This book is about the multiple ways that content circulates today, from top down to bottom up, from grassroots to commercial. As we explore circulation, we see the way value and meaning are created in the multiple economies that constitute the emerging media landscape. Our message is simple and direct: if it doesn't spread, it's dead.

We don't mean the kinds of circulation that have historically concerned publishers—that is, how many readers pick up this morning's edition of the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal.* Any publication can cite its "circulation," especially since the rates paid for advertising are calculated based on those numbers. Like the "impressions" that online publishers tout, such circulation is concerned with making audience members into receptacles for mass-produced and mass-distributed content: as eyeballs in front of a screen (in television terms), butts in seats (in film or sports terms), or whatever other body parts media companies and brands hope to grab next. But those definitions of "circulation" are really talking about distribution, where the movement of media content is largely—or totally—controlled by the commercial interests producing and selling it. These logics of distribution best apply in a broadcast media world, where a small number of producers—Random House or CBS or Warner Brothers—create discrete and finished products for mass audiences.

Instead, *Spreadable Media* examines an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways. The decisions that each of us makes about

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whether to pass along media texts—about whether to tweet the latest gaffe from a presidential candidate, forward a Nieman Marcus cookie recipe email, or share video of a shoplifting seagull—are reshaping the media landscape itself.

This shift from distribution to circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined. And they are doing so not as isolated individuals but within larger communities and networks, which allow them to spread content well beyond their immediate geographic proximity. Henry Jenkins (1992) coined the term "participatory culture" to describe the cultural production and social interactions of fan communities, initially seeking a way to differentiate the activities of fans from other forms of spectatorship. As the concept has evolved, it now refers to a range of different groups deploying media production and distribution to serve their collective interests, as various scholars have linked considerations of fandom into a broader discourse about participation in and through media. Previous work on participatory culture stressed acts of reception and production by media audiences; this book extends that logic to consider the roles that networked communities play in shaping how media circulates. Audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows, and producers, brand managers, customer service professionals, and corporate communicators are waking up to the commercial need to actively listen and respond to them.

While many content creators are struggling with the growing prominence of such grassroots audience practices, an array of online communication tools have arisen to facilitate informal and instantaneous sharing. These platforms offer new capacities for people to pass along media artifacts—and, in the process, to seek models to generate revenue through the activities of their users. However, while new tools have proliferated the means by which people can circulate material, word-of-mouth recommendations and the sharing of media content are impulses that have long driven how people interact with each other. Perhaps nothing is more human than sharing stories, whether

by fire or by "cloud" (so to speak). We must all be careful not to suppose that a more participatory means of circulation can be explained solely (or even primarily) by this rise of technological infrastructure, even as these new technologies play a key role in enabling the shifts this book describes.

Spreadable Media focuses on the social logics and cultural practices that have enabled and popularized these new platforms, logics that explain *why* sharing has become such common practice, not just *how*. Our approach doesn't presume that new platforms liberate people from old constraints but rather suggests that the affordances of digital media provide a catalyst for reconceptualizing other aspects of culture, requiring the rethinking of social relations, the reimagining of cultural and political participation, the revision of economic expectations, and the reconfiguration of legal structures.

Throughout this book, we use terms such as "spread," "spreadable," or "spreadability" to describe these increasingly pervasive forms of media circulation. "Spreadability" refers to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes. As we have been working on this book, some critics have challenged the term "spreadable," suggesting it sounds more appropriate for describing cream cheese or peanut butter. (The term originated in relation to "stickiness," as we will soon explain.) However, think of "spreadability" as a placeholder, perhaps like a stub in Wikipedia; it is something we can shape a conversation around. Our goal is not to create a new buzzword. Instead, we want to challenge readers to think through the metaphors we all use when talking about how content moves across the cultural landscape—to resist terminology that might distort how we understand these trends and to continue seeking terms that more accurately describe the complexity of how we all engage with media texts.

Our focus on terminology is more than mere semantics. We believe that language matters deeply and that the metaphors we all use to describe the patterns we see shape how we understand our world. We become blind to some phenomena and biased toward others. By discussing "spreadable media," we aim to facilitate a more nuanced

account of how and why things spread and to encourage our readers to adopt and help build a more holistic and sustainable model for understanding how digital culture operates.

Sticky Content, Spreadable Practices

"Spreadability" refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes.

Our use of "spreadability" is perhaps most effective as a corrective to the ways in which the concept of "stickiness" has developed over time to measure success in online commerce. A term that emerged through marketing discourse and which was popularized by its use in Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2000) and elsewhere, "stickiness" broadly refers to the need to create content that attracts audience attention and engagement. Gladwell proposes, "There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it" (2000, 132). Gladwell uses "stickiness" to describe the aspects of media texts which engender deep audience engagement and might motivate them to share what they learned with others. In short, to Gladwell, sticky content is material that people want to spread.

As online business models have been built, the use of "stickiness" in the business setting refers to centralizing the audience's presence in a particular online location to generate advertising revenue or sales. This notion of stickiness closely resembles the "impressions" model that has shaped the measurement of audiences for broadcast content. In broadcast media, impressions are measured by how many people see a particular piece of media, whereas stickiness refers to the mechanisms motivating people to seek out and spend time at a particular site. Applied to the design of a website, companies hope to achieve stickiness by placing material in an easily measured location and assessing how many people view it, how many times it is viewed, and how long visitors view it.

Under the stickiness model, companies gain economic value by offering merchandise through some kind of e-commerce catalog, charging for access to information (through some kind of subscription or service fee), or selling the eyeballs of site visitors to some outside party, most often advertisers. Such advertising deals are sold by juxtaposing advertising messages on a page alongside content, and advertising rates are based on the number of impressions a page generates or the number of clicks an ad receives. This conception of stickiness focuses on monitoring and generating specific data on the actions of each site visitor.

This mindset has also come to define the way companies understand the popularity of content online. Online publications look at which articles are viewed the most and which hold people's attention the longest. Media companies assess which videos are viewed the most and longest. Nonprofits and corporate websites alike define success online based on web traffic. Audiences themselves often think about the popularity of content in terms of views at a particular destination. In short, even beyond the instances when advertising deals are being brokered, this narrow definition of "stickiness" has provided the logic by which success has come to be understood.

Stickiness capitalizes on the easiest way companies have found to conduct business online—rather than the ways audiences want to and do experience material online. It privileges putting content in one place and making audiences come to it so they can be counted. Such "destination viewing" often conflicts with both the dynamic browsing experience of individual Internet users and, more importantly, with the circulation of content through the social connections of audience members.

What we mean by "spreadability" will become clearer by contrasting it with this stickiness model. We compare the terms here not to indicate that web traffic shouldn't matter or to suggest that spreadability is the "opposite" of stickiness, but rather to demonstrate the limits of models too closely focused on stickiness.

The Migrations of Individuals versus the Flow of Ideas • Like other impressions-based constructs, stickiness models focus on counting isolated audience

members. Spreadability recognizes the importance of the social connections among individuals, connections increasingly made visible (and amplified) by social media platforms. This approach may still include quantitative measures of how frequently and broadly content travels, but it makes important actively listening to the way media texts are taken up by audiences and circulate through audience interactions.

Centralized versus Dispersed Material • Because deep quantitative audience measurement is at the center of stickiness, online destinations can become a virtual "roach motel." For instance, at an extreme, some sites disable the Back button, making it difficult for users to escape once they have stumbled on the site, without closing their browser. The key to stickiness is putting material in a centralized location, drawing people to it, and keeping them there indefinitely in ways that best benefit the site's analytics. (The process is not that unlike a corral; audiences are pushed along predefined routes matching a publisher's measurement needs and are then poked and prodded for analytics data.) Spreadability emphasizes producing content in easy-to-share formats, such as the embed codes that YouTube provides, which make it easier to spread videos across the Internet, and encouraging access points to that content in a variety of places.

Unified versus Diversified Experiences • A sticky mentality requires brands to create a centralized experience which can best serve the purposes of multiple audiences simultaneously, offering limited and controlled ways for individuals to "personalize" content within a site's format. A spreadable mentality focuses on creating media texts that various audiences may circulate for different purposes, inviting people to shape the context of the material as they share it within their social circles.

Prestructured Interactivity versus Open-Ended Participation • Sticky sites often incorporate games, quizzes, and polls to attract and hold the interests of individuals. The participatory logic of spreadability leads to audiences using content in unanticipated ways as they retrofit material to the contours of their particular community. Such activities are difficult for creators to control and even more difficult to quantify.

Attracting and Holding Attention versus Motivating and Facilitating Sharing • Since sticky business models are built on demographic data, audiences are often constructed as a collection of passive individuals. Spreadability, by contrast, values the activities of audience members to help generate interest in particular brands or franchises.

Scarce and Finite Channels versus Myriad Temporary (and Localized) Networks • Stickiness retains the broadcast mentality of one-to-many communication, with authorized official channels competing against one another for the audience's attention. The spreadability paradigm assumes that anything worth hearing will circulate through any and all available channels, potentially moving audiences from peripheral awareness to active engagement.

