

Rethinking the Audience/Producer Relationship

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Codebreakers, Tastemakers, and Transformers: Audience Influence in the Age of Industry
'Synergy'

Increased connectivity and real-time communication among networks and communities of fans on-line have significantly altered producer-audience relations in recent years – but only for some audiences, three of which particularly de-center the producers' ability to control reception. First, the existence of loose networks of disseminators, analysts, and codebreakers have significantly tested writers' and showrunners' ability to produce puzzles and narrative complexity dense enough to challenge the web's new collective intelligence resources. While corporations' resources dwarf those of the average viewer, making cultural struggle between the industry and its audience necessarily uneven, the resources of fan analyst networks may, under some circumstances, collectively overshadow producers. Generally, fans interested in approaching media primarily in terms of puzzle-solving live in symbiosis with the industry; the threat they pose remains minimal because even as they leak spoilers and reveal solutions to narrative mysteries, new questions always await unveiling, and untimely spoilers often reincorporate themselves seamlessly as publicity. Yet, because of their size and combined assets, these networks also contain the potential to more aggressively destabilize the legitimacy of the industry's products. Under what circumstances might we imagine fan collective intelligence networks, unwieldy and diffuse though they are, operating as a critical cultural apparatus to effectively check the influence of corporate media producers?

Secondly, the rise of cybercelebrities, willing to sacrifice privacy for fame without the compensation of fortune, have become a new class of tastemakers, spoilers, and intermediaries who corporations may deal with as "representative" of the larger audience, and who thus gain disproportionate power to sway producers' understanding of audience desires as well as to influence audience understanding of "the industry." In the last ten years the inclusion of on-line fans within televised storylines, the staff of media corporations, and marketing materials and practices, has often been reported as a triumph for audiences and an end to lopsided cultural economics which pit producers and consumers against each other. Viral marketing promises inclusion in production and access to industry insiders as non-monetary compensation for fans' creative and social labor. Celebrity bloggers like Perez Hilton increasingly compete directly with professional paparazzi. Producers of television series "Supernatural" wrote a caricature of a female fan fiction author into the show, and publicly claim that the series' misogyny results from changes in plot made at the behest of their female fan-critics. The dream peddled in coverage of these events seems to offer all fans the chance to be heard by industry professionals, to see media molded around their particular desires, and to become part of the industry itself. However, this special status can only ever be available to a select group who become part of a new semi-professional class. Like all rags-to-riches stories which keep the poor poor by allowing them to believe they will one day become rich, very few fans actually find success within the industry, and those who do cannot possibly represent the full range of identities, fantasies, and priorities of the fans they leave behind.

Third, the proliferation of fan communities who craft counter-representations in the form of fan films, video editing, literary reinterpretations, and media criticism profoundly reshape perception regarding the significance of televisual productions by redirecting value to grassroots production. Media corporations show signs of slowly accepting the argument that fan counter-representations benefit them financially by increasing brand recognition, sustaining interest in old franchises, and encouraging further expenditure, all at no increased monetary cost. However, counter-representations may just as easily suggest a growing DIY aesthetic and return to a reworked understanding of “the local” that uses “original” publications as little more than raw materials for fans’ art and literature: fans who may even call themselves fans of what fans produce, not fans of any particular mass media product or genre. While it’s true that fan production can come with great expenditure which ends up in industry coffers, it’s also true that the cost of entrance into fan production can be shockingly low, providing a potential outlet for a wide variety of demographics and perspectives which may otherwise receive very little attention, acknowledgement, or even partial incorporation by industry, even in the age of audience-producer synergy.

Across all three phenomena, I would suggest that the future potency of audience influence will depend on first, a commitment to unified, collective action without sacrificing internal critique, secondly, the internet’s access to a mass audience magnified by a strategy to draw the attention of mass numbers to individual themes, counter-representations, practices, and critiques, and finally, a collective recognition of differing interests between producers and audiences. What the content of that difference in interests might be, whether net neutrality or the profit motive or the ability to seamlessly stream content across technological platforms, and whether viewers can successfully act as a collective will determine the shape of the relationship between producers and audiences and the representations available in common culture in the years to come.