networked publics becomes a source of discursive and persuasive power—and insofar as the capacities to meaningfully participate online are linked to educational and economic opportunities—then the struggle over the right to participation is linked to core issues of social justice and equality.

As we've seen here, the nature of participation in the digital age is a complicated matter. For even those groups who have greater access to digital technologies and have mastered the skills to deploy them effectively toward their own end, our capacity to participate can be complicated by issues of who owns the platforms through which communication occurs and how their agendas shape how those tools can be deployed. And, even if we get our messages through, there is often a question of whether anyone is listening. None of this allows us to be complacent about the current conditions of networked communications, even if the expanded opportunities for participation give us reasons for hope and optimism.

What we are calling spreadability starts from an assumption that circulation constitutes one of the key forces shaping the media environment. It comes also from a belief that, if we can better understand the social and institutional factors that shape the nature of circulation, we may become more effective at putting alternative messages into circulation (a goal which brings us back to Enzensberger's talk of "aggressive forms of publicity"). This chapter has looked at the shapes that participation takes in societies increasingly using digital tools to communicate and gather. In chapter 5, we will argue that what spreads in this participatory environment is what John Fiske (1989b) might call the "producerly," texts which constitute resources that participatory communities deploy in their interactions with each other. In doing so, we move between a focus on the properties of the networked audience and the properties of texts which are increasingly being designed to spread through social network sites, whether by brands seeking to reach current or potential customers or by activists seeking to reach supporters.

5

DESIGNING FOR SPREADABILITY

The May 2010 issue of *Fast Company* profiled the creative agency Mekanism (Borden 2010), the group responsible for such successful online promotions as the double-entendre-laden Axe body wash campaign "Clean Your Balls." Claiming the company can guarantee "viral success," Mekanism proclaims that the language of sharing gifts with its brand communities is too soft for a client-services-driven world (quoted in Borden 2010). In other words, it can make more deals if it claims to be able to infect the world with content. But the agency sometimes falls victim to its own language, admitting that clients say, "You're the viral guys, push a button and make it go viral. Isn't that why we hired you?"

In actuality, rather than having some magic formula, Mekanism deeply understands the U.S. youth market and uses this knowledge to better engage that audience. The agency's staff keep their ears attuned to the needs and wants of those they are courting for the companies that pay them. They seed content aimed at particular audiences and deliver material that provides those audiences something unique to share within their communities. Mekanism deploys various quantitative tools to model how and why their media is spreading, creating metrics for success. The notion that the agency generates "virality" may be a stretch, but Mekanism puts significant effort into understanding audiences and creating texts which resonate with desired audiences. As they say, "post and pray" is not an option.

Through our arguments so far, we hope to have convinced readers that the spread of all forms of media relies as much (or more) on their circulation by the audience as it does on their commercial distribution, that spreadability is determined by processes of social appraisal rather than technical or creative wizardry and on the active participation of engaged audiences. In this chapter, we explore the creation of material designed to be spread.

Content creators do not work magic, nor are they powerless. Creators don't design viruses, nor do they simply wait for something to happen. Successful creators understand the strategic and technical aspects they need to master in order to create content more likely to spread, and they think about what motivates participants to share information and to build relationships with the communities shaping its circulation. They cannot fully predict whether audiences will embrace what they have designed, but a creator—whether professional or amateur—can place better bets through the listening processes discussed in chapter 4. In addition, creators consider elements of media texts which make them more likely to spread. This chapter explores the strategies, technical aspects, audience motivations, and content characteristics which creators might keep in mind in order to create content with a higher potential for spreadability. Many of our examples here are from marketing initiatives. However, as we will explore later in the chapter, these principles apply to civic groups, nonprofits, and independent media makers, among others.

The Uncertainty Principle

The creative industries have had a long struggle with predicting and measuring their products' success. Economist Richard Caves (2000) argues that uncertainty of demand is an everyday reality within the creative industries. These questions are exponentially harder to answer in today's spreadable media landscape, where many longstanding models for understanding media audiences no longer apply. However, there are a few sets of considerations which can help producers better create content that might resonate with audiences. These include longstanding processes the entertainment industry has used to minimize this uncertainty, technical and strategic considerations that ensure content is made available in forms that audiences will most likely find useful, and approaches for understanding what motivates audiences to circulate content.

First, entertainment companies have long used models of overproduction and formatting to address this uncertainty. As Amanda D. Lotz, a communication studies professor at the University of Michigan, discusses in our enhanced book, these traditional strategies for responding to this unpredictability carry over to a spreadable media environment. Key to understanding the "entertainment-based media industries," she writes, is recognizing the degree to which success is unpredictable. The primary response has been overproduction, writes Lotz:

> Television, film, and recording industry executives all work in a universe in which they know full well that more than 80 percent of what they develop and create will fail commercially. The key problem is that they don't know which 10 to 20 percent might actually succeed. So, while it is painful from a resource-allocation standpoint, the strategy has been to produce far more creative goods than might succeed and then see what works.

Spreadable media might enjoy lower sunk costs of production, Lotz suggests, particularly because audiences don't hold "the same high production-budget expectations that hobble established media" and because spreadable media's "circumvention of paid distribution reduces costs," allowing "creators to release preliminary content and then follow up on successes with sequels or extensions." Despite this, the best response remains relying on formatting; the best way to predict new success is to build on past success.