Sales Force Marketing to Individuals versus Grassroots Intermediaries Advocating and Evangelizing • By "grassroots intermediaries," we mean unofficial parties who shape the flow of messages through their community and who may become strong advocates for brands or franchises. Grassroots intermediaries may often serve the needs of content creators, demonstrating how audiences become part of the logic of the marketplace and challenging what "grassroots" means, as such activities often coexist or even coincide with corporate agendas. They are not, however, employed or regulated by content creators and also may act counter to corporate goals.

Separate and Distinct Roles versus Collaboration across Roles • In a stickiness model, it's clear who the "producer," the "marketer," and the "audience" is. Each performs a separate and distinct purpose. In a spreadable model, there is not only an increased collaboration across these roles but, in some cases, a blurring of the distinctions between these roles.

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While stickiness may provide the prevailing logic for the creation of online business models, any content or destination that has gained relevance with audiences online has done so through processes of spreadability, whether authorized or not. From the word-of-mouth

spread of recommendations about a brand to the passing along of media content that might ultimately drive interest (and traffic) back to a particular destination, success in the stickiness model has always ultimately depended on audience activity that happens away from the site—in other words, from spreadability.

However, in our focus on spreadability, we are not arguing against the creation of online destinations; we recognize that creators and audiences alike benefit from a central base for their brand or content, whether to serve a business model or simply to have an easy-to-find location. After all, mass-media channels are still valuable resources for getting information out and sharing content of great common interest because they have such widespread reach.

Instead, the "distribution" reach of sticky destinations and the "circulation" reach of spreadable media should coexist, a relationship aptly illustrated by a 2010 experiment by advertising agency Hill Holliday. The firm created an online microsite called Jerzify Yourself that allowed visitors to remake their image in the style of the stars of popular MTV television show *Jersey Shore*. Hill Holliday created the site as part of a project researching the ways word spread about content. The site generated substantial word of mouth, and was featured in a variety of articles and blog posts. Beyond just researching the audiences of those blogs (their immediate "reach" or "distribution potential"), Hill Holliday also used a URL-tracing mechanism to see what additional traffic came from the ongoing spread of those stories and posts.

The experiment created a unique URL for Jerzify Yourself for every site that linked back to the page. Ilya Vedrashko (2010a) reports that five of the top six sites in terms of driving direct traffic to Jerzify Yourself created almost as much traffic through reshares, as people who first discovered the site through that article/mention passed the link on to their networks. One site's coverage generated twice as many eventual visits through ongoing recirculation of the link as it did via direct click-throughs from the original story. Writes Vedrashko, "Counting only the direct clicks from any site is likely to underestimate the site's total value. [. . .] Content that's designed to be spreadable can nearly double the referred traffic through re-shares." Meanwhile, some sites were more "spreadful" than others. In particular, Vedrashko notes that

the site which sent the most direct traffic to Jerzify Yourself actually led to the least amount of resharing.

Despite changes in communication and culture, stickiness still matters. Returning to Gladwell's use of the term, stickiness acts as a measure of how interested an audience member is in a media text. Any creator—whether media company, fan, academic, or activist—produces material in the hope of attracting audience interest. (Perhaps peanut butter isn't such a bad way to represent spreadable media after all: content remains sticky even as it is spread.)

What Susan Boyle Can Teach about Spreadability

What happens when many people make active decisions to put content in motion by passing along an image, song, or video clip to friends and family members or to larger social networks? As this question suggests, much of what is being exchanged at the current moment is entertainment, as fan communities have been among the first to embrace the practices of spreadability. These fan activities will thus be a recurring topic throughout this book. Yet what we say about the spread of entertainment content also increasingly applies to news, branding and advertising, political messages, religious messages, and a range of other materials, and we will draw on a variety of these examples to provide a multidimensional picture of the current media environment.

To start, let's contrast a U.S. "broadcast" phenomenon with a widespread entertainment clip. The finale of the 2009 season of *American Idol* drew 32 million viewers in the U.S., making it one of the year's most viewed two-hour blocks on broadcast television. In comparison, a video of Scottish woman Susan Boyle auditioning for *Britain's Got Talent* was viewed more than 77 million times on YouTube. This latter figure reflects only the viewership of the original upload; YouTube is a space where success often encourages duplication. A cursory survey showed more than 75 different copies of Boyle's audition performance of "I Dreamed a Dream" available on the site when we conducted our research, with versions uploaded from users in Brazil, Japan, the Netherlands, the U.S., and various parts of the U.K. We found edited copies, high-definition copies, and copies with closed captioning and subtitles in various languages. Many of these versions have themselves been

viewed millions of times. Even this scan of the Boyle phenomenon considers YouTube alone, ignoring other large online video-sharing platforms such as Chinese site Tudou (where a quick glance showed at least 43 copies of the original performance) or Dailymotion (where there were 20 easily found copies of her first audition video).

Since any of these videos can be watched more than once by the same person, it is difficult, if not impossible, to reduce these views to a raw "eyeball" count equivalent to television ratings. No matter how you look at it, however, the viewership of the widely spread Susan Boyle clip dwarfs that of the highest-rated show on U.S. broadcast television. The Boyle video was broadcast content made popular through grassroots circulation.

The Susan Boyle audition was the result of mainstream commercial media production, to be sure. The original video was professionally produced and edited to maximize its emotional impact. One segment introduced a character and set up ridiculing expectations, while the next swept the rug out from under those expectations with a spectacular performance of a popular West End song, followed by the emotional responses of the overwhelmed judges and audience. Audience enjoyment of the event was shaped by people's general familiarity with the genre conventions of reality television and/or by particular perception of and investment in Simon Cowell's tough judge character, whose schoolboy grin at the segment's end represents the ultimate payoff for her spectacular performance. And, once the video had been widely spread, the visibility of Boyle was amplified through mainstream media coverage; she was, for instance, interviewed on *Good Morning America* and spoofed on the *Tonight Show*.

Nevertheless, Boyle's international success was not driven by broadcast distribution. Fans found Susan Boyle before media outlets did. The most popular Susan Boyle YouTube video reached 2.5 million views in the first 72 hours and drew 103 million views on 20 different websites within the first nine days of its release. Meanwhile, Boyle's Wikipedia page attracted nearly half a million views within a week of its creation.[1]

While the performance was part of a mainstream television program in the U.K, it was not commercially available at all to viewers in

the U.S. and many other countries. Instead, the video was circulated and discussed through a variety of networks online. Her entry into the U.S. market and her spread around the Internet was shaped by the conscious decisions of millions of everyday people functioning as grassroots intermediaries, each choosing to pass her video along to friends, family members, colleagues, and fellow fans. The Susan Boyle phenomenon would not have played out in the same way if not for the relationships and communities facilitated by social network sites, media sharing tools, and microblogging platforms.

Part of what allowed the Susan Boyle video to travel as far and as fast as it did was the fact it *could* travel so far so fast. People had the right tools and knew what to do with them. Sites such as You-Tube make it simple to embed material on blogs or share it through social network sites. Services such as bitly allow people to share links quickly and efficiently. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook facilitate instantaneous sharing to one's social connections. All of these technical innovations made it that much easier for the Susan Boyle video to spread.

However, the mere existence of individual technologies to facilitate the sharing of the clip does little to explain how the Susan Boyle performance was spread. We must consider the integrated system of participatory channels and practices at work that support an environment where content could be circulated so widely. For instance, uses of particular services should not be viewed in isolation but rather in connection, as people embrace a range of technologies based on if and when a particular platform best supports the cultural practices in which they want to engage.

But, more fundamentally, we have to understand the cultural practices that have both fueled the rise of these sharing technologies and evolved as people discover how these platforms might be used. For instance, the Susan Boyle video was widely shared because the participating public is more collectively and individually literate about social networking online; because people are more frequently and more broadly in contact with their networks of friends, family, and acquaintances; and because people increasingly interact through sharing meaningful bits of media content.

Taken together, this set of social and cultural practices, and the related technological innovations which grew up around them, constitute what we call a "networked culture." These cultural practices were certainly not created by new technologies. We've long known that news stories generate conversations; many of us have a cousin or grandmother who (still!) clips newspaper articles to put on the refrigerator, in an album, or in the mail to us. Social historian Ellen Gruber Garvey (2003), for example, has offered a glimpse into how circulation and value were connected in the scrapbook culture of nineteenth-century U.S. women. Their primary activity was sifting through newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals, gathering material to archive. In an era when news publications themselves actively engaged in "recirculation"—local papers reprinted stories originally published elsewhere if they seemed of interest to local readers—scrapbook collectors stored the most appealing of these ephemeral accounts for future generations. In turn, newspapers sometimes capitalized on this early form of "user-generated content," publishing retrospectives featuring reader-curated material. These archival practices accelerated with the twentieth-century rise of photocopiers, which facilitated easier reproduction and sharing of found material.

However, what happened in a predigital world now occurs with exponentially greater speed and scope, thanks to the affordances of online social tools. According to a CNN research project ("Shared News" 2010), the average global Internet user receives 26 news stories per week via social media or email and shares 13 news stories online. According to a report from the Pew Research Center (Purcell et al. 2010), 75 percent of respondents received news forwarded through email or posted on social network sites, and 52 percent shared links to news with others via those means.

