PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND COMMODIFICATION IN THE AGE OF THE
“DIGITAL REVOLUTION”

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by

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To my family, who must know why.

In loving memory of

my grandmother,
Anna L. LaRocco,
for encouraging a literary mind

and David Foster Wallace,
for making it worthwhile.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 1. Commodification Online: The Changing Landscape of Television ....................... 6  

Chapter 2. The Shift in Fan Culture: Impacts of the Internet ................................................. 16  

Chapter 3. The “Lost Experience” and the *The Sopranos* Blog: Two Case Studies .............. 32  

Chapter 4: The Fan Theory Continuum.................................................................................. 54  

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 65  

Works Cited............................................................................................................................... 69
Introduction

A significant shift is taking place in our contemporary media culture, one that reaches more people than ever before. I refer to the institutions of television corporations in specific which, though revolutionary in themselves at the time of their inception, have been made to revamp and reconfigure themselves for a new era of media culture. Spurred to action by the advent of the World Wide Web, television institutions and, by extension, the advertising companies which are dependent upon them, are heeding the call of new media in which to work, new delivery systems to explore. In short, internet culture makes necessary new and different ways of reaching the television consumer-audience as they become more avid users of the new media available to them and the subsequent new ways of interacting with each other over the internet. As a result, the relationship between the citizens of that audience as both viewers and consumers is changing drastically, and not without cost.

I focus in this thesis on the audience-as-commodity—in other words—the audience as seen through the eyes of this media industries seeking to avail themselves of the new opportunities and challenges presented to it by web culture. But imbricated in the phenomenon of the consumer-audience “going online” and its relationship with the media industries in that online space are issues of commodification, exploitation, convergence, and participation. This thesis will discuss each of these ideas in turn, illuminating the significance of online interactions between audiences and their changing
relationship with media culture, highlighting how these interactions remain significant in the discussion of commodity culture and the meaning of the “commodity audience.”

In the 1960s and 70s, television enjoyed a reputation as a “vast wasteland” (Hilmes 81) that wreaked havoc on traditional culture and held mass audiences in its clutches. Not only that were audiences held captive by the television programs themselves, but they were also lured in by advertisers who sponsored those programs and took full (and progressive) advantage of an audience via the medium of television. The advertisers can now take advantage of an audience on a scale that was theretofore unavailable via print and other previous advertising media. The television audience “from the beginning has been assembled, constructed, defined, reviled, measured, manipulated and largely taken for granted by televisions producers and administrators” (Hilmes 122)—that is, until now. At the very least, this model of the audience is going through a considerable amount of alterations with respect to emerging (and, arguably, reigning) internet culture. Specifically, the proliferation of television show home pages and unofficial fan sites began in the 1990s, changing the landscape of the audience and the way that audience is accessed and dealt with by producers, marketers, and advertisers.

More important is the way in which, due to the increasing presence of audiences, television producers began to take note of them in an exceptional way. Fans, as they are the most dedicated and therefore valuable members of those audiences (in other words, the most heavily targeted by the industry), are those from whom the TV industry took cues as they were the first to develop websites to accompany television shows (or just
pay homage to them). Producers then developed websites of their own. Specifically, producers in the industry created “official” websites as they became increasingly aware of the growth potential inherent in internet spaces which worked to displace and distract attention from more “home grown” sites developed by fans. Official fan site creation was done in order to reap the potential and ever-growing benefit of the “commodity audience;” in other words, the internet provided an additional avenue for the television industry to reach its fans. The marketers and advertisers were then able to exploit this new avenue and reach exponentially increasing numbers of people with their online advertisements. Television web sites thus modeled themselves on those produced by grassroots fan communities; simultaneously, as a result of the internet’s potential for communication, fan sites exploded on the web and brought what were once smaller, grassroots movements (mostly print-based) into a limitless space available to millions of people at once. So, fan activity is a great deal more visible to both internet users and the media industry. Fandom’s extensive web presence resulted in a permanent alteration of how the media industry does business; this alteration continues to take on new dimensions with new advances in web technologies, always with results that are culturally significant in the ways we rationalize ourselves as consumers and viewers.

This thesis will target fan culture as the primary entity around which this shift in commodity culture and media culture takes place. Since fans are the most valuable consumers, the following chapters combine the two most significant aspects of this media shift, viewer dedication and significance as consumer. For this reason, I will focus on
Fan-fan web relations as well as fan-industry relations online. Fan theorists such as Henry Jenkins, though, posit that fan culture is resistant to big media industry, for fan culture is a double edged sword, insists theorist Matt Hills in his book *Fan Culture*, fans remain ideal consumers while still expressing anti-commercial beliefs (29). Accordingly, this thesis will take issue with some of the prevailing theories of fan culture and its role in contemporary media culture; specifically, I will examine the issue of resistant fans and explore the risks involved in this “new” online relationship with the media industry which encourages increased engagement and interaction with the industry itself. I will present two case studies of internet fan culture and its changing nature with regard to the industry, viral marketing and blogging, both of which serve to illuminate the commodification of the consumer-audience.

Fan presence on the internet has accelerated the trend towards a more individualized marketing strategy in opposition to the 60s and 70s model of an audience figured as a generic mass of like-minded people. As a result, the “industry discourse of personal television has less to do with the viewer’s personhood and more to do with new industrial structures of individuation geared toward profit making,” as Lisa Parks writes in her article “Flexible Microcasting” (135). I argue against more positive and utopian views of concepts like convergence, participation, and collective intelligence, positing that the nature of fan-industry web relations is such that they reduce the much sought-after fans to their roles as consumers only, and that the web is a place where both
commodification and exploitation of consumers of cultural objects remain unchecked at present, and show no signs of relenting.
Chapter 1. Commodification Online: The Changing Landscape of Television

In the current “post-network era,” media operations are focusing more intently on “active” consumers, seeking to establish strong and dedicated relationships with viewers. Because, as Ien Ang writes in Desperately Seeking the Audience, the “consumer, like the citizen, must be made, not found” (32), there exists an increasing pressure in the face of the “digital revolution” to solidify relationships with target markets. Widespread emphasis on niche audiences allows for industry marketing efforts to be more direct and particular; “these media operations,” Michelle Hilmes writes in The Television History Book, “seek out niche audiences for advertising more likely to be highly invested in a particular form of cultural expression” (122), allowing them to tailor their advertising to specific customers. Hilmes indicates that the key to the niche network is the “management of a conglomerate structured around a variety of firms with different audiences and different objectives” (122). In other words, the “post-network” era is characterized by accelerated marketing tactics for target audiences rather than the general tactics used on mass audiences in order to better facilitate the garnering of intensified interest and dedication to particular television brands and products.

Ang writes extensively of the two roles of the audience in the eyes of industry: “the audience-as-market” and the “audience-as public” (32). These two roles illustrate the demands on industry to cater to audiences in two ways, both as a market (those who will purchase a product [the show]) and as a public (those who must be fashioned by the television industry to be interested in and desire certain programs offered by that
industry). These commercial institutions cannot stop “struggling to conquer the audience” (32), as Ang writes and as her book title suggests, and as audiences become more engaged with internet culture, it becomes necessary for producers to discover new and different ways to keep up with their niche audiences. Because television itself can easily be seen as a “consumer delivery enterprise” (Hilmes 122) for advertisers and television is becoming less and less the medium by which audiences access their shows, advertisers have acknowledged the imperative to become more creative and assertive in their pursuit of loyal customers.

The “loyal” consumer of our current television era is the “active” consumer. The cable customer stands as the prime example of the first stage of the active consumer phenomenon; he or she pays for the viewership in addition to normal network stations in expectation of better shows and a heightened viewer experience. The act of purchasing this experience marks these consumers, in one point of view, as more committed, or “active,” than others who simply watch free network television. Subscribers to stations like HBO, for instance are already more invested consumers by virtue of their payment of a flat fee and their expectation of higher quality and a more elite selection of programs. A further manifestation of the active consumer is the fan, whom the television, advertising, and marketing industries generally views as the most loyal and dedicated consumer. These media industries are especially dependent on groups of fans and seek to cultivate more devoted relationships with them via marketing efforts.

The “loyals,” as Henry Jenkins refers to them in *Convergence Culture*, are those
who watch “faithfully” and pay more attention than the average consumer to advertising
because of their presumed constant viewing of their object of fandom. Fans, then, are a
key demographic for all television advertisers. These are the loyal consumers who “show
active engagement with media content” and “display willingness to track down content
across a range of media platforms” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 67). In this way they are the
most valued consumers of the television audience, as they will devote the most resources
to the pursuit of their show and its accessories. They are dedicated both emotionally and
monetarily. Fans must therefore be not only targeted vigorously and successfully, but
also consistently pleased with the programming available to them. The heightened value
of fans in the television marketplace is a clear enough reason for the burgeoning
emphasis on fans in advertising campaigns on the internet. Courting fans in the current
saturated media marketplace is increasingly valuable; to win them over guarantees (as
much as a guarantee is possible in this context) and stability for the television industry as
well as profitability for advertisers and marketers.

The chief difficulty with fans in this role, however, is that they exist “both inside
and outside commodification” (Hills 29). In other words, though from the standpoint of
industry fans are the ideal consumers, they simultaneously express anti-commercial
beliefs and desire for their voices and opinions to be considered, presenting a sort of
double-edged sword (Hills 29). Hills further illustrates that “while simultaneously
‘resisting’ norms of capitalist society and its rapid turnover of novel commodities, fans
are also implicated in these very economic and cultural processes” (29). The “resisting of
norms” that Hills refers to here is the character of fandom itself, the action of alighting upon a beloved object, in this case a television program, and taking pleasure in not just consuming it through loyal viewings and consumption of associated products, but in the repeated and consistent acts of revisiting the object of fandom. This consistency defies the process of commodity culture in its attempt to consistently push and market new products and services to replace the old, forever presenting the consumer with something he or she does not have in order to encourage further consumption. Fan culture, on the other hand, emphasizes attachment to an object and full knowledge of the same; it sees increased value, in the case of television, in repeat viewings and in the deconstruction and analysis of the components. Therefore, in its most basic sense, fandom resists the desires of the television industry as it adheres firmly to structures of loyalty and dedication to a particular object of fandom; fans are reluctant to consume new products, which is what the media industry aims to make them do. In this way, fans resist commodity culture by hanging on to particular texts instead of consuming new ones.