Second, in an era of digital sharing, there are a variety of technical and strategic considerations that can increase the chances content might be spread. Content is more likely to be shared if it is

- *Available when and where audiences want it*: Producers, whether professional or amateur, need to move beyond an "if you build it, they will come" mentality, taking (or sending) material to where audiences will find it most useful.

Portable: Audience members do not want to be stuck in one place; they want their media texts "on the go." Content has to be quotable (editable by the audience) and grabbable (easily picked up and inserted elsewhere by the audience). Audiences will often abandon material if sharing proves too onerous.

Easily reusable in a variety of ways: Media producers and media audiences circulate content for very different reasons, actually for very many different reasons. Creating media texts that are open to a variety of audience uses is crucial for creating material that spreads.

Relevant to multiple audiences: Content that appeals to more than one target audience, both intended and surplus audiences, has greater meaning as spreadable media.

Part of a steady stream of material: The "viral" mentality leads brands to invest all their energy in a particular media text that is expected to generate exponential hits. Blogging and microblogging platforms emphasize the importance of a regular stream of material, some of which may resonate more than others in ways creators may not always be able to predict.

Third, and most importantly, success in creating material people want to spread requires some attention to the patterns and motivations of media circulation, both of which are driven by the meanings people can draw from content. After all, humans rarely engage in meaningless activities. Sometimes, it may not be readily apparent why people are doing what they are doing, but striving to understand a person's or community's motivation and interest is key for creating texts more likely to spread.

One thing that is clear: people don't circulate material because advertisers or media producers ask them to, though they may do so to support a cause they are invested in. They might give someone a shirt with a designer label or even a T-shirt promoting a favorite film, and they might respond to questions about where someone could buy more shirts—but they are unlikely to stuff a catalog in a gift box.

When it comes to spreadability, not all content is created equal. Audiences constantly appraise media offerings, trying to ascertain their potential value as resources for sharing. Further, not all good content is necessarily good for sharing. In a gift economy, circulated texts say something about participants' perceptions of both the giver and the receiver; we all choose to share materials we value and anticipate others will value. People appraise the content they encounter according to their personal standards and the content they share based on its perceived value for their social circle. In other words, some of what is interesting to individuals may not be material they want to spread through their communities, and some media texts they spread may become more interesting because of their perceived social value.

We may share songs from our favorite band as a way to define ourselves, to communicate something about who we are and what we like to our friends. We may pass along a news article to a former schoolmate to strengthen our social ties with her, to remind her we remember what she is interested in. We may include a video clip in a blog post or Twitter update as a means to provide commentary on it, using that clip as inspiration for our own content and as a means to gain our own notoriety and audience. Or we may share material as a way to grow or activate a community, whether that be passing along a television-show clip for fellow fans to help dissect or spreading a protest video to mobilize or recruit others around a social cause.

Content spreads, then, when it acts as fodder for conversations that audiences are already having. As Douglas Rushkoff has put it, "Content is just a medium for interaction between people. The many forms of content we collect and experience online, I'd argue, are really just forms of ammunition—something to have when the conversation goes quiet at work the next day; an excuse to start a discussion with that attractive person in the next cubicle" (2000). Keep in mind that many of the choices people make in spreading content, as just described, are not grand and sweeping gestures but rather simple, everyday actions such as "liking" a Facebook status update.[1] Yet many active decisions and motivations are involved in even those instantaneous processes.

Producerly Texts and Cultural Resources

The previous section detailed production models, technical and strategic considerations, and questions about audience motivations that can help producers reduce uncertainty when trying to create material with a higher chance of spreading. These are all considerations outside of the text itself—approaches that can apply to any type of text. What we are not trying to imply, however, is that—in a world of spreadable media—content no longer matters. In fact, quite the opposite is true: creators who utilize all the strategies and consider all the questions discussed earlier will still not be successful if they do not create media texts that engage people and that people deem worth sharing with their friends. While there is no simple answer to creating content that resonates with people, the next several sections consider types of material with a higher potential for spreadability.

Communications scholar John Fiske (1989a) draws a distinction between mass culture—which is mass produced and distributed—and popular culture—media texts which have been meaningfully integrated into people's lives. As Fiske points out, only some material from mass culture enters the popular culture: "If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. They will not be made popular" (2). Under this model, *messages* are encoded into content; *meanings* are decoded from a text. Audience meanings often expand on or deviate from a producer's messages. Fiske recognizes that there are commercial interests working to inspire interest in mass-produced messages, but this commercial material couldn't be "made popular" if it didn't hold meaning-making potential.

Fiske's idea that content can become material for the interactions and interests of diverse communities recognizes and celebrates the generative capacity of participatory culture. Fiske writes that audiences "pluralize the meanings and pleasures [mass culture] offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity or coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain" and that people produce culture when they integrate products and texts into their everyday lives (1989b, 28).

Under the producer's control, it is mass culture. Under the audience's control, it is popular culture. Grassroots circulation can thus transform a commodity into a cultural resource.

Fiske argues that some texts are more apt to produce new meanings than others. The producerly text is one which "offers itself up to popular production. [. . .] It has loose ends that escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them—it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control" (1989b, 104). Material which fills in every blank limits audience interpretations. Propaganda, for instance, is less producerly because it sets rigid limits on potential meanings (though, as audiences become removed from its immediate context, old propaganda might be reread, such as the recirculation of socialist realist or Cold War iconography as camp in recent years). Instead, producerly content can be enjoyed and accessed on multiple levels—it can be taken at face value but also can yield hidden levels upon active interpretation and appropriation (such as with the complex television narratives examined in chapter 3).