This news gathering is shaped by a strong desire to contribute to ongoing conversations with friends, family, and co-workers. Of the respondents to the Pew study, 72 percent said they follow the news because they enjoy talking with others about what is happening in the world, and 50 percent said they rely to some degree on people around them to tell them the news they need to know. All of this suggests a

world where citizens count on each other to pass along compelling bits of news, information, and entertainment, often many times over the course of a given day.

In this networked culture, we cannot identify a single cause for why people spread material. People make a series of socially embedded decisions when they choose to spread any media text: Is the content worth engaging with? Is it worth sharing with others? Might it be of interest to specific people? Does it communicate something about me or my relationship with those people? What is the best platform to spread it through? Should it be circulated with a particular message attached? Even if no additional commentary is appended, however, just receiving a story or video from someone else imbues a range of new potential meanings in a text. As people listen, read, or view shared content, they think not only—often, not even primarily—about what the producers might have meant but about what the person who shared it was trying to communicate.

Indeed, outside the U.K., most people probably encountered the Susan Boyle video because someone sent a link or embedded it in a Facebook update or blog: many people shared the video to boast their accomplishment of discovery. They could anticipate sharing the video with people who hadn't seen it, precisely because the material was not widely available on television. Some may have heard conversations about it and searched on YouTube; for many more, the message came in the midst of other social exchanges, much as an advertisement comes as part of the commercial television flow. Yet, while an advertisement might feel like an intrusion or interruption, people often welcome spreadable media content from friends (at least discerning ones) because it reflects shared interests.

It is apparent that some people were passing Boyle's performance along as a gesture of friendship to build interpersonal relationships, while others used the material to contribute to a community organized around a key interest. This difference is a key distinction: between friendship-based and interest-based networks (Ito et al. 2009). An avowed Christian, Boyle became the focus of online prayer circles. Science blogs discussed how someone with her body could produce such a sound. Karaoke singers debated her technique, reporting an incident

when she was thrown out of a karaoke bar because she was now viewed as a professional performer. Reality-television blogs debated whether her success would have been possible on U.S. television given that *American Idol* excludes people her age from competing. Fashion blogs critiqued and dissected the makeover she was given for subsequent television appearances. Boyle's video spread, then, as a result of the many conversations it enabled people to have with each other, whether among friends or within communities of common interest. (And, of course, many may have done some of both.)

From a commercial perspective, *American Idol* had a full season to build public interest in its finale yet failed to attract the scale of attention the seven-minute clip of Boyle sparked. Contrary to speculation that the Boyle phenomenon would be short-lived, her debut album released by Columbia Records months later enjoyed groundbreaking advance sales, surpassing The Beatles and Whitney Houston on Amazon's charts (Lapowsky 2009). The album sold more than 700,000 copies in its first week, the largest opening-week sales of any album released that year. As Columbia Records chair Steve Barnett explained, "People wanted to get it and own it, to feel like they're a part of it" (Sisario 2009). Of course, those who helped circulate the video already felt they were "a part of it."

While such success makes for an impressive business story, the initial international popularity of the Susan Boyle moment wasn't driven by a plan for counting impressions and raking in the cash. Most of the many millions of people who streamed the Boyle clip were part of a "surplus audience" for whom producers had not built a business model. Boyle's performance was part of a British program with no commercial distribution in most other countries, so the majority of people sharing the video couldn't turn on a television network—cable or broadcast—and watch the next installment of *Britain's Got Talent*. They couldn't stream the show legally online. They couldn't buy episodes from iTunes. Despite relationships with multiple television networks, FremantleMedia couldn't get the show into commercial distribution quickly enough for transnational viewers to catch up with the Brits. Given the global circulation of information about Susan Boyle online, anyone who wanted to know what happened on *Britain's Got Talent*

heard about it within seconds of its airing. In short, market demand dramatically outpaced supply.

The spread of Susan Boyle demonstrates how content not designed to circulate beyond a contained market or timed for rapid global distribution can gain much greater visibility than ever before, thanks to the active circulation of various grassroots agents, while television networks and production companies struggle to keep up with such unexpected, rapidly escalating demand.

The case also allows us to challenge the commonplace assertion that, in the era of Web 2.0, user-generated content has somehow displaced mass media in the cultural lives of everyday people. Lucas Hilderbrand notes, "For mass audiences, broadcast, cable and satellite television still dominate, [. . .] and network content will continue to feed these streams. And I suspect that for many audiences, network content—new or old—still drives users to YouTube, and amateur content is discovered along the way, through the suggested links, alternative search results, or forwarded emails" (2007, 50). What Hilderbrand's account misses, though, is that much of the mass-media content encountered on YouTube and other such platforms is unauthorized—not so much user-generated content as user-circulated content. While audiences' sharing and spreading of Susan Boyle's video may still fit within the broad logic of capitalism, the capacity of audiences to alter the circulation of content is nevertheless causing consternation for companies and artists trying to figure out how to reshape broadcast business and marketing models or to design new businesses altogether. In cases where bottom-up activities have not been ordained by content creators, various corporate entities have labeled many of these activities "piracy" or "infringement"—even when unauthorized forms of sharing create value for both the people circulating the material and those who created it, as was clearly the case with the Boyle video.

Piracy is a concept that will surface repeatedly throughout the book, and every reader will probably draw the line between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" practices at different points. In fact, one of the problems of the current use of "piracy" is that it shortcuts important conversations we should all be having about the economic and cultural

impact of different types of media sharing. Such discussions might draw on legal notions that consider the nature of the use (commercial or noncommercial, education or entertainment), the degree to which the use is transformative, the portion of the work being taken, and so forth in determining what constitutes piracy.

As a rule, though, we are reserving the term "pirate" in this book for people who profit economically from the unauthorized sale of content produced by others. This is not a legal distinction but a moral one that matters for many of those whose activities we will discuss. Yet, as the Boyle example suggests, piracy is as much a consequence of the market failures of media companies to make content available in a timely and desirable manner as it is a consequence of the moral failure of audience members seeking meaningful content by hook or by crook if it is not legally available. We will thus make the case that the appropriation and recirculation of even entire works may sometimes work in the best interests of not only the culture at large but also of the rights holders.

One can only speculate whether Boyle's album and career could have been even more successful or whether *Britain's Got Talent* could have been a transnational hit had the show's producers been prepared to react quickly to this clip's spread. The failure to reconceptualize the way *Britain's Got Talent* circulates reduced what could have been a season-long event into one discrete moment: a single video. For instance, one imagines that few viewers of Boyle's audition video know that multiethnic dance troupe Diversity won the season rather than Boyle. This case not only demonstrates the cultural and technological system at the core of a networked culture but also the inability of the media industries—whose structure and models are still largely configured to a "broadcast" and "sticky" mentality—to actively listen and respond to unanticipated interest in their material.

We've Found a Cure for Viral Media!

As we question how and why content circulates today, it is all too easy to accept an inadequate answer, a theory of media distribution that makes a media text sound more like a smallpox-infected blanket. Many observers described the Susan Boyle phenomenon as an example of

"viral media," a term whose popularity has been fueled by the rapid rise of social network sites alongside declining advertising rates and an extremely fragmented audience for broadcast media.

Viral metaphors do capture the speed with which new ideas circulate through the Internet. The top-down hierarchies of the broadcast era now coexist with the integrated system of participatory channels described earlier in the chapter which have increased access to tools for communication and publishing. As marketers and media companies struggle to make sense of this transformed media landscape, one of the most common explanations is that media content now disseminates like a pandemic—spreading through audiences by infecting person after person who comes into contact with it. Even if the media industries must accept the shift from an environment where people congregate around media texts to a context where audiences do the circulating, they hope to preserve creator control. The promise is simple, if deceptive: create a media virus, and success will be yours. Thus, marketers and media distributors that are unsure of how to reach audiences through traditional "broadcast" or "sticky" methods now pray material will "go viral."

The term "viral" first appeared in science fiction stories, describing (generally bad) ideas that spread like germs. Something of the negative consequences of this simplified understanding of the viral are suggested by this passage from Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel *Snow Crash*: "We are all susceptible to the pull of viral ideas. Like mass hysteria. Or a tune that gets into your head that you keep on humming all day until you spread it to someone else. Jokes. Urban Legends. Crackpot religions. Marxism. No matter how smart we get, there is always this deep irrational part that makes us potential hosts for self-replicating information" (1992, 399). Here, the viral is linked to the "irrational," the public is described as "susceptible" to its "pull," and participants become unknowing "hosts" of the information they carry across their social networks.[2]

Echoing this theme, Douglas Rushkoff's 1994 book *Media Virus* argues that media material can act as a Trojan horse, spreading without the user's conscious consent; people are duped into passing a hidden agenda while circulating compelling content. Rushkoff writes that

certain "media events are not *like* viruses. They *are* viruses," and such a virus seeks "to spread its own code as far and wide as possible—from cell to cell and from organism to organism" (1994, 9; emphasis in original). There is an implicit and often explicit proposition that the spread of ideas and messages can occur without users' consent and perhaps actively against their conscious resistance; people are duped into passing a hidden agenda while circulating compelling content.