But I contend that just as deeply tied to fandom’s emphasis on dedication to a particular object is its full participation in commodity culture both materially and socially. Materially, fans are ideal consumers in that they purchase not only the show itself—for example, our HBO subscriber—but also the commodities that accessorize the show such as clothing and apparel, DVDs, video games, posters, and the like. This, in turn, leads to the social exchange value of fandom; fans are also the ideal way to socially advertise the object of fandom to the general population. By word of mouth and by
visual example, the fans of a particular show are bound to exhibit their passionate interest and, in a sense, advertise to other viewers. They partially perform the work of the media industries in their passionate promotion of texts and related merchandise. Perhaps after seeing one’s best friend wearing a *Lost* t-shirt, he or she will begin to watch the show, and so on. In *Living Room Wars*, Ien Ang discusses the familiar issue of the “delirium of consumer sovereignty” (12) as a result of the mass amounts of choices available to audiences; this “delirium” is a facet of new active audiences who see their selection of shows and products as a method of “activism” whereby they have a stake in what the television industry offers. However, this sort of “activity” is clearly problematic in terms of the notion of “active,” resistant fan culture since it is fully linked with material exchange from consumer to producer. Fans are resistant because of their tendency to cling to specific texts, but the industry responds through their development of new, online strategies to make money off of this sort of cling-to-one-object fandom.

Undoubtedly, there remain problems with the concept of fans as a mode of resistance to the television industry. The internet pushes this issue of commodification one step further, rendering the paradox of resistant fan culture versus commodified fan culture perhaps the most complex it has ever been. The internet’s role in fan culture and television industry advertising has redefined, and according to new rules, the way in which fans rationalize their position in consumer society along with the way the television industry has begun to remap its domain, navigating between the media of both television and the internet.
Ang contends in *Living Room Wars* that the active audience (the most active participants, we can now infer, are fans) “has nothing to do with resistance, and everything to do with incorporation” (12), furthering the notion that the more active the fan with respect to their beloved text, the more effortless it becomes for the industry to take advantage. The more committed the consumer, the more intricately connected to the industry and the more commodified those fans’ tastes and efforts become. Thus, in fans’ pursuit of a deeper and more intense relationship with an object of fandom, they cannot escape the grasp of the media industries which deliver to them both the object and the accessories. I therefore argue that it is primarily through increasing involvement with fan objects that the media marketplace further commodifies and controls their consumers.

The internet in recent years has become a locus for, among other things, the proliferation of advertising campaigns. Specific to this thesis, television advertising has found a new site on which to build a new and larger series of operations. The internet has revolutionized both fan interactions and the relationship between those fans and the producers of their objects of fandom. An exploration of the role of the internet in the current world of fandom is crucial for an understanding of this revolutionary way of interacting.

During the 1990s there was a definite proliferation of unofficial fan sites which preceded the arrival of any corporate web pages. Almost immediately following their detection, program producers recognized the potential inherent in these fan sites and made official sites to accompany them. Producers strategized that many who had not yet
discovered the fan sites would discover the official sites first, allowing for more official promotion and interaction with products strategically advertised on these official sites (Hilmes 137). Already we can chart the beginnings of the interest of corporate strategists into now increasingly visible fan practices. Television producers began to see the advantages of contact with their viewers outside of the realm of the television itself in the new, profitable online space. With the rise of the internet, the producers and advertisers could have more access to the consumers and more demands on their time. Furthermore, producers and advertisers cooperated to combine their efforts on developing “official” fan sites to not only promote the particular show, but also to promote products in conjunction with that show (or sponsors of the show, in other instances).

In essence, the rise of the internet took fandom from what was once a more “underground,” lesser-known cultural practice amongst small grassroots groups to a practice on a worldwide scale, accessible to everyone at the click of a button. Thus fandom arrived at a more above ground, visible place in the cultural imagination, transcending the practice of fanzine distribution within small circuits of dedicated fans to a widespread, user-friendly medium within reach of mass amounts of people. In The Television History Book, Michelle Hilmes remarks in reference to this subject that “fan communities that had taken months, years to develop now developed overnight across time and geographical distances” (137). The internet is also responsible for “normalizing” fan interactions; what was once a rather alternative or even subversive community (subversive in the sense that fans are seen as going against the grain and
exhibiting some sort of resistance to dominant commodity culture) has become a mainstream and even popular way to interact with television texts. The “subcultural reading practices” (137) or fan interpretations and discussions of their beloved texts Hilmes refers to here are more available and accessible online than they would be in literature like fanzines, and the internet has become an invitation to participate for those who would not otherwise know of fan fiction.

The first major reason for the internet’s prominent place in revolutionizing fan interactions, then, is the shift between the previous, underground nature of fan culture that has made the move to a more widespread, easily accessible setting; the second is the increased opportunities of interaction between the producer and the consumer. Television producers can now access conversations and message-boards can now be “overheard,” in a sense, by those in the television industry. Word travels quickly on the internet, and by way of fan sites and blogs, fans’ viewing practices and opinions can be easily ascertained. The fact that producers now have access to “fan feedback,” in other words, the immediate reactions of fans on the internet either while they are watching the show or immediately following, is of the greatest importance, as it is a phenomenon completely new, solely occurring as a result of the internet. Hilmes discusses the way this sort of immediate fan feedback has altered the television industry’s relationship with its audience. That “producers [can] prowl sites and posting boards after program airings to chart reactions” has had a “significant impact” (Hilmes 137) on that industry’s operations. Having an immediate gauge of audience response, (and from their most
dedicated audience members, at that) is an unprecedented power of the television industry. In addition, Ellen Seiter in her essay “Television and New Media Audiences” notes that:

> television networks are exploiting email and Internet communications with audiences to gain feedback on script or character changes, to compile mailing lists for licensed products relating to shows, and to publicize tie-in merchandise. (119)

This new and extraordinary power available to the television industry via fan feedback is truly revolutionary for gauging audience reaction and desires, thus granting the industry the control and ability to manipulate their actions likewise and profit from the feedback accordingly.

Armed with this information and these capabilities by way of the internet, producers and advertisers are at an extreme advantage, it would appear. For producers to have obtained this sort of access and insight is an implicit invitation for the industry to exercise control over such information. Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* notes that “[i]nitially the computer offered more spaces for media consumption and it was easy for media companies to commodify and control what took place,” but now the “media industry is increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace” (133). He refers to the web primarily as a “site of consumer participation” which generates, unlike printed fan communications before it, “unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media
content” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 133). Despite this optimistic take on web culture and new media possibilities within the realm of fandom, fans are first and foremost consumers, as Jenkins’s language suggests, and the “unauthorized” and “unanticipated” methods of fans are fodder for the media industries above all. New media surely expands and extends the possibilities of fan interaction and the fans’ abilities to have an impact on the actions of the television producers, but producers, as a result, begin to use these newly-accessible opinions for their own marketing purposes. The creative process of fan input into how a show may play out is therefore merely a vehicle for producers to keep the fan engaged as a loyal consumer by feeding him or her what he or she desires to see. Furthermore, the cooperation between television producers and advertisers who place advertisements on television show web pages is resulting in the increasing benefits of more frequent access to the consumer-audience on an unprecedented level. And so the ways in which the internet acts as a revolutionary force on both fan culture and television production (the proliferation and “normalization” of fan practices coupled with how it has changed communication) are also ways in which the television, advertising, and marketing industries have tightened their grip on fans.
Chapter 2. The Shift in Fan Culture: Impacts of the Internet

The theories of participatory culture and collective intelligence along with the recent phenomenon of convergence are the ideas that form the backbone of current fan studies, as they are rather new concepts introduced during the rise of internet culture within the past 15 years. Henry Jenkins is the theorist who most thoroughly confronts these ideas, and he will function as the primary voice in their illumination. Participation, collective intelligence, and convergence are contentious issues with varying definitions and arguments surrounding them; this chapter aims to elucidate them and identify their relationship to commodity culture, in preparation for a thorough analysis of the “Lost Experience” and *The Sopranos* blog.

The concept of a participatory culture developed by Henry Jenkins describes a fan culture comprised of the new, active fans in that they are those who enthusiastically pursue information and materials relating to their object of fandom as well as producing content of their own to participate in a fan culture surrounding that show through fan sites, message boards, and the like. Participatory culture places a great importance on the fan and deemphasizes the power of the media, resulting in a “fan-centric” theory aligned with fans’ interests and accomplishments. In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, Henry Jenkins writes about the concept of an “interactive audience” which is “more than a marketing concept and less than a ‘semiotic democracy’” (134). This “interactive audience” is a direct result of internet culture, as “interactivity” and “participation” both refer to the amount of media and interactive possibilities available to consumers and fans.
as they follow a series. He writes that audiences are gaining “greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture;” in other words, they are putting these multiple media platforms to good use in broadening the scope and definition of fandom—making it available to much larger amounts of people and being creative in their uses of internet spaces—thus resulting in a more sophisticated method of influencing the media industries. If large numbers of fans are involved in certain initiatives, it is impossible, or, at least, would not be prudent, for the media industries to look the other way. Consequently, interactivity and participation are more sophisticated than marketing concepts, as Jenkins states, and yet not quite a knowledge “democracy” fueled by these fans.

Convergence, the second concept, on a basic material level refers to the changing nature of technology and new technological innovations such as the smart phone or TiVo, in which multiple technologies are combined to form one device with multiple functions. The “smart” devices are prime channels through which media move, and therefore play an extensive role in the transmission of television shows and related media. Convergence, however, is not just a “technological shift,” as Jenkins has it; it also refers to the “relation between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences,” and it “changes the way media industries operate and how media consumers process news and entertainment” (Convergence 16). He posits that convergence occurs both from the top down and from the bottom up, and that consumers are “fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture”—hence the association of participation
with convergence (Jenkins, *Convergence* 16). Participation\(^1\) goes hand in hand with a
discussion of convergence culture as convergence operates on both a technological and a
fan-to-producer relationship level. Jenkins refers to the “power of participation” in fan
culture measured against mainstream media, which is to write over mainstream culture,
ampend it, expand it, and “add greater diversity of perspective, then [recirculate] it and
[feed] it back to the mainstream” (*Convergence* 256) as mainstream media looks more
and more to the products of fan culture to develop marketing strategies and the
progression of a series. Convergence, then, is a concept representative of an era and a
cultural shift as well as a technological one, a cultural shift characterized by increased
participation of consumers in their “culture” (a prime example of a cultural force being
the television industry). Participation resulting from convergence is a force in conflict
with, or resistant to, the mainstream in its carving out of creative spaces for community
development and its free manipulation of show content for fans’ own purposes. In
Jenkins’s view, the power of these grassroots uses of media is to diversify culture, and
the power of the broadcast media is that it amplifies these efforts in its appropriation of
fan activity for wider purposes. Thus, participation can also be seen as working in
tandem with the mainstream media for both parties’ advantage.