Fiske's notion of the "producerly" introduces guiding principles for transforming commodities into cultural resources: openness, loose ends, and gaps that allow viewers to read material against their own backgrounds and experiences are key. As we detailed earlier in this chapter, such openness allows people to convey something of themselves as they pass along content. As Mike Arauz, a strategist at digital consultancy Undercurrent, suggests, "Opportunities for brands to reach individuals in mass audiences are quickly vanishing. In order to reach people now, you have to find a way to cross paths with them on their own terms, where they choose to spend time. And those places are defined by people's passions. People's lives don't revolve around your brand, they revolve around life" (2009).

Traditional branding theory has valued controlling meaning rather than inspiring circulation. Some longtime Madison Avenue types are likely to sputter in rage at the idea that audiences might appropriate and rework their messages (and their corresponding legal departments are even more likely to). They do not want their brands to be "pluralized" (Fiske 1989b) or "multiplied" (to use Grant McCracken's term from his piece in our enhanced book). They worry about losing control when, in fact, they never had it. As this book has detailed, today's spreading behaviors reflect much older patterns in how people have received and discussed media texts. Only now, people's exchanges are much more visible, occurring at a greater scale and frequency as a greater portion of society taps into the online world. As participants circulate branded content for their own purposes, each new viewer encounters the original content afresh and is reminded of the brand and its potential meanings.

Right now, many companies hold onto the idea that a brand may carry a highly restricted range of meanings, defined and articulated by official brand stewards. They avoid creating producerly texts because making material that is open to interpretation leaves the control of meaning out of their hands. But, in doing so, companies limit the spreadability of their messages and constrain the value of the brand as a vehicle for social and personal expression, all of which ultimately damages their reputation and sales. These corporate attempts to rein in grassroots creativity by creating closed works devalue their material by removing it from meaningful circulation. Yet, even so, creative audiences may find "producerly angles" for many of these texts, meaning that such closed strategies still give no guarantee of complete control to a producer. Perhaps the only way to retain complete control over the meaning of a text is never to share it with anyone.

In the next few sections, we highlight a few types of content which are particularly spreadable because they take up the producerly strategies outlined earlier. These include the use of shared fantasies, humor, parody and references, unfinished content, mystery, timely controversy, and rumors.

Shared Fantasies

Lewis Hyde has argued that the commercial culture shaping the sale of commodities and the noncommercial culture shaping the exchange of gifts are formed around fundamentally different fantasies, which in turn shape the meanings ascribed to such transactions: "Because of the bonding power of gifts and the detached nature of commodity exchange, gifts have become associated with community and with being obliged to others, while commodities are associated with alienation and freedom" (1983, 86). Commodity culture emphasizes personal expression, freedom, upward social mobility, escape from constraints, and enabling new possibilities. These themes—often described as "escapist"—have a deep history in advertising theory and practice. Creating individualized fantasies makes sense within an impressions model, in which audience members are understood as atomized individuals.

The fantasies of a commodity culture are those of transformation (McCracken 2008), while the fantasies animating nonmarket exchanges are based on shared experience, whether the reassertion of traditional values and nostalgia, the strengthening of social ties, the acceptance of mutual obligations, or the comfort of operating within familiar social patterns. These are the values closely linked to the reciprocity on which a gift economy depends. When materials move from one sphere to the other, they frequently get reworked to reflect alternative values and fantasies.

Fan-created works often center on themes of romance, friendship, and community (Jenkins 1992). These values shape the decisions fans make at every level—starting, for instance, with choosing a film or television program. A fan music video for *Heroes*, for example, might feature interactions between two characters that rarely share the screen. The music selected further emphasizes the emotional bonds between characters. Fan-made media is shared among a community with common passions. In some cases, fans produce stories or videos to give to one another explicitly as gifts. Most often, though, fans understand their works as a contribution to the community as a whole. Fandom nurtures writers and artists, putting the deepest emphasis on that material which most clearly reflects the community's core values.

Other commonly spread content has an explicitly nostalgic tone. For many baby boomers, for instance, there is enormous pleasure in watching older commercials or programs of their childhood. This generation, as we emphasized in chapter 2, uses eBay to repurchase the old toys, comics, collector cards, and other pieces of content their parents threw away when they went to college. Such material sparks the exchange of memories, especially personal and collective histories of reading, listening, and viewing. A Facebook page, say, focused around the graduates of a particular high school class may routinely post music videos popular during their youth as a springboard for the exchange of shared memories. When producers are part of a community and understand its values and shared fantasies, the content they create is more likely to resonate deeply with fellow community members.

Humor

Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1991) examines the very thin line separating a joke from an insult: a joke expresses something a community is ready to hear; an insult expresses something it doesn't want to consider. Thus, recognizing a joke involves exchanging judgments about the world and defining oneself either with or against others. Content creators can endear themselves to a particular audience by showing they understand its sensibilities and can alienate themselves by miscalculating that audience's sensibilities. Humor is not simply a matter of taste: it is a vehicle by which people articulate and validate their relationships with those with whom they share the joke.

