the Global Frequency, and you'd never know until they got the call."¹⁷ Ellis rejects the mighty demigods and elite groups of the superhero tradition and instead depicts the twenty-first-century equivalent of a volunteer fire department. Ellis conceived of the story in the wake of September 11 as an alternative to calls for increased state power and paternalistic constraints on communications: *Global Frequency* doesn't imagine the government saving its citizens from whatever Big Bad is out there. Rather, as Ellis explains, "*Global Frequency* is about us saving ourselves." Each issue focuses on a different set of characters in a different location, examining what it means for *Global Frequency* members personally and professionally to contribute their labor to a cause larger than themselves. The only recurring characters are those at the communications hub who contact the volunteers. Once *Frequency* participants are called into action, most of the key decisions get made on site as the volunteers are allowed to act on their localized knowledge. Most of the challenges come, appropriately enough, from the debris left behind by the collapse of the military-industrial complex and the end of the cold war—"The bad mad things in the dark that the public never found out about." In other words, the citizen soldiers use distributed knowledge to overcome the dangers of government secrecy.

Ellis's Global Frequency Network closely mirrors what journalist

and digital activist Howard Rheingold has to say about smart mobs: "Smart mobs consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other. The people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities. . . . Groups of people using these tools will gain new forms of social power."¹⁸ In Manila and in Madrid, activists, using cell phones, were able to rally massive numbers of supporters in opposition to governments who might otherwise have controlled discourse on the mass media; these efforts resulted in transformations of power. In Boston, we are seeing home schoolers use these same technologies to organize field trips on the fly that deliver dozens of kids and their parents to a museum or historic site in a matter of a few hours.

Other writers, such as science fiction writer Cory Doctorow, describe such groups as "adhocracies." The polar opposite of a bureaucracy, an adhocracy is an organization characterized by a lack of hierarchy. In it, each person contributes to confronting a particular problem as needed based on his or her knowledge and abilities, and leadership roles shift as tasks change. An adhocracy, thus, is a knowledge culture that turns information into action. Doctorow's science fiction novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* depicts a future when the fans run Disney World, public support becomes the most important kind of currency, and debates about popular culture become the focus of politics.¹⁹

Ellis's vision of the Global Frequency Network and Doctorow's vision of a grassroots Disney World are far out there—well beyond anything we've seen in the real world yet. But fans put some of what they learned from Global Frequency into action: tapping a range of communications channels to push the networks and production company to try to get a television series on the air.²⁰ Consider this to be another example of what it would mean to "democratize television." Mark Burnett, *Survivor*'s executive producer, had taken an option on adopting the comic books for television; Warner Bros. had already announced plans to air *Global Frequency* as a midseason replacement, which then got postponed and later canceled. A copy of the series pilot was leaked on the Internet, circulating as an illegal download on BitTorrent, where it became the focus of a grassroots effort to get the series back into production. John Rogers, the show's head writer and producer, said that the massive response to the never-aired series was giving the producers leverage to push for the pilot's distribution on DVD and potentially

to sell the series to another network. Studio and network executives predictably cited concerns about what the consumers were doing: "Whether the pilot was picked up or not, it is still the property of Warner Bros. Entertainment and we take the protection of all of our intellectual property seriously. . . . While Warner Bros. Entertainment values feedback from consumers, copyright infringement is not a productive way to try to influence a corporate decision." Rogers wrote about his encounters with the *Global Frequency* fans in his blog: "It changes the way I'll do my next project. . . . I would put my pilot out on the internet in a heartbeat. Want five more? Come buy the boxed set." Rogers's comments invite us to imagine a time when small niches of consumers who were willing to commit their money to a cause might ensure the production of a minority-interest program. From a producer's perspective, such a scheme would be attractive since television series are made at a loss for the first several seasons until the production company accumulates enough episodes to sell a syndication package. DVD lowers that risk by allowing producers to sell the series one season at a time and even to package and sell unaired episodes. Selling directly to the consumer would allow producers to recoup their costs even earlier in the production cycle.

People in the entertainment industry are talking a lot these days about what *Wired* reporter Chris Anderson calls "The Long Tail."²¹ Anderson argues that as distribution costs lower, as companies can keep more and more backlist titles in circulation, and as niche communities can use the Web to mobilize around titles that satisfy their particular interests, then the greatest profit will be made by those companies that generate the most diverse content and keep it available at the most reasonable prices. If Anderson is right, then niche-content stands a much better chance of turning a profit than ever before. The Long Tail model assumes an increasingly savvy media consumer, one who will actively seek out content of interest and who will take pride in being able to recommend that content to friends.