Participation in the era of convergence means increased interaction by way of the
internet with the industries and markets Jenkins refers to, the greatest and most
significant development of the convergence era. The internet itself accurately represents

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\(^1\) Participation will hereafter be used as Jenkins’s conception of the term.
both facets of convergence, the technological phenomenon and the social phenomenon. Technologically, the internet has revolutionized communication in the obvious ways of moving printed text to online locations and increasing the accessibility of such communication a tremendous amount; socially, the internet has revolutionized the ways in which people communicate with each other not only rapidly and in a variety of ways, but also for extended periods of time (I refer here to instant messaging, chat rooms, etc.) while simultaneously surfing the web. Convergence and participation, then, go hand in hand in their newness and their interrelatedness on the level of communication. These relationships enabled by internet culture are central to the shift in media industry practices, and participation is that which makes use of convergence culture and changes the landscape of fan culture as a direct result.

But these changes brought about by convergence culture serve not just to accelerate fan culture, which is arguably a positive outcome; they most definitely bring fans closer to big media industries in a way that commodifies them according to industry desires. Matthew Creamer writes in Advertising Age that:

As proliferation of digital channels makes content long limited to your boob tube available on a range of devices from your iPod to your laptop, the ad industry is undergoing a semantic shift that’s ousting broadcast TV as its central organizing principle. (1)

Though a simple enough quote, it reveals that the “semantic shift,” in other words, reorganizing the mode in which advertisers present themselves to their consumer
audience, is very much seeking out methods outside of television in order more fully to encompass the possible market for the advertisements. This inevitably includes the internet, since “every ad agency is trying to structure itself to produce more digital content and escape the box of the 30-second spot” (Creamer 1) in order to take advantage of this new internet audience. Thus, convergence and participation lead to fans’ greater involvement and immersion in advertisements and big media, not exactly a resistant fan practice or a way for fans to exert influence on these same industries. The concepts of convergence and participation, then, are inherently flawed if one goes by the rather euphoric definition Jenkins provides, in that there is an incorrect assumption about the diminishing power of the media industry when confronted with an increase in participation.

Blogging is a representative of the relationship of convergence to fan participation and, as I will add shortly, the theory of collective intelligence. Jenkins writes that “entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities and reinventing themselves for an era of media convergence and collective intelligence” (Jenkins, Convergence 20). Blogging is one of these models from which “entrenched institutions” such as the television industry are taking cues. At a most basic level, for example, producers started blogs of their own with the knowledge that blogs are one of the most effective ways to garner participation from fans. These media² institutions must “reinvent themselves,” it is supposed from this point of view, according to the standards

² “Media” will always refer to the television and advertising media.
of those utilizing the products of convergence (fans). Blogging, then, involves elements of both convergence and participation, convergence because of its changing of the relation between fans themselves and fans and television producers, and participation as a result of its production through the efforts (primarily) of fans who are engaged online consistently to communicate with other fans and engage with the text of the show.

Bloggers are also ideal examples of those who have inspired the theory of collective intelligence, the third concept, through their participation with new media and “convergence-era” communication. Collective intelligence, as defined by Jenkins, refers to “knowledge communities [that] form around mutual intellectual interest and work to form new knowledge often in realms where no traditional expertise exists” (Jenkins, Gamers 20). He posits that culture is becoming more and more based on this concept of collective intelligence (Jenkins, Convergence 129), and blogging is one of the media through which such “knowledge communities” are developed. In light of collective intelligence, bloggers “take knowledge into their own hands,” Jenkins states, and “navigate within and between emerging knowledge cultures” (Jenkins, Gamers 129). They are, in a way, creators of knowledge within the arena of fan culture which is then sometimes translated into mainstream media, thus navigating with surprising fluency between the knowledge culture of fandom and that of the mainstream media.

Increased participation with things like blogging communities and fan activity in general is seen here as a sort of resistant practice (resistant to mainstream media) or, at least, as a practice which will work as a sort of give and take with the television industry:
fans will give the industry what they desire in the way of viewing habits and consumption while the industry will respond with material tailored to the fans’ desires. In this vein, Jenkins refers to this increased participation as a “politics of participation” which “assumes that we may have greater collective bargaining power if we form consumption communities” (Jenkins, Convergence 243). The “combined expertise of grassroots communities” (Jenkins, Convergence 129) like fan blogs acts as an acceleration of participation which exercises authorship and creation, effectively appropriating content produced by mainstream media but using it for the purposes of fandom. However, behavior such as blogging “can be seen as cooption into commodity culture insofar as it sometimes collaborates with corporate interests,” but from the fans’ point of view, “it also increases diversity of media commodity culture more responsive to consumers” (Jenkins, Gamers 151).

Blogger culture is a good example of Jenkins’s faith in the power of knowledge communities; he posits:

Emergent knowledge cultures never fully escape the influence of the commodity culture, any more than commodity culture can totally function outside the constraints of territoriality…but knowledge cultures will gradually alter the way commodity culture operates. (Gamers 122)

This passage harks back to the discussion of blogging as a possible collaboration with the media industries, but because this partial cooptation into commodity culture is something Jenkins takes as an inevitability, what is more significant to him is the power of the
collective intelligence in these knowledge communities to alter the way producers and marketers function and relate to their fans. The commodities in which fans invest, in this vein, “become resources for the production of meaning” (Jenkins, *Gamers* 122) instead of tools of the marketers, and the relationships such as “authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpretations will blend to form a reading-writing continuum…each will help to sustain the activities of the others” (Jenkins, *Gamers* 122) instead of mutual exclusivity. In other words, these knowledge communities will work together with the media industry to form a symbiotic relationship where both parties benefit. The media industry is losing control according to the models of accelerated participation and the strength of collective intelligence put forth by Jenkins.

This view of blogging as participation in collective intelligence communities—those who stand up to mainstream media—has its limits, however, one of which is its close connection to media convergence. The media industry has taken advantage of these new ways of doing business to such a degree that it has surpassed the ingenuity of fans who were at the forefront of these new internet communities that have inspired such business practices. In *Marketing Week*, Andrew Walmsley echoes Jenkins’s position that fans are consistently at the forefront of new media technologies when he writes that “millions of people are way ahead of us marketers in the way they use the internet. (1, 2) and that “[c]onsumers are so far ahead of the industry, they’re almost over the horizon—and they’re not coming back” (1). Because of this, the media industries respond in kind; they in no way become subservient to or equal to these individuals in collective
intelligence communities. This passage from Walmsley only serves to support the idea that the reason these companies are noting consumer use of technological advances is to build strategy for advancing themselves in order to benefit from the alternate routes of revenue possibilities. Walmsley writes:

[2006] will see broadband continue to grow, and with it, internet use. We are seeing the start of TV migrating from broadcast to the internet, of personal communication to the internet, of economic power to the internet. And with it, the creation of a generation that hardly sees the ads that found traditional media and underpin the marketing industry. (2)

The producers, advertisers and marketers are therefore searching constantly for new ways of turning a profit in this new place of “economic power,” not for new ways of pleasing fans. That the industry’s search for a profit happens to please fans as well should not translate into the industry desiring to please fans for no good economic reason.

The solution for marketers and advertisers, then, is a simple one; follow the consumer. And, through interpretation of Walmsley’s piece, this is exactly what the industry prepares for. He further writes on the issue that “if [the industry is] willing to jump, the stakes couldn’t be higher: move too early and you lose your shirt, too late and you lose your business” (2), illustrating the high stakes involved in not taking advantage of the internet. Moving too late will mean that other companies will have claimed the territory ahead of time and gathered to them the ever-desirable dedicated consumers. Because “[p]ractically everyone a marketer really wants to talk to—and finds
increasingly hard to access through conventional media—is using the internet” (Walmsley 1), the marketers and advertisers have simply follow them there in order to take advantage of the consumer base.

In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins writes of how eagerly media industries are beginning to embrace convergence (129) for three reasons in particular. First, “convergence-based strategies exploit advantages of media conglomeration” (Convergence 129), Jenkins writes, making the media industry more powerful. Next, convergence “creates multiple ways of selling content” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 129), rendering the consumer/fan more susceptible to marketing campaigns and advertisements which treat the fan more as a consumer and less as an independent entity. Convergence, through these multiple avenues, is also “cement[ing] consumer loyalty at a time when fragmentation of the marketplace and file sharing threaten old ways of doing business” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 243). At the same time the current age of the internet is perpetuating fragmentation of the marketplace and changing the way business with audiences is being done, the media industry is responding with their own utilization of technological convergence in an attempt to counteract any edge they would lose in these new ways of doing business. “As some media erode and others develop,” Walmsley writes, “it’s life or death for the brands that depend on them, and the ability to use media innovatively is a source of real competitive advantage” (1). Thus, the interest in the fan or consumer online is restricted to commodity exchange only; the industries have little to no interest in fan activity as Jenkins would like to believe, besides the fact that they are
occupying internet spaces and because they do so, the marketers and advertisers rush there in order to profit and exploit that space, not to engage in a friendly exchange of information and power-sharing. Though the fans may be a step (or several) ahead of marketers technologically speaking, the media remain ahead of the game in terms of commodifying those who engage with those technologies. The effects of what Jenkins terms “collective bargaining power” of collective intelligence communities and increased participation seem minimal and almost futile when met with the literal plans of marketers and advertisers who are vying to occupy internet spaces only to collect what capital they can in the largest quantities possible. What bargaining power can be left fans who remain loyal to objects of fandom controlled by media giants, first of all, and what influence can be left fans who, second of all, are engaging in participation which is to play exactly into the hands of the marketers and advertisers attempting to “woo” consumers to their online spaces? Collective bargaining power seems minimal, at best.