Consider a breakout advertising success from 2010: Old Spice's "Smell Like a Man, Man" campaign. Launched in February by ad agency Wieden+Kennedy, the television commercials feature Isaiah Mustafa as Old Spice Guy, "a handsome but somewhat inscrutable figure who engaged in random acts of manliness": "the man your man could smell like" (Potter 2010). The first spot set the tone. "Hello ladies," Old Spice Guy intones, standing in his bathroom wearing only a towel. Then, he commands the (presumably female) viewer, "Look at your man, now back at me, now back at your man. Sadly, he isn't me, but, if he stopped using lady-scented body wash and switched to Old Spice, he could smell like he's me." After that, the game is afoot. The bathroom is replaced by a boat, a knotted sweater falls onto Old Spice Guy's shoulders, and he reveals he's wearing a pair of tight white trousers. Proving his value as the man ladies would like their man to smell like, he presents an oyster,

inside of which are tickets to a favorite event. "Now the tickets are diamonds," he says, and so they are, because "anything is possible when your man smells like Old Spice and not a lady." The receding camera reveals Mustafa sitting on a horse, a situation he underlines with a dry statement of fact: "I'm on a horse."

Promising to transform customers simply through their use of the product, the spots draw on some of advertising's own clichés and cultural touchstones. It parodies not only the pitchman but also the commercially manufactured ideal man—all "chiseled torso and ridiculously self-assured tone" (Edwards 2010). Old Spice has employed such techniques multiple times in the past. For instance, a commercial in 2007 showed how the product could grow chest hair instantly (a feat its competitor in the side-by-side comparison couldn't manage). This manliness made it the ideal choice for "real man situations, like basketball, recon, and frenching." A 2008 spot featured a spokesman sliding around the entirety of a baseball diamond while he promoted Old Spice as the "bare-knuckle, straight-on tackle, heavyweight deodorant that gives the best game, set, and match, high-stepping, sudden-death, double-overtime performance in the pit fight against odor." By 2009, the product was shown as the deodorant of choice for the winners of manly competitions such as arm wrestling, the karate chopping of concrete blocks, and chainsaw carving. In the latter case, the Old Spice deodorized winner carved his own block of wood into a chainsaw, and he then used it to carve his competitor's block of wood into a sculpture, all before the other guy could start his saw. Old Spice has long experimented with parodying the advertising industry's construction of masculinity.

For the impressions minded, by September 2010, the original Old Spice Guy spot had received in excess of 25 million views on YouTube, while the Old Spice channel showcasing all the campaign's videos received about 94 million views. At that time, the brand had acquired more than 90,000 Twitter followers and more than 675,000 Facebook fans. Perhaps in relation, sales of Old Spice grew 30 percent from February through July 2010, the five months after the new advertising campaign had launched (Edwards 2010).

We might see the "Smell Like a Man, Man" campaign as a product of Old Spice's ongoing experiments with finding the right humorous tone to mock notions of masculinity (Caddell 2010). Unlike the previous spots, this campaign engaged both male and female viewers, as the commercials are directly addressed to the "ladies" who are often purchasers of body wash for their significant other. Its self-parodic elements implicitly grant users permission to adopt and adapt the content for their own purposes. Parodies of the Old Spice commercial spread across the Internet as users drew on the spot's form and structure to conduct their own conversations. Men of all body types and sizes shot spoofs featuring "more realistic" men your man could smell like. The children's television show *Sesame Street* produced a version featuring the character Grover that promised to help viewers "smell like a monster." Australian political comedy program *Yes We Canberra!* shot a version critiquing the status of gay marriage down under, and another Australian Broadcasting Corporation spoof featured an animated Tony Abbott, leader of the Australian opposition party, begging to be "the man your PM should be." Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library even produced a version selling the merits of studying in the library.

"Smell Like a Man, Man" serves as a good exemplar of a "producerly" text. The video has a clearly defined message, but the absurdity creates gaps "wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them" (Fiske 1989b, 104). Wieden+Kennedy enlisted Mustafa to shoot 186 individual videos over 48 hours and posted them on YouTube, responding to comments sent to Old Spice Guy via Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook and to video responses left on YouTube in real time. Old Spice Guy responds multiple times to Alyssa Milano (whom he flirts with), offers a marriage proposal on behalf of a Twitter user, and answers a lot of quite random questions.[2] Many response videos don't feature a single mention of Old Spice products—they respond to people talking about the campaign. Ultimately, the campaign uses its humor in all its extensions to demonstrate how Old Spice "gets" a certain mentality and is a meaningful participant in the dialogue of particular audience members (in the case of the online extension, communities that are

cognizant of the traditional logics of advertising, fully conversant in irony, and immersed in social media platforms).

Not every group appreciated the outreach, however. When Old Spice targeted the trolls at 4Chan, they responded with a mixture of bemusement and overt ridicule; one wrote, "This was the first time I've ever seen someone market to /b/ and I am glad it was a thing as epic and funny and as close to our humor as this so fuck off," while another posted an image macro of the Old Spice Guy labeled "marketing campaign troll." In this case, Old Spice's humor may have been directed at the wrong audience, offending some in a community expressly built to be not just noncommercial but often anticommercial.