Imagine a subscription-based model in which viewers commit to pay a monthly fee to watch a season of episodes delivered into their homes via broadband. A pilot could be produced to test the waters and if the response looked positive, subscriptions could be sold for a show that had gotten enough subscribers to defer the company's initial production costs. Early subscribers would get a package price, others would pay more on a pay-per-view basis, which would cover the next

phase of production. Others could buy access to individual episodes. Distribution could be on a DVD mailed directly to your home or via streaming media (perhaps you could simply download it onto your iPod).

It was the announcement that ABC-Disney was going to be offering recent episodes of cult television series (such as *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives*) for purchase and download via the Apple Music Store that really took these discussions to the next level. Other networks quickly followed with their own download packages. Within the first twenty days, there were more than a million television episodes downloaded. The video iPod seems emblematic of the new convergence culture—not because everyone believes the small screen of the iPod is the ideal vehicle for watching broadcast content but because the ability to download reruns on demand represents a major shift in the relationship between consumers and media content.

Writing in *Slate*, media analyst Ivan Askwith described some of the implications of television downloads:

As iTunes and its inevitable competitors offer more broadcast-television content, producers . . . won't have to compromise their programs to meet broadcast requirements. Episode lengths can vary as needed, content can be darker, more topical, and more explicit. . . . Audiences already expect director's cuts and deleted scenes on DVDs. It's not hard to imagine that the networks might one day air a "broadcast cut" of an episode, then encourage viewers to download the longer, racier director's cut the next afternoon. . . . While DVDs now give viewers the chance to catch up between seasons, on-demand television will allow anyone to catch up at any time, quickly and legally. Producers will no longer have to choose between alienating new viewers with a complex storyline or alienating the established audience by rehashing details from previous episodes. . . . Direct downloads will give fans of endangered shows the chance to vote with their wallets while a show is still on the air. And when a program *does* go off the air, direct payments from fans might provide enough revenue to keep it in production as an online-only venture.²²

Almost immediately, fans of canceled series, such as *The West Wing* and *Arrested Development*, have begun to embrace such a model as a way to sustain the shows' production, pledging money to support shows they want to watch.²³ Cult-television producers have begun to

talk openly about bypassing the networks and selling their series directly to their most loyal consumers. One can imagine independent media producers using downloads as a way of distributing content that would never make it onto commercial television. And, of course, once you distribute via the Web, television instantly becomes global, paving the way for international producers to sell their content directly to American consumers. Google and Yahoo! began cutting deals with media producers in the hope that they might be able to profit from this new economy in television downloads. All of this came too late for *Global Frequency*, and so far the producers of *The West Wing* and *Arrested Development* have not trusted their fates to such a subscription-based model. Yet many feel that sooner or later some producer will test the waters, much as ABC-Disney did with its video iPod announcement. And once again, there are likely to be many others waiting in the wings to pounce on the proposition once they can measure public response to the deal. What was once a fan-boy fantasy now seems closer and closer to reality.

While producers, analysts, and fans have used the fate of *Global Frequency* to explore how we might rethink the distribution of television content, the series premise also offers us some tools for thinking about the new kinds of knowledge communities that this book has discussed. If one wants to see a real-world example of something like the Global Frequency Network, take a look at the Wikipedia—a grassroots, multinational effort to build a free encyclopedia on the Internet written collaboratively from an army of volunteers, working in roughly two hundred different languages. So far, adhocracy principles have been embraced by the open-source movement, where software engineers worldwide collaborate on projects for the common good. The Wikipedia project represents the application of these open-source principles to the production and management of knowledge. The Wikipedia contains more than 1.6 million articles and receives around 60 million hits per day.²⁴

Perhaps the most interesting and controversial aspect of the Wikipedia project has been the ways it shifts what counts as knowledge (from the kinds of topics sanctioned by traditional encyclopedias to a much broader range of topics of interest to specialized interest groups and subcultures) and the ways it shifts what counts as expertise (from recognized academic authorities to something close to Lévy's concept of collective intelligence). Some worry that the encyclopedia will contain

much inaccurate information but the Wikipedia community, at its best, functions as a self-correcting adhocracy. Any knowledge that gets posted can and most likely will be revised and corrected by other readers.