In *Convergence Culture* Jenkins argues against this contention, however, with discussions of both participation and the role of collective intelligence in taming the power of the media industries. He contests the debate on the “frightening power of big media” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 129) backed by such thinkers as Noam Chomsky, Mark Crispin Miller, and more, who talk of the threat of big media companies using “weapons of mass deception” to influence the public. These thinkers, Jenkins posits “fail to acknowledge the complexity of the public’s relationship to popular culture” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 129). He references here especially the significance of collective
intelligence and the power of fans to band together and influence the workings of the media industry through their numbers and fan activities (blogging, fansites, etc.) which retain in themselves the ability to move the decisions of the media industries in their direction. The arguments about the “weapons of mass deception,” then, do not hold water for Jenkins, especially in this new participatory culture where fans have the ability, thanks to the power of the internet, to play a role in creating their own media culture in communities of “collective intelligence” where fans pool together their cognitive resources to form a “moral economy of information,” as Jenkins calls it.

But the “frightening power of big media” is something Jenkins evidently underestimates. While the media may no longer function as such a site of concentrated power due to the proliferation of alternate media sources such as the internet, Jenkins makes his claims about participatory culture and collective intelligence in a way which neglects the very real presence of the power of the media industry in these online spaces which, to Jenkins, are more heavily controlled by the power of fans. The ability of collective intelligence to influence the media industry in any significant or quantifiable way is questionable at best, given the presence of big media in every aspect of online activity. Therefore Jenkins’s ready dismissal of Chomsky’s and Miller’s concerns is problematic, considering the still-powerful reign of big media via advertising and web presence within the communities Jenkins discusses. In fact, the very fact that the objects of fandom themselves that serve as the basis for these fan communities are produced by big media is grounds for challenging Jenkins’s optimism.
Jenkins also posits that media are beginning to fail, as a result of participatory culture and collective intelligence, at controlling and reining in fan activity (their interest in this being, of course, to retain a monopoly over the material). He somewhat subscribes to the philosophy of big media industries as manipulative, but he believes this with reserve, since he also remains a staunch supporter of the idea that fans’ participation, at this moment in cultural and technological history, is becoming more and more of an influence on how media industries do their business. Big media industries since their inception aimed to exert control over fans, to the extent that they can, and “restrict competing interpretations from fan communities impoverish[es] culture” (Jenkins, Convergence 256). Because fandom was originally a sort of underground practice, big media industries were on the lookout for any sort of infringement on the part of fans and did not appreciate fans’ appropriation of producers’ material for their own purposes. Now, within the era of convergence, appropriation of fan practices is possible on an incredibly magnified scale, and performs an even more important cultural role. Thus, on a most basic level, media industries are in contention with fan practices that seek to proliferate and expand upon the meanings produced by those in control, and they threaten the sovereignty that big media industries hold over the control of such content. Jenkins argues in an expansion on his view of the media as in opposition to fan culture that media industries have no choice now but to look to fan culture now for cues as to how to reach fans, as fan culture has gained increasing cultural influence and prominence on the internet. Because television producers in the media industry depend so heavily on the
constant consumption of fans, their most loyal consumers, they have little choice but to please. And of course, because of the expanded influence of these fans in internet culture, media industries have a greater interest in pleasing this demographic. Therefore Jenkins takes a view of media industries which puts them in a position of being somewhat subservient to the fans who consume their material.

The idea, though, that the media industry is losing its grasp on the consumer due to the influence of these knowledge communities is inherently problematic in its assumption that such increased participation coincides with a distancing from the media industry. In fact, it involves a tighter link with the media industry. Alan Breznick in *Cable World* discusses as far back as 1999 in his article “Media Giants Spread Their Tentacles to Develop Web Sites” that “leading cable and broadcast content players on the Internet are frantically scurrying to create even bigger, deeper, more dynamic sites, or collections of related sites, on the Web to woo more consumers and advertisers” (1). Undoubtedly these leading players in the industry gravitated to the web in order to capitalize monetarily, not in order to either entertain fans with more content (without motive) or to develop a more symbiotic relationship with fans, as Jenkins would argue.

There is no guise of catering to fans at all; the clear intentions to “expand in cyberspace” are to exploit new spaces for advertising and marketing. Breznick writes also of companies like CNN who pursued revenue streams via the internet. Scott Woelfull, the then-SVP of CNN and editor-in-chief of CNN Interactive, says that CNN.com’s “continuing surge in advertising revenues…have nearly doubled each year
since its launch in 1995” (Breznick 3), illustrating the material benefit of the internet that these companies were looking for and take advantage of even more in the present day. “Why are these companies so bullish on cyberspace?” Breznick asks. “Because,” he notes, “in an era of largely sagging or stagnant TV ratings, consumers are flocking to the Internet and its leading sites in even greater numbers” (3). Granted, this information does not reflect the TV ratings in recent years, but the quote indeed illustrates the thinking behind following the consumer to the internet in order to benefit materially, and not to cater to those consumers in pure good will. Matthew Creamer adds to this line of argument, writing that:

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Changing the terms of discourse…acknowledges a changing reality, not only in how agencies are organized but also in how the work of reaching consumers has been upended. ‘Broadcast is not dying; broadcast still works,’ said Donna Speciale…‘But we have to follow the consumer to where he or she is getting content.’ (2)
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This passage demonstrates once again the importance of following the consumer due to the changing landscape of media online, and the disregard of the television industry of all things fan-related apart from following them to the web to increase their status as consumers.

Jenkins’s arguments for the power of participation and collective intelligence communities, then, their alleged “collective bargaining power” and influence on the mainstream media, seem to shrink in the face of evidence of the actual thinking behind
the actions of those players putting content on the web. They think in terms of consumption and revenue, not in terms of listening to fans and consumers or splitting the “power” between them. The “listening” and taking cues from fan communities that Jenkins talks about is instead, in light of these advertising articles, a following of the consumer only; the business model is the only concern of these industries; they care about their consumers insofar as they continue consuming and lead the advertisers to the proper space of money-making which is, in the case of the present day, the internet.

Because of this tighter link I mention, the commodification of the fan increases, and the participation upon which theorists like Jenkins depend to establish a fan voice in the mainstream works backward to increase the power of the mainstream industry over the fans.
Chapter 3. The “Lost Experience” and the *The Sopranos* Blog: Two Case Studies

This section will serve as a base from which claims about viral marketing and blogging, in short, specific examples of internet culture and fandom, will be made. The “Lost Experience” viral marketing campaign launched by ABC in 2006 for its television show *Lost* will be the primary example of how viral marketing is altering the dynamic between fans and between producers and fans while *The Sopranos* blog, a fan blog and discussion board covering *The Sopranos*, will act as an example of the television-related section of the blogosphere.

Viral marketing is a phenomenon that demonstrates perhaps the most significant aspect of the revolution of fan and industry interactions. A method of “efforts to expand potential markets across different delivery systems” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 16), viral marketing refers to the ways in which television producers and advertisers use marketing techniques across different media platforms, especially social media, to promote television shows and products. These different media touchpoints can involve anything from text messages to websites, from phone messages to print advertisements. The goals of the media industry with a concept like viral marketing is to “build a long-term relationship with a brand” as well as to use the new models of marketing to “focus on expanding the consumer’s emotional, social, and intellectual investments with the goal of shaping consumption patterns” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 62). With respect to television in particular, viral marketing takes on a storytelling dimension where the “touchpoints”
contain or give access to “missing pieces” to a television show or outside information relating to characters.

Before moving to my case study of the “Lost Experience” which will function as my main example of viral marketing, I want to briefly touch upon an example of an NBC campaign for the 2005 season of Revelations which will be useful in previewing some of the elaborate marketing techniques ABC used for Lost. The phrase “Omnium finis imminent”3 appeared all over (mostly) New York City not just on television, in “cryptic, five-second TV messages that fade in and out” (Finkle 1), but on physical objects throughout the city and the internet. Described as “a tough show to sum up in a 30-second spot” (Finkle 1), the marketing campaign featured some very non-traditional and multi-media elements as characteristic of a viral campaign. Finkle writes that:

The show’s ad blitz began in mid February, when NBC marketing guerillas wrote the ominous phrase in chalk graffiti along riverbanks, trash cans, outside buildings and on sidewalks in cities nationwide. They took photos of their handiwork, then posted those images on the Internet (2) Already we can see the lengths to which marketers will go in this new convergence culture, as Jenkins terms it, in order to get the attention of consumers in a multi-media environment.

3 The end is near (roughly). The show was a combination of elements from The Da Vinci Code and other such apocalyptic, popular texts.
An integral part of viral marketing, too, is word-of-mouth, or, as it is now, word-of-mouth through internet communication, about these bits of information in order to reach a wider audience; the Revelations campaign, then, had good results. For Finkle writes that:

[...]he oblique promos have spawned tens of thousands of internet postings, as well as two mentions in The New York Times. Bloggers posted the photos on hundreds of Web sites, prompting vigorous debates over their significance. While many online users suspected that the phrases must be part of a big marketing campaign, few were able to connect the dots to NBC or Revelations. (2)

These debates, blog entries, and photos are the exact result producers and advertisers look for; this means that their campaigns produce an effect, and the magnitude of the effect in this case mean that those industries were especially successful with their message.

As we will see with the “Lost Experience,” the dissemination of this information on the part of fans, the mystery that is perpetuated in order to draw more people in, is crucial to keep the consumer engaged. In this way, interest is peaked and maintained, and the consumer tries to make sense of what is a seemingly random series of bits of content, but what is actually a “carefully orchestrated effort” (Finkle 2) that is, very significantly, “designed to attract viewers who usually ignore ads” (2). Viral marketing, then, becomes a very effective instrument at not only further engaging fans of a show, but
also in effectively establishing content-based, instead of ad-based, relationships with those potential consumers who would otherwise avoid pointed advertisements.

