



Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, Joshua Green. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2013. xv + 351 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4350-8; ISBN 978-0-8147-4351-5; ISBN 978-0-8147-4390-4.

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Published on Jhistory (March, 2014)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek (Harvard)

Spreading a New Buzzword to Describe Participatory Culture

Spreadable Media is a recent, collective attempt to understand the participatory culture that is largely expressed through online and electronic media, though we see clearly throughout the book how this culture has spread to many other corners. This is very much capturing a moment in history: the technologies that the authors use as examples are outstripped by new applications even in the lag between submitting their text and the printing of the book. Their hope, then, is to capture the means of interacting with media rather than the media themselves. Anyone who watches a YouTube video or likes an article on Facebook; anyone who manipulates a Feminist Ryan Gosling meme or reposts a news article with a cheeky interpretive comment; anyone who writes online fan fiction or creates a video response—all are expressions of participatory culture, and all are contributors to spreadable media.

Considering that the book is jointly authored, informed by myriad contributions from scholars of media and culture, and concerned with diffuse phenomena, *Spreadable Media* coheres well. It is an aggregated text, though, synthesizing many original studies, and indeed, one failing of the book for me is its unclear methodology: original research is poorly distinguished from case studies conducted by other scholars, and we are given no indication of how the authors selected their sample and what guided their reading of it. Some of the best

insights in the book are the thoughts of others, giving the authors the curious prestige of providing a book-length object lesson of the value of curation in participatory culture—one of the key themes in the book. They go an extra distance in this regard, offering an “enhanced book” online in the form of a collection of micro-essays at www.spreadablemedia.org. This functions like a special issue of an open-access journal: the contributions are often useful, but the need to lay special claim to them and to present the book as a transmedia product has more than a whiff of branding to it.

The hand of the brand is evident in this project. The authors’s claim that their “goal is not to create a new buzzword” is either disingenuous or, in the parlance of the culture they are observing, an epic fail (p. 3). “Spreadability” is repeated and digestibly presented, even as the authors acknowledge the limit of metaphor and (rightly) insist on seeing these expressions of participatory culture in their cultural, political, and economic contexts. At the book’s very beginning, we are told, “If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” (p. 1). This is more a buzzy, normative declaration than an empirical observation, and it is our best clue as to what informs the analysis that follows. They set their term against comparable buzzwords: spreadable not sticky, spreadable not pirated, spreadable not viral. These are the themes that shape what follows.

By endorsing “spreadable not sticky,” they take on

Malcolm Gladwell's term from *The Tipping Point* (2000). They offer a series of binary contrasts to show how stickiness is static and rooted in the commercial priorities of corporations. "Stickiness" is described more conveniently than exhaustively here, but the case study that follows of Scottish singer Susan Boyle's success highlights how spreadability captures features stickiness does not. This sets the authors up for a critique of Web 2.0: their elegant, useful, and deceptively simple phrase "the imperfectly aligned interests of media producers and audiences" is underscored again and again in their analysis (p. 49). Some media producers do catch on, surpassing the model of stickiness, and examples of corporate bodies crafting spreadable marketing campaigns are given ambivalent treatment: what is the line between interesting, engaging material and exploitative maneuvers to generate more consumers or consumption? The authors seem to suggest there is no line: a campaign can be both at the same time. Thus, television program *Ghost Whisperer* is praised because the show-runner ran a deliberate and savvy campaign to court viewers, whereas *Friday Night Lights* is not so much damned as deemed uninteresting because its creators only imagined its existence in the traditional world of broadcast television. Commercial success is not forgotten in this analysis—both programs are there to make the networks money—but the authors prefer to focus on the means rather than the ends.