For this process to work, all involved must try for inclusiveness and respect diversity. The Wikipedia project has found it necessary to develop both a politics and an ethics—a set of community norms—about knowledge sharing:

Probably, as we grow, nearly every view on every subject will (eventually) be found among our authors and readership. . . . But since Wikipedia is a community-built, international resource, we surely cannot expect our collaborators to agree in all cases, or even in many cases, on what constitutes human knowledge in a strict sense. . . . We must make an effort to present these conflicting theories fairly, without advocating any one of them. . . . When it is clear to readers that we do not expect them to adopt any particular opinion, this is conducive to our readers' feeling free to make up their own minds for themselves, and thus to encourage in them *intellectual independence*. So totalitarian governments and dogmatic institutions everywhere have reason to be opposed to Wikipedia. . . . We, the creators of Wikipedia, trust readers' competence to form their own opinions themselves. Texts that present the merits of multiple viewpoints fairly, without demanding that the reader accept any one of them, are liberating.²⁵

You probably won't believe in the Wikipedia unless you try it, but the process works. The process works because more and more people are taking seriously their obligations as participants to the community as a whole: not everyone does so yet; we can see various flame wars as people with very different politics and ethics interact within the same knowledge communities. Such disputes often foreground those conflicting assumptions, forcing people to reflect more deeply on their choices. What was once taken for granted must now be articulated. What emerges might be called a moral economy of information: that is, a sense of mutual obligations and shared expectations about what constitutes good citizenship within a knowledge community.

We might think of fan fiction communities as the literary equivalent of the Wikipedia: around any given media property, writers are constructing a range of different interpretations that get expressed through stories. Sharing of these stories opens up new possibilities in the text.

Here, individual contributions do not have to be neutral; participants simply have to agree to disagree, and, indeed, many fans come to value the sheer diversity of versions of the same characters and situations. On the other hand, mass media has tended to use its tight control over intellectual property to reign in competing interpretations, resulting in a world where there is one official version. Such tight controls increase the coherence of the franchise and protect the producers' economic interests, yet the culture is impoverished through such regulation. Fan fiction repairs the damage caused by an increasingly privatized culture. Consider, for example, this statement made by a fan:

What I love about fandom is the freedom we have allowed ourselves to create and recreate our characters over and over again. Fanfic rarely sits still. It's like a living, evolving thing, taking on its own life, one story building on another, each writer's reality bouncing off another's and maybe even melding together to form a whole new creation. . . . I find that fandom can be extremely creative because we have the ability to keep changing our characters and giving them a new life over and over. We can kill and resurrect them as often as we like. We can change their personalities and how they react to situations. We can take a character and make him charming and sweet or cold-blooded and cruel. We can give them an infinite, always-changing life rather than the single life of their original creation.²⁶

Fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths. Here, the right to participate in the culture is assumed to be "the freedom we have allowed ourselves," not a privilege granted by a benevolent company, not something they are prepared to barter away for better sound files or free Web hosting. Fans also reject the studio's assumption that intellectual property is a "limited good," to be tightly controlled lest it dilute its value. Instead, they embrace an understanding of intellectual property as "shareware," something that accrues value as it moves across different contexts, gets retold in various ways, attracts multiple audiences, and opens itself up to a proliferation of alternative meanings.

Nobody is anticipating a point where all bureaucracies will become adhocracies. Concentrated power is apt to remain concentrated. But we

will see adhocracy principles applied to more and more different kinds of projects. Such experiments thrive within convergence culture, which creates a context where viewers—individually and collectively—can reshape and recontextualize mass-media content. Most of this activity will occur around the edges of commercial culture through grassroots or niche media industries such as comics or games. On that scale, small groups like the Sequential Tarts can make a material difference. On that scale, entrepreneurs have an incentive to give their consumers greater opportunities to shape the content and participate in its distribution. As we move closer to the older and more mass market media industries, corporate resistance to grassroots participation increases: the stakes are too high to experiment, and the economic impact of any given consumption community lessens. Yet, within these media companies, there are still potential allies who for their own reasons may want to appeal to audience support to strengthen their hands in their negotiations around the boardroom table. A media industry struggling to hold on to its core audience in the face of competition from other media may be forced to take greater risks to accommodate consumer interests.