Parody and References

Fiske specifically cites parody as a popular form closely associated with the "producerly"—one of the ways audiences transform brands into resources for their own social interactions. While all humor builds on whether an audience "gets" the joke or shares a sensibility, parody combines that aspect of humor with a specific shared reference. This is precisely what makes parody valuable—it can express shared experiences and, especially when it plays on nostalgic references, a shared history. Those who are creating humor and parody claim specific common experiences with those who are laughing at the joke.

A particularly potent example of the power of parody to help content spread can be found in a 2007 commercial for Toyota set in the online video game *World of Warcraft*. This spot not only utilizes unique details and aesthetics of *World of Warcraft* but also refers to a very specific event in the history of the online game's culture. The 30-second spot features a group of warriors planning and arming for an attack. In the middle of their discussion about battle strategy, one player suddenly goes rogue. He announces he'll equip himself with "a little Four Wheels of Fury!" and then promptly transforms into a truck and rushes into battle, leaving his teammates to chase behind him. The ad directly references a well-known video based in *World of Warcraft*. Player Leeroy Jenkins was away from his computer while his guildmates meticulously planned a raid. When he returned to the game, he shouted out his own name as a battle cry and tore into the fray with no regard for the plan that had been articulated in his absence, ultimately dooming his guildmates to defeat. This video of Jenkins's "epic fail" spread widely online within, and eventually outside of, the *World of Warcraft* community, and the incident became so well known that it was eventually featured as a question on the television game show *Jeopardy!*

The Toyota parody remained faithful not just to *World of Warcraft* culture but to the Leeroy Jenkins incident in particular. The Toyota ad's warriors use similar matter-of-fact voices to the original players as they plan the raid. The character who turns into a truck issues a crazy, over-the-top battle cry and proclaims, "Let's do this," in much the same way Leeroy Jenkins does. Further, there is an additional layer of self-reflexivity when one of the *World of Warcraft* players responds with an exasperated "No way. There's no trucks in *World of Warcraft*!" The commercial's culturally specific details ultimately establish a playful homage to, and loving spoof of, the original, showing Toyota as a meaningful member of the *World of Warcraft* community rather than as a commercial force mocking or "capitalizing on" a culture of which it is not part.

Culturally specific references such as the Toyota ad provide pleasure to audiences who enjoy mapping links between different texts and recognizing when texts are referencing each other. Designer Jeffrey Zeldman writes in his analysis of the advertising campaign for HBO's 2007 documentary *Alive Day Memories*,

> The poster contains more content than I have listed. Most of that content is externally located. For this poster has been framed and shot, and its subject styled and posed, almost exactly like an American Gap ad. Consciously or unconsciously, an American viewer will almost certainly make an uncomfortable connection between the disfigurement and sacrifice portrayed in this ad, and the upbeat quality of the Gap's long-running, highly successful clothing slash lifestyle campaign. *That connection is content.* (2007)

Zeldman's example highlights how a variety of genres—in this case, a documentary about U.S. Iraq War veterans—might use such references.

When audience members choose to pass along media texts, they demonstrate that they belong to a community, that they are "in" on the reference and share some common experience. Knowing about Leeroy Jenkins helps define someone as a *World of Warcraft* insider while also deflecting outsiders for whom this knowledge carries little to no value. This degree of exclusivity is a key function for the spread of some material, though the inclusion of Jenkins as the basis for a *Jeopardy!* question also suggests how much this information becomes common knowledge beyond the initial community. The Toyota ad both becomes part of the myth of Leeroy Jenkins and drives new audiences to seek out the original *World of Warcraft* material.

Unfinished Content

Chapter 3 argues that a successful media franchise is not only a cultural attractor, drawing like-minded people together to form an audience, but also a cultural activator, giving that community something to do. Content which is unfinished, or not immediately intelligible, drives the individual and collective intelligence of its audiences. Such texts or events often ask people to contribute something or encourage them to look twice because they can't believe what they are seeing; they need to verify its authenticity or figure out how it was done.

One of the most cited advertising examples of this approach, Burger King's Subservient Chicken interactive video site (launched in 2004), literally engaged users in the creation of the video's content. Visitors saw an amateurish video of a man in a chicken suit standing in a room; the view is through a single, low-resolution camera pointed head-on, not unlike a webcam mounted atop a computer. Below, there was a text-input box with the words, "Get chicken just the way you like it. Type command here." Once a recognized command was typed, it triggered a video clip of the man in the chicken suit performing what is demanded of him. There were nearly 300 different clips in all, each set to respond to commands ranging from "jump" to "lay egg" to "moonwalk." Commands that the chicken didn't understand might result in a clip expressing confusion or boredom, while commands deemed inappropriate—such as those that were sexually explicit—resulted in a clip of the chicken wagging his finger in disapproval.

The campaign became so widely referenced as a new way to advertise that it inspired a variety of case studies and many related campaigns. For instance, six years later, European correction-fluid brand Tipp-Ex replicated the model in a YouTube video that featured a hunter too scared to shoot a bear that approaches him in the wilderness. Rather than kill the bear, he uses correction tape to blank out the verb in the title of the video—"Hunter Kills a Bear"—inviting users instead to write in their own verbs. More than fifty recognized verbs triggered clips showing different humorous endings.