The “Lost Experience,” launched in the United States in 2006 in tandem with ABC’s show *Lost*, is another example of a marketing campaign which better illustrates a multi-media campaign. During the television show’s second season, companies such as Sprite, Jeep, Verizon, and monster.com sponsored elements of the marketing campaign. The elements included fictional websites, television and newspaper advertisements, YouTube videos, and more, all comprising either parts of the series back story, adding to the show’s narrative, or focusing on some aspect of a fictional character. Clearly, then, for one to find out everything one can about a show, this typically being the goal of a fan, he or she must participate in this campaign to be apprised of the most recent happenings and missing pieces. This is an especially clever method for a show like *Lost*, whose complex and nearly baffling narrative structure lends itself well to outside explorations of the narrative and accompanying trivia.

The significant issue with respect to viral marketing and fan culture is the conflation of the artistic features of the show with advertising efforts. In this way, the television industry, along with the companies that advertise, have access to increasing amounts of attention from audiences. In addition to merely watching the show and viewing the commercials, advertisers can now have contact with audiences many more times even within a single day and across a wide variety of media. As a result, the television show builds a more intricate and intimate relationship with its audience over a
short span of time (presumably within the season) while the advertisers enjoy the benefits of multiple “touchpoints.”

Claire Atkinson, in her article “Getting Creative with Web Games,” goes into detail about the economic and marketing strategies behind these touchpoints in the context of viral marketing and, specifically, the “Lost Experience.” Significantly, she writes that:

Must-see, bite-sized content, rather than bland promotions for new episodes, is what advertisers have been seeking as the world of multiplatform programming explodes. ABC gave fans and marketers alike the “Lost Experience,” a giant web game aimed at extending the “Lost” story line from the small screen to the third screen. Mr. Benson and the ABC sales department tapped numerous marketers for help in support of one of the most ambitious viral-marketing strategies in modern TV history

(1)

This passage reveals the trend toward attracting attention with “bite-sized content” which requires, initially, less effort on the part of the viewer and then, on the side of the marketer or advertiser, more of a chance that the person who sees that snippet will at the very least have his or her attention grabbed. If not just that, he or she will want to find out more.

In this same piece, Mr. Benson, the senior vice president of marketing at ABC, says along these lines, “I’m looking at marketing more like content,” referring to the
current trend, especially in viral marketing efforts, at conflating content and advertisements/marketing materials (Atkinson 1). He further states:

We have got to find other ways to engage beyond the typical promo. If we can take the program, explore the stories and perpetuate the mystery…it furthers the relationship with the audience. (2)

The bite-sized content of viral marketing campaigns, then, are one way to “engage beyond the typical promo” in that it grabs the attention of viewers and establishes a mystery before the viewer even knows what is being marketed.

Much like the reference to the eradication or, at least, the avoidance of the 30-second spot in the interest of new, dynamic strategies that fit with this new audience of convergence culture, this statement references the way content will serve the fan in that it will provide him or her with information (or, in the case of a viral marketing game, clues) while it provides advertisers and marketers a simultaneous “in” with that audience.

Benson talks about the way in which they aim to “[craft] content, and…work with the sales department and…integrate them with the original marketing materials” (2). Using this method, advertisers retain the ability to lure potential consumers in a type of guise (the content) while presenting them with a product for sale, thus involving them more closely in the commodification process.

The necessity of engaging the viewer/consumer before he or she knows what is being sold is crucial to this new method of advertising. James Finkle in Broadcasting and Cable transcribes an NBC executive’s insistence that:
People are so overloaded with messages... The truth is that, when you speak to them, you shouldn’t even be talking about what you are selling.

You’ve got to open a dialogue first. (2)

The consequences of this integration of content with advertisements are dire in light of the reputation between fans and the industry, once again. Making content indistinguishable from the attempts of the industry to draw in and make money off of these fans as they consume content and participate in web games is at once manipulative and foreboding in terms of fan culture, for once that content becomes one with advertising and marketing, the fans will remain completely at the mercy of the industry and able to make no choices of their own.

The “Lost Experience” is a literal embodiment of attempts at branding and marketing, the branding here specifically being that of ABC, the television network itself, as well as Lost. Marketers and advertisers achieve the important emotional impact through the alternate reality game’s\(^4\) (ARG) relation to the intimate details of the character’s lives and the idea that those who will invest time in the game are those who are emotionally involved with these characters. Additionally, those who enjoy the pursuit of information outside the scope of the actual show’s viewing time presumably feel a keen attachment to the show and an investment in the turn of events. Thus, they have amplified interaction with the show’s narrative via internet clues and plot details that will

\(^4\) An alternate reality game is a multi-media game involving multiple media platforms in which the player is expected to participate in order to receive content and interact with other players. These platforms can include such media as television, internet, video games, books, print and online advertisements, and more.
ideally (for the marketers and advertisers) result in intensified engagement with the show. The idea that a brand must “extend across as many media as possible” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 62) is directly addressed by the ARG, for the “Lost Experience” involved fictional websites, television and newspaper advertisements, YouTube videos, phone messages, and other such media channels, consequentially making the material accessible through nearly every information channel available. Undoubtedly, the more “touchpoints” the better, the “Lost Experience” takes advantage of nearly every touchpoint available, thus fueling its success (Jenkins, *Convergence* 62).

Those viewers and fans who chase down clues and narrative additions by way of different touchpoints support Jenkins’s third point in successful brand-building, the “exploiting of multiple contacts” between the producer, ABC (in addition to the company’s advertising) and the consumers, or fans. Because the “channel of distribution,” in this case the television, “is no longer the defining aspect of the content that travels through it” (Jenkins, *Gamers* 179) in this convergence culture, both television producers and advertisers are choosing to reinvent themselves through these viral marketing campaigns to stay relevant. *Lost* in particular is conducive to these new forms of advertising and has consequently garnered one of the largest viewerships on television and millions of participants in the “Lost Experience.” In *Convergence Culture* Jenkins emphasizes that “non-linear storytelling” is perfect for the the “extending [of] narrative possibilities” and “perfect for multi-media platforms” (114) which is directly applicable to *Lost*’s extremely complex methods of narration.
To further illustrate the advantage of websites in reaching potential viewers and consumers like those involved with the “Lost Experience,” John Caldwell writes in his essay “Convergence Television” of the most effective television websites, those that “keep viewers engaged long after a new series episode has aired” (51). In this way, the sites “expand the notion of what a television text is” (Caldwell 51), involving the fan in as many (the important thing is that there are more) interactions beyond the show as possible. These interactions attach value to the events and encourage the fan to see the show as a phenomenon rather than an isolated event on a television.

As desired by the marketers at ABC and the advertisers associated with Lost, “fan sites have metastasized all over the internet” in addition to the officially-produced content of the “Experience” (Atkinson 2). Atkinson references the videos that have also multiplied on YouTube.com; it listed (in 2006) 242 “Lost Experience” videos and “[a]s of mid-August, one site had attracted an astounding 24,000 views” (Atkinson 2). This, I maintain, is a most significant result in favor of big media. The passage reveals a sort of ecstatic pleasure in the amount of fan activity Lost generated (and is still generating), a pleasure not produced by contentedness in the fans’ enjoyment of the content, but in how they are promulgating and advertising, in their own way, the content and, in turn, advertisements and marketing strategy of the industry itself, since we have now established the conflation of content with marketing and advertising efforts. In the eyes of the industry, then, this is the best possible result; fans becoming even more integrated with big media as a result of, initially, the blur of content and advertising, and then the
sharing of this content with limitless amounts of other people. Hence the “viral” aspect of viral marketing; the ultimate goal is for as many people to participate as possible, resulting in a widespread communications effect much like the rapid spreading of a virus. Participation, then, takes on a whole new meaning in this context, for it is not the fan-centric participation of Jenkins, but a participation which feeds on, revolves around, and makes money for the media industry.

The “Lost Experience” itself boasts a “viral” presence in almost every media context, three optimal examples being thehansofoundation.org, a fake website in the guise of the Hanso Foundation in the show, a fictional careers site based on the show, hansocareers.com, and Letyourcompassguideyou.com, an official “Lost Experience” website sponsored by Jeep. The Hanso Foundation on Lost is a fictional foundation that deals in sophisticated weapons development. It funded The Dharma Initiative, a research project discovered to have taken place on the island before the plane crash. The Hanso Foundation in the “Experience” has its own website for players that is uncannily realistic. A statement from Alvar Hanso, the founder, greets you on the main page. The statement, accompanied by the professional-looking Hanso Foundation logo, prepares the site’s visitors for “a period of restructuring and overhaul” so the Foundation can continue its work to “build a future that can support, enrich, and cradle us all in peace and joy” (Hanso 1). As the site is merely a dummy, there is no link to get “inside” the site, but the illusion of the Hanso Foundation remains. The statement also reveals information
involving other characters and events on the show that fans were intended to look at for clues.

Related to this site is hansocareers.com which takes the “Experience” one step further in introducing an advertising sponsor, monster.com. The familiar “powered by Monster” logo rests in the bottom right corner of the page, and the site itself is structured like the Monster site, prompting you to “see where you fit within the Hanso family” (Careers 1). Offering such job locations as Copenhagen, Iceland, and Santa Barbara, hansocareers.com provides visitors with job listings in advertising/marketing/public relations, biotechnology, pharmaceutical, and other fields, in addition to job descriptions and requirements found when clicking on the links. A message from Hanso indicates that they are “looking for hardworking employees like you—people who share our goal to do nothing less than make the world a better place” (Careers 1). The similarity of the site to Monster and the actual link with Monster is obviously intended to get players to visit Monster itself as they search for jobs; therefore, while Monster provides the money for Lost’s promotion through the “Lost Experience” sites, Monster’s goal is to profit as well through advertising their own site and gaining more visitors who utilize their services.

A third example is Letyourcompassguideyou.com which is a clue-gathering site sponsored by Jeep. The purpose of this site, first revealed in a Hanso Foundation commercial, is to provide players with clues found by typing in specific codes while using a compass—the compass being the actual Jeep logo—to navigate around the site. In order to yield these clues, importantly, one must pass through a series of Jeep
references whether they be the Jeep logo barely visible, a link to jeep.com, or an advertisement for Jeep disguised in a fake e-mail message to a Hanso employee which appears after typing in a code (Compass 1). Similar to the Monster site, the Jeep site combines the content of the “Lost Experience” game with advertisements for Jeep, which shows the intricate nature of viral marketing with relation to advertisers—the fan remains pleased with newfound information while the advertisers simultaneously turn a profit.