As we have seen across the book, convergence culture is highly generative: some ideas spread top down, starting with commercial media and being adopted and appropriated by a range of different publics as they spread outward across the culture. Others emerge bottom up from various sites of participatory culture and getting pulled into the mainstream if the media industries see some way of profiting from it. The power of the grassroots media is that it diversifies; the power of broadcast media is that it amplifies. That's why we should be concerned with the flow between the two: expanding the potentials for participation represents the greatest opportunity for cultural diversity. Throw away the powers of broadcasting and one has only cultural fragmentation. The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media.

Read in those terms, participation becomes an important political right. In the American context, one could argue that First Amendment protections of the right to speech, press, belief, and assembly represent a more abstract right to participate in a democratic culture. After all, the First Amendment emerged in the context of a thriving folk culture, where it was assumed that songs and stories would get retold many

different times for many different purposes. Its founding documents were written by men who appropriated the names of classical orators or mythic heroes. Over time, freedom of press increasingly came to rest with those who could afford to buy printing presses. The emergence of new media technologies supports a democratic urge to allow more people to create and circulate media. Sometimes the media are designed to respond to mass media content—positively or negatively—and sometimes grassroots creativity goes places no one in the media industry could have imagined. The challenge is to rethink our understanding of the First Amendment to recognize this expanded opportunity to participate. We should thus regard those things that block participation—whether commercial or governmental—as important obstacles to route around if we are going to “democratize television” or any other aspect of our culture. We have identified some of those obstacles in the book, most centrally the challenges surrounding corporate control over intellectual property and the need for a clearer definition of the kinds of fair-use rights held by amateur artists, writers, journalists, and critics, who want to share work inspired or incited by existing media content.

Another core obstacle might be described as the participation gap. So far, much of the discussion of the digital divide has emphasized problems of access, seeing the issue primarily in technical terms—but a medium is more than a technology. As activists have sought a variety of means to broaden access to digital media, they have created a hodgepodge of different opportunities for participation. Some have extended access to these resources through the home, and others have limited, filtered, regulated access through schools and public libraries. Now, we need to confront the cultural factors that diminish the likelihood that different groups will participate. Race, class, language differences amplify these inequalities in opportunities for participation. One reason we see early adapters is that some groups not only feel more confidence in engaging with new technologies but also some groups seem more comfortable going public with their views about culture.

Historically, public education in the United States was a product of the need to distribute the skills and knowledge necessary to train informed citizens. The participation gap becomes much more important as we think about what it would mean to foster the skills and knowledge needed by monitorial citizens: here, the challenge is not simply being able to read and write, but being able to participate in the delib-

erations over what issues matter, what knowledge counts, and what ways of knowing command authority and respect. The ideal of the informed citizen is breaking down because there is simply too much for any individual to know. The ideal of monitorial citizenship depends on developing new skills in collaboration and a new ethic of knowledge sharing that will allow us to deliberate together.

Right now, people are learning how to participate in such knowledge cultures outside of any formal educational setting. Much of this learning takes place in the affinity spaces that are emerging around popular culture. The emergence of these knowledge cultures partially reflects the demands these texts place on consumers (the complexity of transmedia entertainment, for example), but they also reflect the demands consumers place on media (the hunger for complexity, the need for community, the desire to rewrite core stories). Many schools remain openly hostile to these kinds of experiences, continuing to promote autonomous problem solvers and self-contained learners. Here, unauthorized collaboration is cheating. As I finish writing this book, my own focus is increasingly being drawn toward the importance of media literacy education. Many media literacy activists still act as if the role of mass media had remained unchanged by the introduction of new media technologies. Media are read primarily as threats rather than as resources. More focus is placed on the dangers of manipulation rather than the possibilities of participation, on restricting access—turning off the television, saying no to Nintendo—rather than in expanding skills at deploying media for one's own ends, rewriting the core stories our culture has given us. One of the ways we can shape the future of media culture is by resisting such disempowering approaches to media literacy education. We need to rethink the goals of media education so that young people can come to think of themselves as cultural producers and participants and not simply as consumers, critical or otherwise. To achieve this goal, we also need media education for adults. Parents, for example, receive plenty of advice on whether they should allow their kids to have a television set in their room or how many hours a week they should allow their kids to consume media. Yet, they receive almost no advice on how they can help their kids build a meaningful relationship with media.

Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of

the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways. Convergence culture is the future, but it is taking shape now. Consumers will be more powerful within convergence culture—but only if they recognize and use that power as both consumers and citizens, as full participants in our culture.

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