The theme "spreadable not pirated" continues the economic ambivalence present in this imperfect alignment of interests. The authors frame "piracy" as a moral rather than a legal distinction. File sharing and piracy are dubbed "two competing moral systems for characterizing the unauthorized circulation of media content;" the word "unauthorized" reveals that they cannot quite escape the legal questions implicated in the act (p. 53). In asserting that piracy is a term which allows producers to frame the act as illegitimate and that file sharers are merely taking control of the means by which they engage with the product, the authors tell us nothing new. They even offer the familiar rejoinder that pirates are pioneers, creating new markets for Hollywood media products (seen in their example of China and the television program *Prison Break*). More compelling is their analogy of the barn-raising—activity of a moral or gift economy that is damaged by the introduction of commercial activity on its fringes, such as renting parking spaces or selling drinks to people who come and watch the barn being raised.

The third theme, "spreadable not viral," challenges the popular but inaccurate metaphor for spread products.

The action associated with virality—inflecting or injecting—is too unidirectional and does not accommodate the many instances of personal agency, repositioning, and transformation that occur as media are spread. In each of these challenges—to sticky, pirated, and viral—the authors fulfil their goal of "seeking terms that more accurately describe the complexity of how we all engage with media texts," even as they fail in their other goal of negating "spreadable" as a buzzword (p. 3). Rather, it becomes the preferred catchphrase.

The most compelling theme in the book is not a challenge to an existing term but the rescue and revaluation of an old one: appraisal, and its role in the work of curation. Given the economic imbalance in these media encounters—corporations that exploit fan communities, producers who ignore dedicated but undesirable audiences when they cancel television series, and the pernicious imperfectly aligned interests—how do we assign value or worth (the words, from Lewis Hyde, are used advisedly) to the participation that so many engage in? The authors note that YouTube "encourages users to think of attention as itself a kind of currency," and certainly it is as much currency as most media spreaders are likely to receive (p. 92). Despite this lack of compensation, fans continue to generate novel media texts suited to their passions and the community they have built and identified with. The authors liken this to curation at museums, where the value is in "critiquing, organizing, and displaying/exhibiting artifacts" (p. 85). This contributes to their application of Hyde's gift economy, and it is a sensible way of understanding what is happening with participatory culture.

There is much in *Spreadable Media* to praise. Many treatments of this subject fall into a techno-determinist or "breathless enthusiast" pose. The authors are rarely so swept up by their material, and although they indicate their sympathies early on—they are with the spreaders—they are not afraid to credit corporations and producers that play the spreading game well. If this project inspires further anthropology of creation, that will be a useful contribution to social research. Also, they treat the phenomenon historically: though the technologies may be new and their reach may be farther and faster than it has ever been, nonetheless the impulse to share, to recommend, to reshape, and to curate is not itself new. Finally, they do not overstate the productive nature of the audience: they recognize that someone "productive" in one area may be "passive" in another (and the scare quotes are theirs—p. 155); that enthusiasm for the productive audience may be a means of removing the taint of

commercialism from the act of consumption; and, following from Dallas Smyth, that viewing itself can be classed as work, so that no audience is ever truly passive.

My prevailing criticism of the book—and this is not a new complaint about cultural studies—is that it lacks, for want of a better word, importance. There is no question that fandom is an important part of people’s lives and that their participation in the culture surrounding games, films, or programs that they like is meaningful in a sincere way. Yet somewhere between the musings of Karl Marx and Neil Postman, I am wondering why all this effort deserves so much attention and heroic praise. Is fan engagement in consumable media a palaver, a substitute for meaningful employment which does not exist or engagement with communities from which some people are

estranged? These questions are not asked in *Spreadable Media*, though they lingered for me as a possible answer for why these entertainment media matter so much to the audiences described. The authors draw attention, in different parts of the book, to two different spreadable campaigns from 2009. One was an effort from Domino’s Pizza to engage with online audiences to make a better pizza; the other was an effort from citizens in Iran to express on Twitter their displeasure with the presidential election, followed swiftly by the documentation on that same medium of the brutal response with which their protests were met. The spread of dissent changed nothing concerning Iran’s election results nor the conditions of its citizens. The spread of consumer engagement did, arguably, result in a better Domino’s pizza. Small gains.

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Citation: Michael B. Munnik. Review of Jenkins, Henry; Ford, Sam; Green, Joshua, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. March, 2014.

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