Both these campaigns created dynamic interaction, engaging the user as part of the process of creating the final video they see. The "story" required a command to be entered to move forward, so the actual output was controlled and triggered entirely by the user. Both brands declined complete control over the creation of the content; even though the various actions and endings were premade, the text itself—the advertisement—was fundamentally incomplete. Subservient Chicken was the more daring of the two: while Tipp-Ex asked users to engage in a narrative game with two characters (the hunter and the bear) in a heavily and clearly branded space on YouTube, Subservient Chicken was far more obscure, offering fewer clues as to the context for the giant-chicken-suited person staring out from the screen. Not only was there no obvious meaning ascribed to Subservient Chicken, but there was also no action, no finished content, until the user entered a command. Thus, by creating a partial work—an archive of incomplete component parts—the Subservient Chicken campaign offered the user agency that went beyond just access and choice: it offered tangible participation in the work's creation.

Many participants also explored the way Subservient Chicken worked as much as they reinterpreted its meaning. Gamers often seek to test the limits of a game to see how much actual control they can exert. In the case of Subservient Chicken, users wanted to push against the limits of the ad to see what flaws they could locate in its execution. Webpages soon appeared that cataloged the various commands the site recognized and their responses. Similarly, users left comments under the Tipp-Ex videos with the full list of verbs that would trigger responses. The ambiguity and unfinished nature of these campaigns capitalized on the collective intelligence of participatory culture, encouraging the spread of content by setting up a challenge that people could work together to solve. Communities spread the text, trying to expand the ranks of potential puzzle solvers.

Mystery

Subservient Chicken was also interesting because the amateurish qualities of the video production and the site were reminiscent of the proliferation of live fetish online webcams, perhaps driving many viewers to initially question whether the site featured a prerecording or whether the man was actually performing these commands live. Mysteries about the origins of media texts have proliferated in the age of spreadable media, in part because content moves so fluidly from context to context, often stripping away the original motives behind its production. As new audiences encounter such texts, they are often unsure what their rhetorical goals were intended to be or even who produced the material. They may not even be able to initially classify whether the works are commercially or noncommercially motivated.

For instance, in early January 2009, Heidi (an attractive, blonde Australian woman) sent out a somewhat awkward plea via YouTube: she'd recently met a guy in a café in Sydney with whom she had become a little enraptured. After explaining how their orders had gotten mixed up, providing her a chance to speak with him briefly, Heidi showed the camera a black sport coat that the mystery man had left behind. This was her key to finding him again. She hoped someone would recognize the jacket.

Heidi's appeal had many of the hallmarks of a genuine, amateur YouTube video. She addresses the camera directly, sitting in a simple, naturally lit bedroom. She stumbles over her words, her speech filled with repetition and "ums." She appears nervous, and her language is plain. Pink text flashes over the screen at the video's end with a Hotmail account where viewers could contact her and a URL for a website offering more details: hardly a slick and professional production standard.

The video was quickly popular. The 24-year-old appeared on national news and talk programs and was the subject of a profile piece in the lifestyle section of Australian newspaper the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Marcus 2009a). Describing her as a "modern Cinderella," the paper reported that, in just six days, her video had garnered more than 60,000 views and more than 130 comments. Some of these comments, it reported, questioned the story's authenticity. In interviews, Heidi assured the Australian public that she was genuine, but YouTube commenters were less than convinced. Some pointed out that taking a jacket from a café, rather than turning it in to the staff, was odd behavior. News outlets found other inconsistencies in her story, revealing that they couldn't track down Heidi's employer and that staff at the café didn't recall the incident (though they did recall her leaving a note for her mystery man). Others found that the label on the jacket was for a clothing company—Witchery—that didn't have a men's line. When contacted, Witchery denied involvement.

Soon, the video was revealed as a "hoax." Sydney paper the *Daily Telegraph* learned that Witchery was about to launch a men's line (O'Neill 2009). Only two days after the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s profile piece, the paper noted that a publicist for Naked Communications, which handles Witchery, confirmed that the company had been behind the video (Marcus 2009b). Some parts of the Australian press reacted with a certain vehemence against the campaign. Guests on *The Gruen Transfer*, a national television panel program that critiques and discusses advertising campaigns and strategies, dismissed the campaign for being disingenuous. Meanwhile, Heidi followed her original video with a second one in which she came clean, acknowledging that she was an actress and that the entire narrative was part of a campaign for Witchery.

The Witchery story is especially interesting because of how closely it resembles the case of Lonelygirl15, the online video experiment that ran from 2006 to 2008 and purported to be the vlog of a homeschooled teenager. In both cases, the public's uncertainty about the status of this content made figuring out the source of these messages the central task. Consider what danah boyd wrote about the now classic example of Lonelygirl15: "They are telling their story, truth or fiction. Of course, this makes many people very uncomfortable. They want blogs and YouTube and MySpace to be Real with a capital R. Or they want it to

be complete play. Yet, what's happening is both and neither. People are certainly playing but even those who are creating 'reality' are still engaged in an act of performance" (2006). This fascination with getting to the bottom of "hoaxes" is far from new. Neil Harris recounts how infamous nineteenth-century circus showman P. T. Barnum once shared an anecdote from his ticket seller about Barnum's show: "First he humbugs them, and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it" (1981, 77). Perhaps it's not surprising that someone like pro wrestling impresario Vince McMahon is regularly compared to Barnum today. Almost all wrestling fans know that the performances are not legitimate competitions but often actively watch wrestling matches with an eye toward understanding "how they do it."