The web of fictional information woven by the “Experience” is indisputably complex and intricate, illustrating the lengths television producers will now go to engage viewers. Television producers have responded to this new internet-based culture of information with new and innovative ways to keep their current viewership and garner additional viewers. It also fulfills the requirement of engagement in a more enhanced way through appealing to fans’ involvement with characters; with the type of ARG such as the “Lost Experience,” fans are made to feel as if they are more involved in the events of the show and, more importantly, they are made to feel that if they do not participate, they will be missing something crucial. Such is the thought behind viral marketing campaigns, and the success is proven by the number of individuals who are willing to chase down these pieces of outside information for what they know is a fictional show.

This process of conflating content with advertising and molding more dedicated consumers, then, is the ultimate commodification of fans. The increasingly “active” consumer/fans involved in these viral marketing campaigns, while fully participating in an involved and expertly rendered artistic sort of puzzle, are also enhancing their status as
ideal consumers and strengthening their commitment to participate in the very commodity culture they seek to challenge through their own artistic pursuits of fan fiction, message boards, blogging, and the like. Essentially, viral marketing is a monopolization of both attention and time. Whether or not this fits into Jenkins’s positive model of the “active” fan is clearly debatable, then, as this is fully compatible with the goals of the media industry.

While viral marketing results in an intensification of fan participation (the culture of the internet making these “alternate reality” games accessible to millions) it simultaneously intensifies the interaction between the producers and the consumers in an exploitative way. In *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* Jenkins discusses the marketing concept of “reach” which is the “number of people with exposure to a particular advertisement” (17); through the internet and viral marketing “reach” comes to its full potential, contacting the largest amount of people as can be done with any contemporary technology. As a result, it is quite apparent that producers view increased and intensified fan activity as materially beneficial, and therefore a negation on the fans’ side of any sort of pure artistic or creative motives.

In *Broadcasting & Cable*, Anne Becker illustrates how invested the television industry is in turning a profit from online spaces by discussing the “digital evangelists” of ABC. The article focuses on the “five member team” “to help bring content to new platforms and better integrate digital media into the company” (1). This team eventually went on to create the “Lost Experience” which was very timely, as the team was created
just “as major media companies scramble to organize their digital strategies and get their broadcast divisions with the program” (Becker 1). Becker goes on to lay out ABC’s plan for the spring of that year, which was to “to lure viewers to its site with free, ad-supported content” (1). Becker writes that “[t]en advertisers will participate in the trial, which will offer new ad models, such as allowing users a choice between viewing a spot and playing an ad-sponsored game” (2). This article contains several implications about the nature of the relationship between industries and fans. Namely, the idealistic view of Jenkins on the symbiotic nature of that relationship is challenged; the creation of an entire team based on figuring out how to best market content and integrate advertisements into these online (fan-occupied) spaces is testament to the disinterestedness of the industry in fan practices, but their overwhelming interest in monetary gain from these fans. Additionally, the promise of free web content, while seen on the surface as a gesture towards making things more tolerable for fans and viewers (i.e. no material claim on them), but is in fact a way to “lure” them into watching advertisements, from which advertisers obviously profit. Therefore, though it may be disguised, as Becker writes, as a game, it is an elaborate masking of the workings of the industry which seeks only to capitalize on fans’ dedication and enthusiasm, much like elaborate viral marketing campaigns. Atkinson writes tellingly, after all, that:

For advertisers that did tie in with the “Lost Experience,” the most important question when the game winds up in October will be not ‘Did they pick up the clues?’ but ‘Did they get my message, too? (2)
We can see illustrated in this quote the prevailing importance of “getting the message” to producers and advertisers instead of any sort of relationship-building exercises with fans.

The phenomenon of television show blogging is quite a different discussion in that viral marketing campaigns and ARGs such as “The Lost Experience” are in pursuit of viewers and participants who will dedicate themselves to additional components of a show and by way of this come in contact with advertisements, while on the other hand, television blogs focus on a discussion of the show in question throughout the week in between the airing of the show. This blogging aims to involve the fans in a critical conversation about the show, thus engaging a fan’s powers of observation and analysis. The most distinguishing factor about blogging, though, as it stands up to the viral marketing discussion, is the bloggers themselves who are frequently fans of the show, thus shifting the focus from viral marketing, where the producers are at the helm, to the fans themselves who are producers of the blogs. The situation becomes sticky, however, as blogs are increasingly tied to or produced by news organizations or other official media establishments. I select the two phenomena of viral marketing and blogging, however, because they both have revolutionized fan culture through the internet and they both exist as a draw to fans and a way for fans to become more “active” in pursuit of their object of fandom.

Viral marketing, then, is revolutionary in its pressure on fans to hunt for extra outside information, inextricable, again, from advertising and marketing stratagems, and enact a sort of fitting together of the “missing pieces” of the show. In this way fans are
deeply involved with the fine points and elaborate storylines and feel more connected than those who choose not to participate (who would not, then, be classified as true “fans”). Blogging makes fans more “active” in that they analyze and engage themselves with the material of the show, executing an actual processing of the show beyond merely acting as a viewer. Furthermore, they spend a great deal of time engaging with the material specifically with other fans, a more interactive process than, say, the “Lost Experience,” and fans can therefore contribute to the world of fandom surrounding that particular show with heavy involvement in the blogging community. More importantly, too, bloggers exercise authorship and participate in a creative community, expressing anything from love for the show, to frustration with events, to criticism of the writer’s treatment of a character, to advice on how a certain plotline or character relationship should be handled. This expression of a creative voice is of the utmost importance; for the purposes of blogging, though, it should be noted that this authorship is what the fans consider an expression of pure fandom, affection, and unsullied involvement with a show. The difficulty lies, however, as stated previously, in blogging’s relation to media industries.

The Sopranos blog at http://forums.thesopranos.com will serve as my example of fans in the blogosphere. Posted on and moderated by fans only\(^5\), this blog began with the inception of the series and continues now, into 2009, though with infrequent posts. The posts range from questions for discussion to debates about episodes, from character

\(^5\) The moderators are (handles) TheLastDon, malastrega, and uno.
analysis to rumors and news about actors on the show or future events of the show. The
general forum also includes “episode guides” for each season, a section for
announcements, and even a section for “off-topic discussions” about everything from
other television shows to politics. This blog illustrates my contention about the
participatory nature of fandom and its benefits in the face of big media industries; the
deepth and breadth of the blog shows the level of commitment involved in the blog and the
amount of time apparently involved in the upkeep and maintenance of such a space. The
salient issue with respect to commodification is the visibility incurred by a space like this
one. In other words, not only is this blog a top hit in a Google search, rendering it very
visible to television producers looking to see what is happening with regard to the
reception of their show, its visibility also allows marketers and advertisers an inside look
at what consumers want from the show and where the consumer is going for information
and content (Sopranos 1).

Blogging in general, I want to propose, is not a method of resistant participation
but a way for the media industry to tighten its grip on fans in its ability to track them
down and view their every move and listen in, so to speak, on their every discussion.
And consequently, because of the participatory culture Jenkins discusses which boasts an
exponential increase in fan activity all over the internet, these fan practices become even
more prevalent and prominent online since there are so many participants and so many
blogs, and thus, they are more easily seen and monitored by those in control of the fan
objects themselves.
The issue of time spent on the blog outside of the show itself each week is one which connects the blogging phenomenon to that of viral marketing, as it raises the issues of the active fan, the commodification of the fans’ time, and fandom visibility. The new, more active fan embodies this activity in several ways; one is active pursuit of show-related commodities, another is the amount of time a fan spends between shows engaging with that show’s material. The blogging phenomenon by fans is truly a manifestation of this new, “active” fandom as a result of the internet; the actual large-scale discussion of the shows in a visible, public cultural space is a phenomenon wholly new and different from past practices of print-based fandom. From the industry standpoint, however, the amount of time fans spend engaging with the material of the show outside of its airing is an important factor. The more widespread visibility of fan activity spurred on by blogging is that which does the most significant work with respect to the media industry; in other words, because of the prevalence of blog entries (see again the blog entries inspired by *Revelations*) on the web, fans are providing additional ways for the advertisements and marketing strategies of the producers to reach untold amounts of people. In a way, this dissemination and circulation of content and hype on the part of the fans does the work of the industry, thus aligning fan culture with the very industry that it seeks to position itself against.

The industry is focused on emotional investment as well as on fan-to-fan word of mouth, or, in the case of the internet, a huge presence accessible by millions at once. So, while fans feel more involved with both of these endeavors, their own enthusiasm works
against them (providing, of course, they adhere to the purported model of resistant to industry). A perhaps less obvious way the industry becomes involved is via the time involved in fans’ pursuit of internet fandom activities such as ARGs and blogging. While pre-internet fan culture still involved the dedication of a great deal of time outside of the show’s airing and even after the completion of a series, the internet has provided an additional forum (and in fact has usurped the initial forum of print fanzines) in which to spend time. Some even argue that the actual nature of the shows are more conducive to both viral marketing and other outside information-gathering activities; in his “Convergence Television,” John Caldwell claims that The Sopranos’s complex narrative is one that fans want to follow outside of the show (95), and the same, of course, could be said for Lost. Though this can be true at a basic level, the import of time spent engaging with the show in the context of commodity culture indicates that these fans are more susceptible to advertising campaigns. Indeed, the internet is an entirely new landscape advertisers have learned to navigate over the past decade, but television fans are a particular breed of consumers which have more to offer advertising companies because of their investment in particular shows which funnel that specific set of consumers to the appropriate advertisers. Fan participation, then, is integral to the extension of more complex marketing efforts. Now that fan culture is so highly visible on the internet, the model of resistant fandom is challenged by a model of fans who remain much more susceptible to marketers and advertisers.
There remain those, however, who are adamant in their contention that the growing internet activity is a sign of more fan sovereignty over industry and an enhancement of a fan culture “voice” as marketers look more and more to fan culture for cues as to how to conduct themselves to please their “loyals.” But again, more and more evidence shows that fans are being commodified for their high level of dedication and interest instead of being respected and “listened” to. Where is this voice of fandom in, say, the situation Thomas Claburn outlines in his article “Tune In To The Net,” the situation in which ABC offers free episodes of Lost online in 2006. Whereas fans previously had to pay $1.99 for a Lost or Desperate Housewives episode on iTunes, they can now access them for free online (Claburn 1). The price? Watching advertisements.