This notion of the media *as* virus taps a larger discussion that compares systems of cultural distribution to biological systems. Rushkoff describes the culture through which modern U.S. residents navigate as a "datasphere" or "mediaspace"—"a new territory for human interaction, economic expansion, and especially social and political machination"—that has arisen because of the rapid expansion of communication and media technologies (1994, 4). He writes,

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

This theme of comparing the spread of cultural material to biological processes extends beyond the "virus" metaphor. In the 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, famed British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced the "meme," which was to become both an incredibly important and incredibly overused idea, just like its viral companion. The meme is a cultural equivalent to the gene—the smallest evolutionary unit. "Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission," Dawkins argues (1976, 189), writing,

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (192)

Dawkins notes in later editions (1989, 2006) that the notion of the meme has itself spread in memelike fashion—it provides a compelling way to understand the dispersion of cultural movements, especially when seemingly innocuous or trivial trends spread and die in rapid fashion. In a moment when the meme pool—the cultural soup which Dawkins describes as the site where memes grow—is overflowing with ideas, being able to create or harness a meme seems to promise anyone the chance to ride the waves of participatory culture.

However, while the idea of the meme is a compelling one, it may not adequately account for how content circulates through participatory culture. While Dawkins stresses that memes (like genes) aren't wholly independent agents, many accounts of memes and viral media describe media texts as "self-replicating." This concept of "self-replicating" culture is oxymoronic, though, as culture is a human product and replicates through human agency.

Simplified versions of these discussions of "memes" and "media viruses" have given the media industries a false sense of security at a time when the old attention economy has been in flux. Such terms promise a pseudoscientific model of audience behavior. The way these terms are now used mystify the way material spreads, leading professional communicators on quixotic quests to create "viral content."

The term "viral marketing" was first popularized in relation to Hotmail in 1995, after the creators of the service used the phrase to describe why their service gained millions of users within months (Jurvetson and Draper 1997). At the bottom of every email sent, a marketing message appeared which offered, "Get your free Web-based email at Hotmail." The term described the process well. People

communicated and—in the process—sent along a marketing message, often without realizing it had happened.

Yet the viral metaphor does little to describe situations in which people actively assess a media text, deciding who to share it with and how to pass it along. People make many active decisions when spreading media, whether simply passing content to their social network, making a word-of-mouth recommendation, or posting a mash-up video to YouTube. Meanwhile, active audiences have shown a remarkable ability to circulate advertising slogans and jingles against their originating companies or to hijack popular stories to express profoundly different interpretations from those of their authors.

"Viral marketing," stretched well beyond its original meanings, has been expected to describe all these phenomena in the language of passive and involuntary transmission. Its precise meaning no longer clear, "viral media" gets invoked in discussions about buzz marketing and building brand recognition while also popping up in discussions about guerrilla marketing, exploiting social network sites, and mobilizing audiences and distributors.

Ironically, this rhetoric of passive audiences becoming infected by a media virus gained widespread traction at the same time as a shift toward greater acknowledgment that audience members are active participants in making meaning within networked media. Shenja van der Graaf maintains that viral marketing is "inherently social": "the main feature of viral marketing is that it heavily depends on interconnected peers" (2005, 8); van der Graaf uses "viral" to describe content that circulates in ways linked to network behavior, citing participation within a socially networked system as a central requirement of "viral" behavior. This focus on how audiences pass material along, however, is distorted by the metaphor of infection that "viral" invokes.

Confusion about viral media will not be easily resolved. The term is at once too encompassing and too limiting, creating false assumptions about how culture operates and distorted understandings of the power relations between producers and audiences. As we have been making this argument over the past few years while working on this project, we have found a growing number of marketers and media professionals also challenging the term. (See, for instance, Yakob 2008;

Arauz 2008; Caddell 2009b; Askwith 2010; Hasson 2010; Chapman 2010.) The term even received the most nominations for elimination in Lake Superior State University's annual "List of Banished Words from the Queen's English for Mis-use, Over-use, and General Uselessness" (2010). Bluntly put, an antidote for the viral needs to be discovered; we hope this book contributes to that growing charge.

In contrast, the concept of "spreadability" preserves what was useful about earlier communication models—the idea that the effectiveness and impact of messages is increased and expanded by their movement from person to person and community to community. Spreadability recognizes the ways later theorists such as van der Graaf have revised the earliest, relatively static and passive conceptions of "viral" to reflect the realities of the new social web, while suggesting that this emerging paradigm is so substantively different from the initial examples that it requires adopting new terminology. Our use of "spreadable media" avoids the metaphors of "infection" and "contamination," which over-estimate the power of media companies and underestimate the agency of audiences. In this emerging model, audiences play an active role in "spreading" content rather than serving as passive carriers of viral media: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what gets valued.

However, while this book combats the use of "viral" to describe many processes in which people are actively involved in circulating and shaping the meaning of content, we want to acknowledge that there still remain examples of "viral marketing." Ilya Vedrashko (2010b) argues that, as marketers (hopefully) shift away from "viral market-ing" as a catch-all term, they cannot forget that there are still literal examples of viral marketing which do not seek to engage audiences but rather deploy automated ways to induce audience members to unwittingly pass along their marketing messages.

As Iain Short (2010) points out, for instance, many applications for Twitter and Facebook send automated marketing updates to a person's followers without a user actively passing this material along. Thus, downloading an app might cause a Facebook user's friends to get pinged with a message encouraging them to join, or buying an animal on Farmville might send an update to all of a user's Facebook friends

(whether or not they play the game). In the instance of Facebook's Open Graph feature, users receive notice that a friend is reading a particular story or watching a certain video in his or her Facebook news feed. In order to see the content, users have to download an application for that publisher, which then starts sharing what they read to their friends' feeds. In all these cases, messages are sent "from the user," without the user crafting the messages or often even being aware the message has been generated.

The use of "viral marketing" should be reserved only for those marketing concepts that really do not rely on the agency of audience members to circulate media texts for their own purposes and through their own relationships. Vedrashko writes,

> The entire debate over the terminology might look to a marketing practitioner like an Ivory Tower nitpicking but it is an important one because metaphor-based terms rely on our understanding of the underlying concepts to guide our actions. An attempt to create a "viral" video will be informed by what one knows about viruses, which among marketing professionals isn't a lot, anyway. On the other hand, a creator of a "spreadable" video will be drawing upon an entirely different body of knowledge, perhaps a theory about *why people gossip*, or the related *theory of social capital*. (2010b)

As Vedrashko suggests, the choice of metaphors sets expectations. If viral success means elements of a campaign have to be spread rapidly among audiences in pandemic proportions, then many companies are likely to be disappointed by the distribution they achieve. For instance, a 2007 JupiterResearch report found that only 15 percent of marketers launching viral campaigns were successful in "prompting their consumers to promote their messages for them." By using the term "spreadable media," we refer to (and draw on cases that describe) not just those texts which circulate broadly but also those that achieve particularly deep engagement within a niche community. In many cases, such content does not obtain the type of scale that would qualify for many people's definition of "viral success," yet the text became highly spread among the particular audiences the producer hoped to reach.

Further, if companies set out thinking they will make media texts that do something to audiences (infect them) rather than for audiences to do something with (spread it), they may delude themselves into thinking they control people. Conversely, understanding spreadability will allow audiences and activists to form new connections and communities through their active role in shaping the circulation of media content. The concept of spreadability also gives these groups new means to mobilize and respond to decisions made by companies and governments in ways that challenge decisions that adversely effect them and to exploit gaps in the system which may allow them to serve their own needs.

"Comcast Must Die"

Companies are not just worried about making their content "go viral," though. Marketers have also been using the metaphor to make sense of how their customers' communication about a company now has the potential to circulate widely.

Fifteen years ago, the degree to which audiences had direct access to brands, and vice versa, was limited. Direct mail may have targeted messages at particular customers. Brands with retail outlets had a direct customer touchpoint, but the brand ambassadors in this case—retail employees—were (and remain) among the least respected, trained, and compensated members of the organization. Some companies had sales forces that aggressively contacted potential customers but often only through a one-way message, as during the "telemarketing craze." The most robust site of contact between customer and company was customer service, a division in most companies that has been marginalized and is often measured by efficiency—how quickly employees can get customers off the phone—rather than any prioritization of customer engagement (Yellin 2009). Thus, most correspondence between brand and company was one-way, providing little room for the customer to shape the experience.

These conditions persist. However, when corporate websites emerged by the mid-1990s, no one fully realized how substantially they would shift a company's relationship with its audiences. Few of the companies creating brochure-like websites at the time completely

considered that brands had the opportunity to tell their stories directly to the audience outside the constraints of advertising spots on television and radio and without going through the third-party voice of journalists. There would be a fundamental shift in how everyone "consumes," as interested people could seek content from companies when they wanted it—to juxtapose and assess corporate messages directly from the source and to publish what they find online for family, friends, colleagues, and strangers to see.

Brands and entertainment properties cannot return to the one-directional communication flows of the broadcast era, when they had the perception of control, so companies must listen to and learn from their audiences if they want to enjoy long-term success.