The encouragement of such active strategies from the audience is what distinguishes a magic show (where attendees know they are being "tricked") from a scam and stories such as the Witchery Cinderella and Lonelygirl15 from what has become known as "astroturf": commercially produced content which seeks to pass itself off as grassroots media, often in ways that mask the commercial and political motives of those who have produced it. In a culture which increasingly has to work through confusions about the sources and motives of digitally circulating material, there is a strong incentive for bloggers and journalists to unmask the groups which are circulating "fake" or "misleading" messages online, calling them out for their deceptions. The line between a "cool campaign" purporting to be part of "the real world" and marketers exposed as looking to "dupe" the world can be thin and relies on whether creators seem to have wanted the true origins of the text to eventually be discovered and whether creators are seen to be part of the culture with which the content seeks to engage.

Timely Controversy

Controversy and timeliness can also be key to understanding why content spreads. For our purposes, controversy refers to the ways that material may spark intense disagreement among those who encounter it, especially in terms of conflicting values and judgments. Meanwhile, timeliness refers to the ways that a chunk of media may be linked to highly topical discussions within or beyond a given social network site, sometimes fueled by news coverage but also shaped by recurring personal experiences.

Take, for example, the November 2010 online videos depicting computer programmer John Tyner's experience at an airport security checkpoint in San Diego. The U.S. Transportation Security Administration had just introduced "enhanced security procedures," including new scanner technologies that could penetrate travelers' clothing and allow full-body scans, essentially producing an X-ray of travelers. As the new scanners were being phased in, travelers were permitted to "opt out" of passing through them, in which case they would be patted down by TSA agents who would now use the front of their hands and fingers (rather than the back of their hands) to touch passengers in the groin and chest. Tyner declined to walk through the new scanner. When a TSA agent prepared to pat him down, Tyner warned the agent that he would have him arrested if the agent "touched his junk." The agent called over his supervisor, and a verbal altercation ensued between Tyner and his traveling companions and some TSA agents. Eventually, Tyner was escorted back to the airline counter for a ticket refund, and a man believed to be a TSA agent threatened him with a $10,000 fine for leaving the security area.

Before beginning the process just detailed, Tyner had turned on the video-recording function of his cell phone. He posted a three-part series of his experience on YouTube and a full written account on his blog that same day. The videos quickly gained traction because they spoke to an issue prevalent in the public consciousness at the moment of Tyner's experience. Throughout the year, the press and public had been questioning the safety, necessity, and privacy violations of these airport scanners and the invasiveness of more thorough pat-downs. And the release of this content was timely, as news accounts and public discussion alike had come to a head as travelers worried about the potential delays these new security practices could have on their Thanksgiving travel. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the videos spread rapidly across the Internet, through social network and news sites and through blogs and microblogging sites. Tyner's video was remixed and even Auto-Tuned (electronically processed to distort the audio to make it melodic). People made T-shirts with slogans based

on Tyner's challenge: "If you touch my junk, I'll have you arrested." And the story was picked up by mainstream news services that both reported the incident and interviewed Tyner.

Often, a media text spreads particularly far when it depicts a controversy a community cares about at the precise time it is looking for content which might act as its rallying cry. In this case, material becomes spreadable because it articulates the sentiment of the moment, a situation people have experienced but couldn't easily explain, or an insight people hadn't quite been able to put into words. Similarly, content spreads when it states a community's stance on an issue of intense interest at a particular moment better than its members think they can otherwise. Tyner's video arrived at the right time to serve as a proof point for people skeptical of new TSA security measures, especially because Tyner was not a widely known "influencer": rather, he was a citizen "like everyone else" whose sharing of an experience that many people fear and dread became contextually relevant and timely.

Timeliness (and timing) can be particularly tricky because cultural relevance can change quickly. Such timing is hard to predict. This is often the logic behind corporate blogs and Twitter accounts (and online news sites, for that matter), where content is uploaded regularly in hopes of speaking to an issue of importance to the audience at a particular moment but with the mindset that some texts will be widely spread while others will not, depending on how long a community stays engaged on a particular issue and what other content the community might be actively engaging with at a given time.

Controversy can be even trickier for producers to embrace. Many of the examples highlighted in this chapter demonstrate how various groups—creators, marketers, grassroots civic media groups, and loosely organized communities—use controversy to make their content more spreadable. In some cases, however, that controversy can backfire. For instance, video game company Electronic Arts suffered a strong backlash to its decision to host a contest at the San Diego Comic-Con in 2009 which offered a lucky winner "a sinful night with two hot girls" as part of the promotion for its *Dante's Inferno* video game. Intended to depict "lust," one of the seven deadly sins used as a game element in *Dante's Inferno*, the contest created more passionate disgust about the objectification of women than the company was prepared for. As Suzanne Scott (2010) has documented, the promotion became linked to larger debates around the convention's shifting gender balance, a backlash against the mostly female *Twilight* fans, and charges of sexual harassment among event participants. Further, Electronic Arts's campaign gained broader visibility because of the widespread use of social network tools by Comic-Con attendees. Here, timeliness may have helped spread publicity for Electronic Arts but simultaneously intensified the controversy, eventually requiring an apology from the company.