With respect to online airings of TV episodes (these specific ones costing money, even), Michael Learmonth writes in his piece “Distributors, Networks Push for More Ads in TV Shows Online” that “The networks and distributors putting TV online are facing some tough economics” since they have to pay for hosting and bandwidth, and “[e]ven if they’re selling ads at a healthy $35 to $50 cost per thousand, there just aren’t enough of them to pay the bills” (1). As a result, the industry pushes for more advertisements in the shows online, resulting in a disregard for fans and a commodification of fans’ attempt to revolutionize the relationships between them and the industry via internet spaces. For, though the fans succeed, in some respect, in making the industry and networks cater to their web habits, they in the end lose out to the advertisers and networks, who refuse to allow them free content without exploiting them as consumers.
Claburn goes on to talk about ABC’s launch of these *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives* online episodes which will actually contain “special interactive ads that can’t be skipped” (1); the “interactive” nature of the ads is key here in addition to the fact that they can’t be skipped, since “interactive” implies a fun sort of way to get fans involved without feeling as if they are being commodified, though that is in fact what is taking place. Claburn writes that:

The move lets ABC begin to earn online ad dollars with its shows and explore an alternative distribution channel…AT&T, Cingular, Ford, Procter & Gamble, Toyota, Unilever’s Suave, Universal Pictures, and Walt Disney Pictures are among the advertisers taking part in the experiment by offering interactive advertisements. And the consumers will have to watch those ads. They can pause, advance, and rewind streamed shows, but they won’t be able to skip the commercials. (1,2)

The inability of viewers to skip the ads in these shows demonstrates that even though it appears on the surface to be a move of the television producers to make the shows more accessible to their fans, it truly means that the fans are being inescapably targeted as consumers only.

There is a push in the industry then to capitalize off of these fans in online markets in the attempt to earn more ad dollars, not to enhance and improve relationships with fans. The ads in this instance, again, cannot be skipped; this is a testament to the fact that while fans interpret this move as a concession for the industry in moving online
(and one in which they have won over the networks to their online spaces), what they have really done is give the media industry as a whole a way to exploit the biggest, most valuable market available.
Chapter 4: The Fan Theory Continuum

It is important to examine theories of fan culture in order to read into how the media industry is dealing with interactivity, participation, collective intelligence and, in turn, what these concepts mean in terms of further commodification of the fan. These concepts are the keys that are aiding in the development of the “new” television viewership that participates simultaneously in a great variety of online activities. In the context of the discussion of participatory culture, I will in this chapter discuss several theories of fan culture in light of the new interaction with the web, focusing on Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills, who represent opposite ends of the spectrum with regards to participation. Henry Jenkins will qualify, on the continuum of fan culture that I propose, as the one who most supports the idea of participatory culture as a way to liberate fan culture from the media industry, while Matt Hills will represent the other end of the spectrum which views participatory culture with a more cynical eye, wary of the benefits of increased participation. The examples of Jenkins and Hills will constitute a continuum along which other fan theorists fall according to their views of participation and commodity culture.

A basic premise of Jenkins’s in Convergence Culture says that fans are “fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture” (16) and that they “insist on the right to become full participants (131). This view implies that fans as a whole, or, at least, for the most part, are not satisfied with their position as viewers, but that they require an increasing possibility of involvement with their fan text. A fan of The
Sopranos insists on, in addition to just watching the show, doing a number of participatory activities including blogging, message board participation, fan fiction, all the while contributing opinions through this variety of venues about the overall plot and structure of the show, calling to mind Jenkins’s discussion of collective intelligence. At the heart of the importance that Jenkins sees in online fan participation is the idea that fans are consistently at the forefront of new media technologies, as he discusses in Convergence Culture, and that the concept of interactivity hinges upon the ways new technologies are more and more designed to respond to consumer feedback. Fans are known to take advantage of new technologies to spread the word about objects of fandom. Through examples of online fan communities discussed in this essay, it is indeed a visible and identifiable phenomenon. Additionally, this concept of interactivity is reliant on these new technologies in order to function; not only that, but Jenkins posits that this interactivity makes companies and advertisers more apt to develop working relationships with consumers and value their feedback as opposed to manipulating their consumer base, as has been more the conception before the advent of participatory culture.

Jenkins in Convergence Culture discusses the “current moment of media change reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture” (132) which again focuses on the rights of the consumer, or fan, to have a voice in the creation of their culture. Again his argument hinges upon the proposal that fans are dissatisfied
with passive roles, and that participation necessitates involvement with the fan community beyond watching a show.

Jenkins generally places an emphasis on the necessity of going above and beyond watching the show and participating in a “cultural activity” such as writing about that show, now mostly defined in fandom through internet activity. Only in this way do they become “full participants,” and to Jenkins, the defining feature of these participants is their desire to be heard and to act as cultural producers. Using the proof of the exploding internet culture over the past decade, Jenkins makes the claim that the “current moment of media change [reaffirms this] right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture (Jenkins, Convergence 132). Significantly, he is adamant about the importance of these fans as they square up to the media industry as a result of this new moment of media change where fans are playing more participatory and important roles in voicing their opinions for the industry. He writes that “[a]s fan productivity goes public, it can no longer be ignored by the media industries, but it cannot be fully contained or channeled by them, either” (Jenkins, Convergence 134). Noteworthy, then, is the claim that such fan activity cannot be contained in total by the media industry, and therefore Jenkins establishes further his strong position on the “most participatory” end of the continuum; he holds that fan activity is resistant to being fully commodified by the media industry and that it therefore retains a powerful position in media culture.

Also qualifying Jenkins for the “most participatory” end of the continuum is his position on fan texts as significant and necessary cultural production. He believes in the
significance of fans’ interpretations of their fan texts, calling fans “textual poachers” because of the way they create new meanings from texts and, in a way, become cultural authors in their own right. This process of authoring references the move from a spectator culture to a participatory culture in which all can participate as authors. This is in conflict, in Jenkins’s view, with the media industry’s previous tendency to desire to control the authorship and appropriation of fan texts by the fans. But as a result of the web, Jenkins would lead us to believe that there is a more symbiotic relationship occurring between the media industry and these textual poachers. Of fan innovation and this symbiotic relationship between fans and mainstream media as a result of Web 2.0, Jenkins writes:

The Web represents a site of experimentation and innovation, where amateurs test the waters, developing new practices, themes, and generating materials that may well attract cult followings on their own terms. The most commercially viable of those practices are then absorbed into the mainstream media, either directly through the hiring of new talent or the development of television, video, or big-screen works based on those materials, or indirectly, through a second-order imitation of the same aesthetic and thematic qualities. In return, the mainstream media materials may provide inspiration for subsequent amateur efforts, which push popular culture in new directions. In such a world, fan works can no longer be understood as simply derivative of mainstream materials but
must be understood as themselves open to appropriation and reworking by the media industries. (Convergence 148)

Because according to the model presented here fans produce materials useful to the mainstream media, this indicates a positive give and take relationship between fans and the media industry. Additionally, we can see here Jenkins’s insistence upon fans as cultural producers in a culture of participation in the way in which he holds that they produce material “no longer…understood as simply derivative of mainstream materials.”

Fans, then, are not merely consumers but are cultural participants; he asks us to rethink the traditional view of media as all-powerful and fans as a fringe culture and holds that because the media industry is taking cues from these fans and reinventing or reworking its relationship with fans, fans hold more sway over the industry and, at the very least, remain resistant to full commodification. Thus, the web is a site of consumer participation which alters relationships with media industry in a beneficial way for both parties, but more importantly, fans retain a semblance of sovereignty over their texts and media companies cannot so easily commodify and control, but instead are committed to these active consumers to supply them with ideas and useful feedback. All angles considered, Jenkins’s view of this new participatory culture is a positive one that elevates the role of the fan to one of great cultural importance.

On the other hand, Matt Hills puts forth a more cynical view of fans’ new relationships with advertisers and the media industry which places him on the opposite end of the continuum from Jenkins. Whereas Jenkins places the fan in the role of cultural
producer and author, Hills takes issue with this role; while Jenkins sees this new
“moment of media change” as one in which the relationship between these two groups is
becoming more symbiotic and beneficial to both parties, Hills is more wary of the idea
that both groups benefit to the same degree. In his book *Fan Cultures*, he counters
Jenkins directly and expresses his concerns and criticisms with regard to these very
issues.

Hills’s initial problem with Jenkins’s analysis of the current state of fan culture
takes root in the way Jenkins characterizes fans as all desiring this more active, involved
role that “emphasizes some and downplays other aspects of fandom.” (Hills 8) His
analysis as a result splits “fans and non-fans into very different types of subjectivity” and
results in a “moral dualism”—“a view of the cultural world which constructs and focuses
on two clear sets of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ phenomena (Hills 8). He suggests that Jenkins
makes an implicit assumption in his argument that *all* fans not only are already playing
the roles of cultural producers and authors, but that they also are “fighting for their
rights” as Jenkins terms it, to have these capabilities. This is not Hills’s understanding of
the process, as he illustrates in *Fan Cultures*, for he is wary of both the fans clamoring for
rights and of, more importantly, their ability to perform the tasks of cultural production
and authorship. He argues that Jenkins projects the values of academia, which include
rigorous analysis, diligent research, and the like, onto fan culture. He sees fan culture as
incapable of these charges because of their status as simply citizens and viewers of
popular culture, no matter how well-versed they may be, as opposed to those who spend
their lives in the position of cultural critics and authors. He criticizes Jenkins for dubbing fans what he calls “miniaturized academics” (8) in their abilities to write or create culture, becoming what is termed by several fan theorists as “aca-fans.” These textual poachers, according to Hills, should not be accorded the same rights in cultural production as academics, nor, he argues, do they have the capability; this is one issue—the reduction of the role of the fan—which makes Hills’s position on current fan culture less eager to embrace participation.