This "lack of control" is particularly noticeable when it comes to customer complaints. In a world of spreadable media, what were once considered solely "customer service" issues are increasingly "public relations" issues as well (which is ironic, considering "customer service" was, in the early twentieth century, once called "public relations" [Yellin 2009, 22]), as customers spread their own stories about companies.

Comcast, the largest cable operator in the U.S., has learned this lesson with particular pain. Cable operators have long struggled with customer complaints and dissatisfaction, displeasure well illustrated by a 2006 video of a Comcast technician falling asleep on customer Brian Finkelstein's couch while on hold with the company's own help line. Finkelstein's video spread rapidly and widely and received coverage in a variety of traditional media outlets as well. The drowsy technician was fired, and Comcast received a steady stream of negative publicity online as frustrated customers added their own commentary to the video.

The sleepy Comcast technician was only one of their spreading troubles. For instance, there was the much-recounted tale of LaChania Govan, the Illinois Comcast customer whose repeated attempts to resolve a customer service issue in 2005 led to employees changing her account name—and bill—to "Bitch Dog." Similar attention was heaped on 75-year-old Virginia Comcast customer Mona Shaw, who became so angered at her customer service treatment in 2007 that she

smashed up the office with a hammer (Yellin 2009, 2–8). Journalist Bob Garfield (2007) shared his own "Hell on Earth" story about Comcast customer service, beginning his *Advertising Age* column with the declaration "Comcast must die." Garfield started a campaign against the cable operator on the site ComcastMustDie.com. And amid these videos, stories, and campaigns were the myriad individual complaints that Comcast customers increasingly voiced across blogs, microblogging platforms, and discussion forums.

Companies now face building pressure to use their online presence not just to communicate their own messages but to respond to the demands of disgruntled customers as well. Comcast listened to some degree, one could argue out of necessity, over time creating a specific department to respond to issues raised online. In February 2008, Comcast Executive Support Manager Frank Eliason (who had been with the company six months) was named the company's "Director of Digital Care." The department Eliason created now reaches out to bloggers, Twitterers, and other online discussants, attempting to proactively resolve their problems. In the process, the "Comcast Cares" initiative has addressed thousands of customers and simultaneously generated significant publicity. *BusinessWeek*, for instance, named Eliason (who has since gone on to work for financial services company Citi as its head of social media) "the most famous customer service manager in the U.S." (Reisner 2009). Although in 2009 Bob Garfield still called Comcast "a vast, greedy, blundering, tone-deaf corporate colossus," he noted that the company "has heard our angry voices and taken concrete steps in the process of putting customers first." Meanwhile, many people in customer service and communications look to Comcast's online customer service response as an exemplar that companies should follow to create online communication platforms which respond to customer questions and reach out to those who complain.

Despite the praise, Comcast's customer service remains far from ideal. Its pioneering work using social media platforms to listen and respond to negative customer experiences still serves as a quick fix to the larger issues that plague service providers. In 2010, for example, Gizmodo published a letter received by a customer who was told his

service would be disconnected if he didn't pay the $0.00 he owed (Golijan 2010), while another customer who praised Comcast's Twitter communication shared his ongoing frustrations once he was connected to others within the company (Paul 2010). These are only two of a regular stream of customers expressing frustrations with the company's traditional communication modes.

Further, the "Comcast Cares" initiative, and the general perspective that customer service issues become a higher priority when customers have their own online presence, means that some customers get better treatment than others. See, for instance, this account from *Slate*:

> People with more clout seem to get better service. One Twitterer with fewer than 20 followers told me that though he's tweeted about Comcast frequently, the company has responded only to tell him its customer-service phone number. Another—with about 300 followers—told a better story: When she complained about a service problem, Comcast made special arrangements for a refund. And Glenn Fleishman, a tech journalist with more than 1,600 followers, got the best deal of all. [He] quickly got a call from an executive in the escalation department, who offered to waive [a $1,300 early-cancellation] fee. (Manjoo 2009)

As long as companies treat customer service issues online with some degree of concern about whether the customer is "an influencer," customers will receive different levels of response based on their perceived "public relations threat" (not to mention the lack of recourse for those who lack easy access to these communication platforms). And, in devoting significant energy to responding to those customers who complain loudest, without fixing underlying customer service issues companies might, if anything, encourage people to "spread their complaint" as their first course of action, influenced by the horror stories of phone trees and endless hold times awaiting them at a customer call center.

Even though Comcast and all large companies still have miles to go in fairly and fully prioritizing customer service, the spreadable media environment has made listening to audiences a greater priority for

many marketers and media companies. Public relations and corporate communication departments are increasingly using their online presence to address the messages customers are circulating, a sign of the power which visible and socially connected audience members have to shape the agendas of companies through the messages they spread (an issue we will return to in greater detail in chapter 4). In other words, companies are feeling more pressure to think not just about how audiences might spread messages about a brand (and content from the brand) but also about how their own corporate presence might "spread" to connect with the messages audiences are circulating about them.

Participatory Culture Reconsidered

Spreadability assumes a world where mass content is continually repositioned as it enters different niche communities. When material is produced according to a one-size-fits-all model, it imperfectly fits the needs of any given audience. Instead, audience members have to retrofit it to better serve their interests. As material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms. This continuous process of repurposing and recirculating is eroding the perceived divides between production and consumption.

Whitney Phillips's doctoral work at the University of Oregon focuses on the cultural practices, productions, and performances associated with 4Chan, an online community that actively encourages behavior which is often described as "antisocial" or "troll-like." Phillips argues that even disrespectful remixing is generative. In our enhanced book, she argues that 4Chan members have adopted a distinctive model for thinking about the "contributions" they make to culture, actively seizing on memes as tools for creativity and production:

As understood by trolls, memes are not passive and do not follow the model of biological infection. Instead, trolls see (though perhaps "experience" is more accurate) memes as microcosmic nests of evolving content. [. . .] Memes spread—that is, they are actively engaged and/

or remixed into existence—because something about a given image or phrase or video or whatever lines up with an already-established set of linguistic and cultural norms. In recognizing this connection, a troll is able to assert his or her cultural literacy and to bolster the scaffolding on which trolling as a whole is based, framing every act of reception as an act of cultural production.

For 4Chan members, the concept of the meme as a self-perpetuating phenomenon beyond human control might contribute to the spontaneity and disruption the group hopes to achieve. Phillips (2009) has argued elsewhere that 4Chan may have been the birthplace for widely spread images that represented U.S. President Barack Obama as Batman character The Joker, which some supporters of the U.S. conservative Tea Party movement adopted for protest signs during their public opposition to President Obama's national health care plan.

While the *Los Angeles Times* (Grad 2009) identified the artist of one of the most widely spread versions as college student Firas Alkhateeb, the image emerged from a larger series of remixes by the 4Chan community as they toyed with marketing material produced for the 2008 Batman film *The Dark Knight*. Other remixes included transforming John McCain into The Joker, along with Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton, various pop stars, and, of course, pictures of cute cats. While most of these remixes didn't circulate broadly outside 4Chan, some members of the Tea Party found particular resonance in the image of Obama as the antisocial Joker. Within 4Chan, memes serve as themes for ongoing conversations and fodder for creative activity, with each variation demonstrating and requiring particular cultural knowledge. Much as 4Chan hijacked images from Christopher Nolan's movie, the Tea Party poached these images from 4Chan, changing their political valances yet again. All of this suggests the ways that the appropriation, remixing, and recirculation of content via the mechanisms of participatory culture are increasingly impacting conversations far removed from what once might have been seen as niche communities. As this happens, we are seeing the erosion of traditional boundaries—between fans and activists, creativity and disruption, niche and mainstream in the 4Chan example, or between

commercial and grassroots, fan and producer in some of the examples we will consider later in this section.

This book will suggest a range of groups who are strongly motivated to produce and circulate media materials as parts of their ongoing social interactions, among them activists who seek to change public perceptions of an issue of concern to the group; religious groups who seek to spread "the Word"; supporters of the arts—especially of independent media—who seek to build a base to bolster alternative forms of cultural expression; enthusiasts for particular brands that have become signposts for people's identities and lifestyles; bloggers who seek to engage others about the needs of local communities; collectors and retro audiences seeking greater access to residual materials; members of subcultures seeking to construct alternative identities; and so forth.

In particular, we will frequently use entertainment fandom as a reference point because fans groups have often been innovators in using participatory platforms to organize and respond to media texts. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, amateur publishers began to print newsletters about shared interests and to circulate them across the country, ultimately leading to the formation of the Amateur Press Association (Petrik 1992). The rise of science fiction fandom in the 1920s and 1930s (Ross 1991) built on this foundation, representing one of the most prominent and enduring examples of organized fan communities. Television fandom, in turn, has provided a supportive context through which many women, excluded from the male-only club that science fiction fandom had largely become, could develop their skills and hone their talents. By the 1970s, many women were remixing television footage to create their own fanvids, writing and editing their own zines, creating elaborate costumes, singing original folk songs, and painting images, all inspired by their favorite television series (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Coppa 2008). With the rise of networked computing, these fan communities did important work, providing their female participants with access to new skills and technologies as their members took their first steps into cyberspace, reversing early conceptions about the gendering of digital culture as a space only for masculine mastery. In particular, female fans were

early adopters of social network technologies such as LiveJournal and Dreamwith, using the resources offered by new media technologies (podcasting, mp3s, video-sharing sites) to create their own distinctive forms of participatory culture.

