

What's Stopping the (Global) Flow of TV?

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Japanese animation has been experienced globally since the anime industry's beginning. The first-recognized anime with a serialized storyline, Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy*, premiered in Japan in 1963, and later that year it aired on American television. Anime shown on American broadcast television has always been an exception: some has aired on broadcast networks, such as *Pokemon* or other kids' shows, while other series have been erratically shown on cable television in small blocks on the Sci-Fi channel, Cartoon Network, and the International Channel. Similar random programming has also occurred in dozens of other countries, but the case of the American distribution industry is particularly pertinent because it acts as the primary bridge between Japan and global fans.

Alongside the distribution of Japanese animation on television or in purchasable formats such as DVD, global networks of fans have shared multiple series of anime – both translated and untranslated – via tape trading clubs since the 1970s and more recently via the internet as fansubs. Official distribution was rarer back in the '70s and '80s, but the general goal of anime fan clubs back then was to spread an awareness of anime. Most of the time, these clubs facilitated trading networks, which jumped onto Usenet and the Web once the internet became popularized. And the first members of the American distribution industry that founded or entered companies to bring more (legal) anime to the States usually dabbled in these underground fan networks. This industry was and still is rickety, but it has remained operational, and while companies have died out, more have appeared to replace them continue licensing anime for American (and other English-speaking) audiences. However, these changes in the industry have taken place alongside the development and maturation of digital fansub communities and practices online, as well as other illicit web services such as streaming video aggregators.

The American distribution industry is the largest and most stable of its kind to disseminate anime. However, in the face of fan piracy, it has in recent years developed digital distribution strategies to continue licensing shows and distribute more shows for non-Japanese markets. While fans argue that the quick nature of digital piracy has helped to generate enthusiasm that the industry exploits for licensing insights, the truth remains that fans who watch these shows before official distribution do not inject enough money back into the distribution and production industries.

In the face of fan piracy, new efforts to provide digital options for fans – instead of downloading fansubs – have recently appeared. FUNimation and Crunchyroll currently license the majority of anime within the United States and provide subtitled streaming options for fans, for free. Both companies also have made efforts to simulcast the most popular shows, by providing subtitled episodes an hour after they premiere on Japanese television for the American market. Users who pay a subscription fee get to watch these simulcasts immediately, while

others will watch them for free about a week later. While some companies have attempted to erect paywalls to make some return on their licensing investments, it seems the majority are streaming a large number of series for free with only ad-funded revenue. Still, the saturation of free series does not induce fans to purchase DVDs, and thus the profitability of VHS and DVD releases is rare today.

Foreign distribution of anime continues to attract niche audiences. Small groups of foreign fans are not as critical to the Japanese animation industry as the local markets that provide the most revenue for producers and distributors. Before the turn of the century, Japanese companies barely recognized that foreign fans were enthusiastic about anime; nowadays, the licensing of anime by foreign companies occurs only to bring in any money potentially lost to fansub audiences.

Regardless of the type of media, the relationships between international companies are difficult to navigate. The time it takes for a television show to make it from the country of origin to a foreign audience completely reproduced for each market takes time, and the fan distribution communities that are not mediated by monetary interests achieve results much faster.

The issue of fans trying to watch international television ultimately comes down to ease of access: that is, which shows are available quickest in an acceptable format. The streaming initiatives of American anime distribution companies seem to have solved the problem, as long as they can continue to license every show, every season, as has been done for Summer 2010. But even with these options available, not all fans are aware of them, or at least don't use them, opting instead to access anime through illegal means.