Secondly, Hills challenges Jenkins’s emphasis on the positive relationship blossoming between the media industry and dedicated fans as a result of web-facilitated participatory culture. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Hills raises the issue that fans are both ideal consumers and yet express anti-commercial beliefs, and he uses this to take issue with Jenkins’s enthusiasm about fans’ increased participation with the media industry by way of blogs and viral marketing campaigns. To Jenkins, this increased participation yields an increase in the importance and influence of the voice of fandom in the cultural sphere, but for Hills, fans cannot remain resistant while enhancing participation, as the two concepts are mutually exclusive. More pointedly, he argues that:

\[\text{[t]he intense attachments of fans cannot be assumed to resist or transcend commodification; online fan practices such as just-in-time fandom and the newsgroup’s serialization of the audience are complicit with the commodity-text, functioning within the dialectic of value as an intensification rather than a transcendence of commodification. (179)}\]
This position directly counters Jenkins on the stance that increased fan activity as it involves the media industry acts as a catalyst for the media industry to exercise even more control over the fans; it instead further commodifies them and draws them nearer to television producers and advertisers.

The relationship between the mainstream media and the fans is intensified in participatory culture, and therefore as opposed to Jenkins’s view that the fan assumes a more significant role in this culture, Hills argues that the fan’s role is to be an ever-more-dedicated consumer. He identifies the tightening bond between consumer and producer, fan and mainstream media, as a form of the manipulation Jenkins claims is not at work in this new participatory culture. Hills sees the relationship not as symbiotic, but as a further exploitation of the fan and an increase in power for the media industry, regardless of the artistic products and textual input of fans. Jostein Gripsrud, a theorist in agreement with Hills’s position in his article “Broadcast Television” even writes, in response to ideas put forth with respect to participatory culture:

The relatively “passive” viewers who let themselves be informed and entertained by broadcast television along these lines cannot be expected to be replaced by “active” interactors who are busily planning their viewing “freely” as isolated individuals, and are constantly talking back to producers and/or distributors. There is something very utopian and even silly about these images of future viewers as individuals wholly outside their geographically determined communities, actively enjoying an
imagined total “freedom” from the powerful programmers of broadcast
TV. One might suspect that such ideas have been cooked up by socially
isolated and alienated computer nerds, mostly young men who much too
often still live at their parents’ houses, and then subsequently are turned
into fancy theoretical constructs by socially isolated and alienated
academics with a penchant for simple-minded liberalist anarchism” (219).

Though perhaps a little overzealous in his denunciation, Gripsrud here supports the Hills
side of the spectrum through his cynicism directed at “active interactors” who have a
voice and can “talk back” and contribute to producers. While this may be the case in
some isolated incidents, Gripsrud, Hills, and those in their camp view the idea of any
permanent, lasting and significant change in the dynamic between fans and the media
industry as quite out of reach. Thus, Hills’s earlier assertion that no transcendence of
commodification is available to fans through increased participation and involvement is
in direct opposition to Jenkins’s faith in such practices to establish the fan as a touchstone
of media culture.

The import of the conflicts on this continuum is multi-faceted. For Jenkins, it is
absolutely necessary for fans to take advantage of the opportunity to shape their culture,
as the door is being left open by these mainstream institutions who take cues from their
grassroots communities in order to better serve their audience. Fans, then, are more
valued as cultural producers through this lens than as a market. And, of course, these
fans and communities of collective intelligence are resistant against domination by the
mainstream media industry through this altered participatory relationship in which the fans and the industry work together to exchange with each other what the other party needs. For Hills, there is a danger in imagining that fans can use collective intelligence to take over powerful industrial efforts, since these efforts result in more accelerated marketing tactics. In addition, fans who do not participate as “textual poachers” are, in the context of Jenkins’s theory, left out of cultural production and Jenkins leaves almost no room for the number of fans who do not take part in these participatory behaviors.

The conclusions I draw in response to this continuum position me towards Hills’s end of the continuum for a number of reasons. Initially, some question arises with respect to Jenkins’s enthusiasm about fans insisting on the right to become “full participants” in their media culture; what of those who have no such desire? Is there any place for those who simply consider themselves fans for simply watching the show, or those who participate through blogging or online communities but care nothing for being an instrument of cultural production? Jenkins will argue that in our current convergence culture, everyone is a participant though he or she may have different degrees of status and influence. However, considering the interests of the industry, it seems that the status and influence, whether existent or not, is after all quite limited. Moreover, if this status and influence is measured in part by the amount of communication and involvement the fans have with the media industry, the industry is benefitting to a greater degree, considering that money is made through these fan interactions. Because money is, by all
means, the highest priority of the media industry, it is difficult to assert that the industry does not come out ahead.

In addition, the amount of time spent blogging, participating in viral marketing efforts, re-watching shows online, and contributing to or reading TV fan sites dwarfs the amount of time spent watching the show each week, rendering the fans’ enthusiasm and commitment perfect fodder for accelerated and intensified commodification. Because fans are more accessible, the industry has an easier time targeting them and involving them while advertisers enjoy the same benefits. Of course, there is a give and take suggested in Jenkins’s proposal; the give and take relationship involving fans and the media industry that results in more cultural influence for the fans, though, results in more intensified emotional investment on their part. Consequentially, further commodification is the result, and regardless of whether this may be in addition to cultural influence, the media industry benefits materially and therefore more significantly. Because the industry can exist, however tenuously, without the fans, but the opposite is not true, the material gains made by the industry through interactions with fans demonstrate the power of the industry over those fans, regardless of their cultural footprint.
Conclusion

In his essay “E Unibus Pluram” on the state of television and U.S. fiction in the 1990s, David Foster Wallace posits that “the artistic viability of post-modernism was a direct consequence…not of any new facts about art, but of facts about the new importance of mass commercial culture. Americans seemed no longer united so much by common beliefs as by common images: what binds us became what we stand witness to (42). In the 1990s Wallace was writing in, images saturated our culture by way of the television; now, because of the internet, the hold of images on our attention spans is exponentially more. Images dominate the way in which we interact with the world; whereas Wallace saw the proliferation of the television image taking over media culture, we are witnesses to the proliferation of the image through internet culture in an ever-more accelerated and far-reaching way. The ramifications of our dependence on images and where those images come from with regard to commodity culture exists as the root from which the concerns of this thesis grow; how we interact with images via television and the web and how the media industry interacts with us via those same media generates consequences relevant to both our roles as consumers in a commodity culture and our roles as members of the society of popular culture.

We can conclude without question that there exists a permanent alteration in nature of communications among television fans and the television producers, advertisers, and marketers who thrive on the support of these fans due to the advent of web culture and the proliferation of internet activity. What comprises the alteration
though, and the consequences in terms of commodification and the integrity of web culture is what sparks controversy. In *Living Room Wars*, Ien Ang writes about the “institutional agreement [among media industries] in terms of the exchange value of the ‘audience commodity’” (54) which ever drives the thinking behind each action taken by the media industry and forms the basis of all interactions between the television producers and their viewers. Because of this preoccupation, we cannot disassociate these interests of the industry from its apparent interest in fan culture as well as the way internet activity encourages fans to be more closely involved with the workings of the media industry.

This interest began as a way for industries to get closer to audiences in order to commodify them, and we have little reason to believe, regardless of theories of participation and collective intelligence, that this motive is dissipating, or that the appetite of the industry is content in a way that assures fans of their cultural legitimacy instead of their role as ideal consumers. Specifically, television producers initiated their presence on the internet by copying fan sites in order to become more intimate with fans and expand their audiences. Following those producers were advertisers seeking to take advantage as well, and their current position in web culture, though it may involve more participation from the fans themselves and more catering to those fans’ desires, must be read in the same light as that initial encounter. Exploitation, then, is the main concern for the media industry; attempts to fulfill fan desires and enhance participation to develop relationships with the industry’s consumers cannot be mistaken for this overarching goal.

66
The way in which, as Jenkins writes, the “current moment of media change [is] reaffirming right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture” (Convergence 132) I maintain is a misleading and vague assertion which actively ignores the more deeply ingrained economic strategies at work in the media industry. Through the examples of the “Lost Experience” and The Sopranos blog as well as the examination of advertising and marketing trade journals, these strategies emerge as infinitely more the inspiration behind these new online interactions than any sort of desire to cater to those fans as cultural producers with rights and contributions. New technologies do facilitate the ease and contribution of consumer feedback due to their interactive nature (Jenkins, Convergence 62). These technologies, though, facilitates this feedback with the goal of assisting the producers in expanding audiences and fostering more dedicated consumption on the part of their shows’ viewers and assists the advertisers in getting better access to audiences through more touchpoints. Obtaining more opportunities to make money from those consumers, then, is the result of these new technologies.

Viral marketing illustrates the extent to which marketers and advertisers will go in order to exploit every media avenue and ensure the conflation of content and advertising so that the consumer will be unaware of the sales agenda. Reading across media, or blogging, for example, as Jenkins himself says, “sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption” (Convergence 96). That perhaps the biggest proponent of the positive nature of participatory culture and media convergence acknowledges the accelerated consumption that activities like blogging encourage is telling and also
indicative of the increasing infiltration of commodification into every aspect of the fan’s experience. Viral marketing and blogging may amplify fandom’s cultural visibility, in more concrete terms they amplify fans’ literal visibility to the industry and interaction with it, thus resulting in an easy job for the media industry in targeting and exploiting those fans. Likewise, as “shifts in media technology [grant] viewers greater control” (Jenkins, Convergence 62), which may appear as a way that the industry is embracing the cultural weight of fans and heeding their desires, the industry motivations reveal that the push to give viewers more power is really the push to more fully control those viewers by commodifying their tastes, desires, and activities and monitoring them more closely. So while participatory culture is revolutionary in changing the way the media industry conducts business, the media industry is outpacing the cultural efforts of fandom with its elaborately constructed marketing and advertising strategies which draw fans closer and closer, eliminating the prospect of a symbiotic relationship and fully establishing the fan’s role as nothing more than the ideal consumer. Thus, the “changing” of business strategy signifies a change that translates to the further commodification of the fan and the new avenues of exploitation fans are opening up to the media industry by way of participatory culture.
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