These types of communities have embraced new technologies as they emerged, particularly when such tools offered them new means of social and cultural interactions. Rather than looking at platforms such as YouTube and Twitter as "new," we consider these sites where multiple existing forms of participatory culture—each with its own historical trajectory, some over a century old—come together, which is part of what makes such platforms so complex to study. The popularity of Twitter, for instance, was driven by how efficiently the site facilities the types of resource sharing, conversation, and coordination that communities have long engaged in. The site's early success owes little to official brand presence; big-name entertainment properties, companies, and celebrities began flocking to the microblogging platform only after its success was considered buzzworthy (a few exceptional early adopters notwithstanding, of course). Launched at the 2007 South by Southwest Interactive festival, a favorite event for people in media-related industries, Twitter quickly enabled individual marketers to build their personal brands, to connect with one another, to demonstrate their social networking abilities, and to share their "thought leadership." Marketers, advertisers, and public relations professionals constituted a good portion of the early professionals using the site at a time when the rules of marketing were rapidly changing and a new crop of professionals were cementing their status and demonstrating their prowess in the "digital era."

The same year Twitter launched, so too did *Mad Men*, AMC's multi-Emmy-award-winning series about 1960s advertising agency Sterling Cooper. *Mad Men* celebrates what many people consider a "golden era" of U.S. mass marketing. The series serves as both a retrospective on the broadcast era and an exploration of another time in marketing when the rules were in flux and new advertising practices were developing around an increasingly important new media form (in this case, television).

It almost seems inevitable now that Twitter would prove a natural extension for the drama of *Mad Men*. Since season one, ad man Don Draper and fellow Sterling Cooper employees Pete Campbell, Joan Holloway, and Roger Sterling (or, rather, someone performing their identities) had been providing advice to readers through a Tumblr blog. However, on August 12, 2008, in the midst of the series's second season, Draper showed up on Twitter, gaining several thousand followers in a few days. Soon, Pete, Joan, Roger, and almost the full cast of *Mad Men* characters arrived. During and between episodes, their followers could watch the characters interact and even join conversations with them. Some wholly new creations began to appear in the Twitter/*Mad Men* narrative as well, including Sterling Cooper mailroom employee Bud Melman and the office's Xerox copy machine.

The *Mad Men* characters on Twitter were often playful and self-referential. Despite the obvious questions about how characters from the 1960s were using a modern communication platform, why they would share personal thoughts publicly, or how a Xerox machine could tweet, the interaction largely fit within the parameters of the show's storyline, deepening engagement with existing stories rather than challenging the narrative or taking it in new directions. Some tweets referenced facts the audience knew but most characters didn't, such as the closeted homosexuality of art director Sal. Others alluded to contemporary political events in relation to developments on the show, such as the rise to prominence of Joe "the plumber" Wurzelbacher as the quintessential middle-class citizen during the 2008 U.S. presidential election (King 2009).

A growing number of high-profile bloggers, especially in the fan and brand spheres, praised AMC's marketing prowess. This praise was somewhat misdirected, however: as it turned out, the tweeting *Mad Men* (like their Tumblr forebears) were not affiliated with AMC or the show. Instead, fans of the show had inhabited the identities of favorite characters. As the popularity of these virtual versions of *Mad Men*'s characters escalated, AMC contacted Twitter to ascertain who was behind the accounts. Twitter interpreted this inquiry as a copyright challenge from AMC and suspended several user accounts,

under the guise of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, on August 26, 2008, about two weeks after Draper's first tweet.

Twitter's suspension of the accounts fit a narrative that media fans and marketers alike knew well. Cease-and-desist orders have become an all-too-familiar means of correspondence between brands and their audiences in an era when prohibitionist corporate attitudes have collided with the collaborative nature of online social networks. There was immediate outcry against AMC for disrespecting its fans, pointing out that this activity had become an engine for generating interest and deepening engagement in a niche cable show with high critical praise but underwhelming ratings.

Part of AMC's ambivalence about *Mad Men*'s Twitter popularity was likely driven by marketers' uncertainty about ceding control, in some ways paralleling *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner's own reputation as a self-professed "control freak" who "approves every actor, costume, hairstyle and prop" (Witchel 2008). Weiner's reputation for tight control has extended beyond careful monitoring of the production; he has spoken out vehemently against ways of viewing or experiencing the show of which he disapproves. Says Weiner, "I met this guy who was creating software where you could watch *Mad Men* and you could chat with your friend while you're watching it, and things would pop up, and facts would pop up, and I said, 'You're a human battery. Turn the fucking thing off! You're not allowed to watch the show anymore. You're missing the idea of sitting in a dark place and having an experience'" (quoted in Jung 2009). Weiner's response is emotional rather than legal, but both his complaint and AMC's actions in response to tweeting fans reflect a desire on the part of the media industries to maintain a tight grip on the reception and circulation of content. While the attention to detail that Weiner and his staff consistently display is part of what drives the show's reputation and its audience's enjoyment, expanding that tight control over how *Mad Men* is viewed, discussed, and spread restricts the show's circulation and dampens audience enthusiasm.

In many cases, however, the people writing as *Mad Men* characters had professional as well as personal interest in the show. Several were marketers themselves (Draper, for instance, was performed by

strategist Paul Isakson with digital agency space150), and these fans drew on their professional identities to lobby for account reinstatement. Strategist Bud Caddell (who created the original character Bud Melman on Twitter) launched WeAreSterlingCooper.org to act as "command central" for the community of fans participating in the Twitter fan fiction and to articulate their rights to continue posting. The site issued "a rallying cry to brands and fans alike to come together and create together":

> Fan fiction. Brand hijacking. Copyright misuse. Sheer devotion. Call it what you will, but we call it the blurred line between content creators and content consumers, and it's not going away. We're your biggest fans, your die-hard proponents, and when your show gets cancelled we'll be among the first to pass around the petition. Talk to us. Befriend us. Engage us. But please, don't treat us like criminals. (Caddell 2008)

In the midst of the controversy, marketer Carri Bugbee, who had tweeted as @peggyolson, opened up new Twitter account @Peggy_Olson to continue writing. She started with, "I worked hard. I did my job. But the boys at Twitter are just as churlish as the boys at Sterling Cooper. Such a pity that they're so petty" (quoted in Siegler 2008). As fan tweeting and public discussion about the controversy increased, AMC did a swift about-face. Reportedly, AMC was following advice from its digital marketing agency Deep Focus, which itself had suffered criticism from marketers for preaching the value of social media while working with a client blatantly stomping on fans' passion and expressions (Learmonth 2008). More visible after the suspension controversy, the Sterling Cooper Twitterers returned to their posts.

Perhaps the *Mad Men* snafu resulted from the continued prevalence of "stickiness" as the chief way to measure success. If AMC evaluated the success of promoting *Mad Men* only by the easily measurable traffic through its official channels, then discouraging anything that might distract people from these destinations makes sense. From that mindset, fan-created material off official *Mad Men* channels is in competition with the show, and any traffic those outlets receive dilutes the reach of the show's official presence. This approach assigns no value

to how fan-created-and-circulated content might drive awareness and engagement in a show indirectly, because it cannot be easily quantified.

Beyond the lingering desire to cling to a stickiness model, companies are often just uncertain about audiences spreading material for their own purposes. Though marketers idealize a dream audience that will passively pass along official (viral) messages, they know that the reality is much messier: fans who create new material or pass along existing media content ultimately want to communicate something about themselves. Fans may seek to demonstrate their own technical prowess, to gain greater standing within a niche community, to speculate about future developments, or to make new arguments using texts already familiar to their own audiences. As the *Mad Men* Twitter example proves, content often gains traction when people are given the latitude to use "official" media texts to communicate something about themselves.

The clash of professional concerns and fan enthusiasm within the *Mad Men* Twitter community caused particular consternation. Since the *Mad Men* Twitterers were marketers, professional motivations also drove their fan creation. Because of this, Deep Focus initially indicated that the Twitterers shouldn't be considered fans (Caddell 2008), suggesting their professions removed them from the logics of fandom, locating them instead squarely within the economics of "corporate America."

Further, Caddell describes infighting among the Twitterers as their popularity grew, with multiple contenders vying to portray popular characters and some more secretive members concerned that, if their true identities were "outed," their professional standing could be compromised. Meanwhile, some of these fans used their role in this controversy to demonstrate their own knowledge about Twitter and their understanding of fan enthusiasm, building recognition within the marketing community. After the controversy subsided, Caddell published the report "Becoming a Mad Man"; Bugbee built a new agency, Big Deal PR—drawing, in part, on the controversy and the Shorty Award she won for her Twitter portrayal of Peggy Olson; and several others have drawn on their participation in this fan activity through professional publications or conference presentations. In the

process, tension over who claimed ownership of the fan activity and which Twitterers took credit for this moment of success became public. For instance, when Bugbee created a South by Southwest Interactive panel about the *Mad Men*/Twitter phenomenon, Caddell (2009a) publicly discussed the politics of panelist selection, blogging about the omission of himself and other prominent "fans" who were pivotal in the movement.

The circulation of media content within participatory culture can serve a range of interests, some cultural (such as promoting a particular genre or performer), some personal (such as strengthening social bonds between friends), some political (such as critiquing the construction of gender and sexuality within mass media), some economic (such as those which serve the immediate needs of everyday individuals, as well as those which serve the needs of media companies). We are not arguing that fans are somehow resisting consumer capitalism and its intellectual property regimes through these various processes and practices, as many of even these unauthorized activities might indirectly profit media companies and brands. Whatever audiences' motivations, they may discover new markets, generate new meanings, renew once-faded franchises, support independent producers, locate global content which was never commercially introduced in a local market, or disrupt and reshape the operations of contemporary culture in the process. In some cases, these outcomes are the direct goal of participatory culture; in others, they are a byproduct. Companies that tell audiences to keep their hands off a brand's intellectual property cut themselves off from these processes, many of which might create and prolong the value of media texts.

The media industries understand that culture is becoming more participatory, that the rules are being rewritten and relationships between producers and their audiences are in flux. Few companies, however, are willing to take what may be seen as substantial risks with potentially valuable intellectual property. Fans' desires and corporate interests sometimes operate in parallel, yet they never fully coincide, in part because even companies that embrace the ideals of audience engagement are uncertain about how much control to abdicate. Watching AMC and Deep Focus sometimes reject and sometimes embrace

the efforts of their fans to promote *Mad Men*, regardless of these fans' alternative motivations, provides a glimpse into the limits of current industry understanding of what we call spreadable media. The fans in the *Mad Men* case are themselves part of the branded entertainment industry, using their recreational time to consider how this new cultural economy might operate. Some have publicly acknowledged that their actions crossed the lines which normally separate producers from their audiences, while others were wary to speak out, unsure what was at risk as they ventured into this uncertain terrain. However, these marketers/fans and their fictional characters articulated audience desires to participate more actively in producing and circulating media and professional desires to make marketing and media texts more participatory.

Corporate interests will never fully align with those of participatory culture, and frictions will frequently emerge. For instance, people are deeply ambivalent about how media companies and corporate communicators participate in such an environment. With audiences' greater autonomy, they seek more explicit acknowledgment from companies but are concerned with how the active participation of corporations might distort communities or that corporations will only embrace audience practices in the ways they can most easily profit from them. Participatory culture is not synonymous with the business practices that have been labeled Web 2.0, a distinction we will explore more fully in chapter 1. We are all struggling over the shape our culture(s) will take in the coming decades, a struggle being tackled on uneven terms and with unequal resources. We see participatory culture as a relative term—culture is more participatory now than it was under older regimes of media power in many places. Yet we are a long way away from anything approaching full participation.

All of this suggests ways we are revising the concept of participatory culture to reflect the realities of a dramatically altered and still-evolving mediascape. We are moving from an initial focus on fandom as a particular subculture to a larger model that accounts for many groups that are gaining greater communicative capacity within a networked culture and toward a context where niche cultural production is increasingly influencing the shape and direction of mainstream media. We

are moving from focusing on the oppositional relationship between fans and producers as a form of cultural resistance to understanding those roles as increasingly and complexly intertwined. We are moving from a celebration of the growth of participatory opportunities toward a view tempered by concern for the obstacles blocking many people from meaningful participation. We will return throughout the book to debates about the terms of our participation, about how our participation is valued or blocked through various corporate policies and practices, and about which participants are welcomed, marginalized, and excluded.

Papyrus and Marble

The innovations, and struggles, of participatory culture that take place within the broad interplay between top-down institutional and bottom-up social forces have shaped the spread of media within and across cultures. There is a long history of such cultural exchanges, conducted through various channels and practices. The rise of networked computing and the ways its components have been absorbed into participatory culture and deployed through social network sites represents a new configuration of long-existing practices. (MIT media historian William Uricchio traces some key chapters of that history in our enhanced book, showing how media from coins to printed books have flowed within and across cultures.) Even if grassroots channels of communication may have disruptive effects on existing monopolies of knowledge, spreadable media needs to be understood in evolutionary rather than revolutionary terms.

How media circulates has been a central concern of media studies at least since the 1951 publication of Harold Innis's *The Bias of Communication*. In Innis's formulation, the dominant means of communication in a given society influences the production and control of information. Calling for an approach to media studies centered on "the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time," Innis noted that some media (stone or marble, for example) are "heavy and durable," preserving information for long periods but also leading to top-down control over what information is preserved. Other media (papyrus, for example) are "light and easily transported," allowing

for their quick and easy spread across a geographically dispersed area (1951, 33). Often, those media that enable mobility are also low cost, allowing for their deployment by and among more people and resulting in more decentralized communication.

Innis argues that ongoing tension between durability and mobility—between marble and papyrus—has determined what kinds of information gained visibility in its own time and what has been preserved for subsequent generations. In his account, shifts in the technological infrastructure have the potential to construct or undermine "monopolies of knowledge" closely associated with other sources of institutional power. Innis's focus on how different configurations of technologies may enable or constrain the circulation of information has been taken up by more recent writers seeking to explain the rise of phenomena such as digital rights management systems (DRM) as attempts to shape audience behavior. Tarleton Gillespie describes the system of constraints determining how users can engage with and share digital media texts:

> Constructing technology to regulate human activity, such that it limits all users in a fair and effective way, is never simply a technical matter. It is a heterogeneous effort in which the material artifacts, the institutions that support them, the laws that give them teeth, and the political and cultural mechanisms that give them legitimacy, must all be carefully aligned into a loosely regimented but highly cohesive, hybrid network. (2006, 652)

Different technological choices, then, can shape the uses the public makes of media content, facilitating some while constraining others, but technologies can never be designed to absolutely control how material gets deployed within a given social and cultural context. Indeed, both popular and niche uses of technology always emerge far outside anything foreseen by the designer.

Yet the more companies and governments roadblock the spread of media texts, the more grassroots circulation requires advanced technical skills to work around those obstacles. In the process, many people are shut out of being able to meaningfully shape the circulation

process. Gillespie describes user agency as a mixture of technical capacities (being able to "act with a tool and on that tool") and social capacities ("the user's perception of their ability and right to do so") (2006, 661). Using transportation as an example, Gillespie discusses the range of cultural resources, economic incentives, and technological innovations which have encouraged some users to fix their own cars, even as he describes ways current car design has made this less likely than in the past and has limited which groups of people feel able to do so without causing more damage than they are fixing. Spreadability is coming to a head right now because a complex set of changes has made it easier for grassroots communities to circulate content than ever before, yet the requirements of skills and literacies, not to mention access to technologies, are not evenly distributed across the population, an issue which we will examine throughout this book.

However, we again do not wish to ascribe too much power to any particular technology or platform. While Innis's formulation presumes there will always be a dominant communication medium "biasing" society in one direction or another, this present moment of media convergence is one when there are multiple (sometimes competing and sometimes complementary) media systems whose intersections provide the infrastructure for contemporary communication (as the Susan Boyle and *Mad Men* examples suggest about the interplay between broadcast and digital networks). Some of these structures (such as the digital rights management systems Gillespie describes) seek the weight and authority prescribed to previous durable media. Often, such structures seek to lock down content, limiting or controlling its circulation. Other current platforms (such as YouTube, which makes it easy to embed its content elsewhere) have the freedom and mobility once ascribed to papyrus, enabling their rapid circulation across a range of social networks. Some media texts are made to last, while others (such as Twitter) are intended to be timely and disposable.

If various platforms offer divergent opportunities for participation, preservation, and mobility—and each system of communication sustains different relations between producers and citizens—then the established geopolitical system also creates hierarchies which make it harder for some groups (and some nations) to participate than others.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, a leading theorist of globalization, is another who has followed in Innis's footsteps. Appadurai observes that "cultural objects, including images, languages, and hairstyles, now move ever more swiftly across regional and national boundaries. This acceleration is a consequence of the speed and spread of the Internet and the simultaneous, comparative growth in travel, cross-cultural media and global advertising" (2010, 4). Appadurai sees this accelerated flow of information and culture being facilitated not simply by the efforts of multinational capitalism but also through the expansion of illegal and unauthorized markets. These markets often cobble together systems of exchange that support the spread of media content and cultural values (but also guns and drugs) outside official and commercial channels. Often, he suggests, these underground, grassroots circuits—which serve the needs of less-affluent or marginalized peoples—"ride on" older systems of exchange which emerged from even more longstanding processes of globalization.

Appadurai's model concedes fundamental inequalities in terms of which countries have access to these different forms of circulation, which face roadblocks that make it difficult to meaningfully participate in such exchanges, and how these inequalities of participation shape which ideas get put into circulation. There are, as Appadurai's work demonstrates, many different kinds of networks which reach many different layers of societies and which travel between many different nodes in the system. While our book details the potentials of spreadability as a means of ensuring that more people have access to the means of cultural circulation, we believe it's crucial to always be cognizant that not everyone has equal access to the technologies and to the skills needed to deploy them.

Despite (or perhaps because of) these inequalities, though, we are seeing some spectacular shifts in the flow of information across national borders and, as a consequence, in the relations between the peoples of different countries. As Appadurai notes, "This volatile and exploding traffic in commodities, styles, and information has been matched by the growth of both flows of cultural politics, visible most powerfully in the discourse of human rights, but also in the new languages of radical Christianity and Islam, and the discourse of civil

society activists, who wish to promote their own versions of global equity, entitlement, and citizenship" (2010, 5).

Journalists, bloggers, and other cyber-enthusiasts have celebrated the use of sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube by protesters across the Muslim world and their supporters from the West as a decisive sign that grassroots communicators might be able to route around government censors and that citizen journalists might be able to force international concerns onto the agenda of the professional news media. Consider, for example, the role such technologies played in the aftermath of Iran's hotly contested summer 2009 elections. Between June 7 and June 26, the Web Ecology Project (2009) at Harvard University recorded 2,024,166 tweets about the Iranian election, involving 480,000 people. Meanwhile, CNN's iReport received more than 1,600 citizen-produced reports from Iran (Carafano 2009), mostly photographs but including videos of the actions in the street, recorded and transmitted via mobile phones. (Our enhanced book features a more involved discussion by Henry Jenkins on how "spreadability" applies to these events in Iran and the 2011 Arab Spring movements as well as the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States.)

Sean Aday et al.'s 2010 report *Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics* argues that Twitter participation inside Iran was too low to have made much difference on the ground (estimating that as few as 100 people may have produced most of the Twitter traffic out of the country) and that the regime in power likewise used social network tools to monitor the behavior of protesters and often to circulate counterrevolutionary materials. However, the report concludes, "Where Twitter and other new media clearly did matter is how they conveyed information about the protests to the outside world. Traditional media were at a disadvantage in covering events inside Iran because of restrictions placed on journalists, and thus ended up relying on new media for content. Hence, the outside world's perceptions of the protests were crucially shaped by Twitter (as conveyed through blogs and other means), amateur videos uploaded to YouTube and Facebook, and other sources" (22). In Innis's terms, what happened challenged two "monopolies of knowledge" which potentially regulated the flow of information from Tehran to the United States: the

Iranian government's desire to contain news of the protest and the mainstream news media's ability to determine the priority it gave to covering specific events. For Appadurai, the same data might have illustrated continued inequalities in the speed and spread of communication, such that people struggling for power within Iran were forced to rely on influence and attention from the Western world to shape events within their own country.

Clay Shirky has argued that Twitter's impact in this instance was more affective than informational: "As a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think. [. . .] Twitter makes us empathize. It makes us part of it. Even if it's just retweeting, you're aiding the goal that dissidents have always sought: the awareness that the outside world is paying attention is really valuable" (2009). These strong emotions reflected the cumulative effect of an ongoing but always fragile flow of messages from the streets of Tehran. Much as daily digital communication about mundane matters led to people using social network sites feeling stronger personal ties to their friends, the flow of political messages through Twitter helped make them feel more directly implicated by the protest. Global citizens (including a strong diasporic community in North America and western Europe) helped the Iranian protesters evade potential censorship and technical roadblocks, translated their thoughts into English and other Western languages, flagged reliable information from rumors, passed what they had learned onto others, and rallied news outlets to pay closer attention.

Newsrooms are still struggling to figure out what their new roles may be in an environment where the demand for information can be driven by affect and shaped by what happens within online communities, where citizens may make demands on what journalists cover and may cobble together information from a range of resources if traditional news outlets fail to provide desired information. While smooth relations between grassroots and commercial media can be rare, the two can coexist within a more layered media environment, each holding the other accountable for its abuses, each scanning the other for potentially valuable content that might otherwise fall through the cracks.

However, one could argue that these acts of circulation (and discussions of circulation) substituted for actual political action. Jodi Dean contends in an essay on what she calls "communicative capitalism" that the expansion of the public's capacity to circulate messages has too often been fetishized as an end in itself, often at the expense of real debate or action on the ground that might seek to directly change the struggles taking place:

> Today, the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond. Rather than responding to messages sent by activists and critics, they counter with their own contributions to the circulating flow of communications, hoping that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions dominance or stickiness. [. . .] Under conditions of the intensive and extensive proliferation of media, messages are more likely to get lost as mere contributions to the circulation of content. (2005, 54)

Dean raises an important caveat about how means can become ends in themselves, especially amid the techno-euphoria that has surrounded the expansion of communication capacities. Twitter (as a new company seeking to increase its visibility in the marketplace) benefited from what happened in this case as much or more than the Tehran protestors did. Yet we feel that Dean goes too far in dismissing the meaningfulness of popular acts of circulation. She writes, "Messages are contributions to circulating content—not actions to elicit responses. [. . .] So, a message is no longer primarily a message from a sender to a receiver. Uncoupled from contexts of action and application—as on the Web or in print and broadcast media—the message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant" (59). For Dean, meaningful participation is a fantasy used to sell products and services rather than a description of contemporary political and economic realities. We disagree. Web 2.0 companies may often seek to sell longstanding cultural practices back to the communities where

they originated, but Dean's argument is every bit as disempowering as corporate versions of "viral media" and ultimately fatalistic in its conclusions. Rather than seeing circulation as the empty exchange of information stripped of context and meaning, we see these acts of circulation as constituting bids for meaning and value.

We feel that it very much matters who sends the message, who receives it, and, most importantly, what messages get sent. Acts of circulation shape both the cultural and political landscape in significant ways, as we will demonstrate throughout this book. What happened with Iran was not revolutionary, in the sense that it led to a regime change, but it was profound, in the sense that it made people around the world more aware of the political dynamics on the ground in Tehran and left many of us feeling closer to a group of people who, for most of our lives, we had been told to hate and fear.

What's Next

Innis's distinction between marble and papyrus, storage and mobility, is helpful for considering the ways a more spreadable media culture breaks with the assumptions of both the broadcast paradigm and the "stickiness" model. Both broadcast and stickiness represent different kinds of "monopoly" structures, locking down access and limiting participation. Under the conditions we've been describing here, media content that remains fixed in location and static in form fails to generate sufficient public interest and thus drops out of these ongoing conversations. Throughout this chapter, we've detailed many examples of spreadability at work, including those from the realm of entertainment (Susan Boyle, *Mad Men*), news and politics (Iran), and marketing/customer service (Comcast). Insofar as spreadability becomes an attribute of the contemporary media landscape, it has the potential to dramatically reshape how central cultural and political institutions operate.

If we all accept that the media industries and marketing worlds are moving toward a model of circulation based on the logic of spreadability, and if we also accept that concepts such as the meme and the virus often distort the human agency involved in spreading media content, how might we better understand the ways in which material

travels within a networked culture? This core question will structure the rest of this book.

First, we consider the economic and social logics shaping this spreadable media landscape. Chapter 1 critiques the rhetoric and mindset of Web 2.0, examining what gets lost in contemporary business practices which seek to harness participatory culture for businesses' own economic gain and exploring some of the gaps emerging between the social logic that often shapes noncommercial production and the commodity logic that informs much of commercial culture. Chapter 2 digs further into the processes used to evaluate and appraise media content from yesteryear, examining the residual meanings and potential new value for content and brands as they move between commercial and noncommercial exchange.

Second, we consider ways the media industries have begun to reconceptualize their audiences as active participants whose labor helps determine the value of branded entertainment. Chapter 3 focuses on how the television industry is rethinking audience measurement as it seeks new business models built on audience engagement. In particular, we explore how transmedia entertainment has emerged as an alternative strategy for courting and mobilizing audiences behind media franchises. Chapter 4 directs attention toward the nature of participation, suggesting a need to move from the broadcast era's focus on individual audience members to an emphasis on socially active and networked audiences. Along the way, we consider which forms of participation are and are not valued within current business models. We make the case for a greater focus on processes of deliberation rather than aggregation and on the value of "listening" to what audience members say rather than simply "hearing" that a brand or media property has been mentioned. And we examine the gaps in access and participation that persist in our culture.

Third, in chapter 5, we explore why some types of media content spread more widely and more quickly than others. In focusing specifically on marketing (in the first part of the chapter) and on activist and civic media (in the second), we seek to link the spread of material with the social needs of online communities. We draw on John Fiske's (1989b) notion of "producerly" media texts to explore how networked

communities transform mass-produced media into "resources" which fuel their ongoing conversations with each other.

Finally, our book explores how spreadable practices may support a more diverse array of media options than the old broadcast paradigm—focusing on independent and Christian media in chapter 6 and transnational media flows in chapter 7. In chapter 6, we examine how independent media makers from film, publishing, music, comics, and games are building new kinds of relations with their audiences. While these practices may not match the economic advantages enjoyed by mass-media producers, they have allowed independent artists to expand access to and increase the visibility of their productions. Chapter 7 argues that a combination of pirates, immigrants, and pop cosmopolitans have helped circulate more media content beyond geographic borders than ever before. Much like the creations of independent media makers, these cultural goods often still operate from a position of marginality, unable to compete directly with dominant media industries. Yet there are signs that their cultural and economic impact is increasing, thanks to their ability to travel through grassroots media channels.