Rumors

Our final quality that makes content spread is also the one with the most potential for causing harm. In Patricia Ann Turner's work with African American populations, she makes the distinction between rumors—informal and temporary constellations of speculation—and contemporary legends—"more solidified rumors" that maintain a reasonable consistency as they are passed (1994, 5). Many of Turner's cases center on commercial products; in particular, the rumors that a number of different companies—from food and consumable-good producers such as Church's Chicken and Marlboro cigarettes to clothing firms such as Troop Sport—were owned by the Ku Klux Klan remained widespread during the period of her research. Such rumors may have inflicted serious damage on these brands: Church's was forced to sell, and Troop went bankrupt as these rumors were spreading (Turner 1994, 96).

Some of the accused organizations were private enterprises and others public, but none had any explicitly racist policies. Though the claims had no basis in fact, the accusations, Turner tells us, were far from random. The accused companies were "white-owned firms [with] advertising directed solely at black consumers, that established nationwide franchises selling popular but nonessential commodities in primarily black neighborhoods" (1994, 97). The rumors became vehicles for shared feelings of frustration among some African American audiences about the shortage of black-owned businesses in their

own communities. These rumors reflect the reality of a world where racism most often no longer takes a direct form, such as a KKK rally, but is instead experienced as implicit, tacit, and thus hard to locate or confront. By circulating the story, community members were demonstrating their own active participation in the community, helping to distinguish friend from foe, popularizing an anecdote to express their larger concerns about racism, and establishing the boundaries of their community.[3]

The rumors that Turner discussed were widely shared within the black communities she studied and were little known outside them. Historically, black America generated its own institutions, from the barbershop to the African American press and the black church, counterpublics which enabled the formulation and exchange of the community's own perspectives. Some scholars (for instance, Nunley 2004) have linked these institutions to an older tradition of "hush harbors," spaces where slaves gathered outside the oversight of their masters for vital communication, stressing their capacity to sustain conversations within the race. The rise of networked computers has amplified these messages and expanded their circulation, which, in some cases, allows others to make common cause within and between minority groups.

Yet the porousness of the communication environment also brings new risks for such communities. Consider, for example, the circulation of videos featuring Rev. Jeremiah Wright's sermons to his Trinity United Church of Christ congregation (of which Barack Obama was a member), which played a significant role in the 2008 presidential campaign. Wright's sermons were written for and presented to a predominantly but no longer exclusively black congregation as part of a tradition of fiery black critique of white institutions and practices. But, in the modern media environment, messages are much harder to contain; they travel and spread everywhere. So the Wright videos were posted on YouTube and picked up by bloggers and podcasters, broadcast and reframed on Fox News, covered in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, discussed on talk radio, referenced in political debates, repurposed in political advertising, and so forth. What Wright's comments might have meant in a black-only or black-dominated space is very different from what they meant when spread through these other contexts.

Consider the false claims that President Barack Obama had a Muslim upbringing or that he was not born in the United States, rumors which persist despite repeated attempts to correct them. Some political observers believe these stories were maliciously manufactured; they have certainly been sustained by groups invested in generating anxiety about Obama's election and distrust of his motives. Rumors about the black president functioned among white cultural conservatives as a displaced discourse about race, expressing their sense that Obama is not appropriate to lead the country and shifting the focus from race onto issues of religion, national origins, or patriotism.

For Christian conservatives, rumors about Obama's Muslim roots were especially worrisome when coupled with the departure of George W. Bush—a white, conservative president who openly proclaimed his "Christian values." One particular rumor about President Obama, circulated both online and offline, held that the president had canceled the National Day of Prayer and participated in an Islamic ceremony at the White House. In actuality, Obama had announced the annual proclamation of the day of prayer in 2009 but opted to observe it in private. Some email versions of the rumor misrepresented a picture of the president removing his shoes before entering a mosque during a diplomatic trip in Istanbul as proof of the supposed White House Islamic ceremony. Those who share the values that these rumors expressed knew how to read them. They may or may not have believed them on a literal level, just as the rumors about Church's may or may not have been taken at face value by those in the African American communities who heard and shared them; however, these rumors do culturally and politically significant work in shaping how these communities collectively perceive shifts in U.S. racial composition.

Through investigating these various rumors, we learn something important about how and why content spreads, most notably that the material which gets picked up often is not that which is of the highest quality but rather that which most powerfully speaks to the desires and fears of the participating community. The ease with which the

Obama "birther" controversy could be disproven did not impact its ability to drive debate because—as with the Church's example—it was a parable for deeply held cultural concerns.

We do not mean to indicate that the attributes listed here are the only types of material which might spread. In fact, this book includes a wide range of examples that wouldn't fit into the categories detailed in the preceding few sections. While our list is not exhaustive, our intent has been to detail some types of content that have the highest degree of spreadability. As these sections indicate, texts that are particularly producerly—that leave open processes of analysis, meaning making, or collective activity for the audience to fill in—often drive deep engagement. In short, engaging, producerly texts have a greater tendency to spread.

Avatar Activism and Other Civic Media

While much of the discussion in this chapter has centered on strategies being deployed by marketers to create more spreadable content, the core principles of spreadability can be deployed by any kind of media producer that wants to ensure the circulation of its content across dispersed and diverse populations. Principles of spreadability may, in fact, be most visible when we look at the ways civic media is adopting new styles and strategies in order to encourage free circulation and to attract so-called earned media coverage. Civic media is content intended to increase civic engagement or to motivate participation in the political process. This may include media produced by political candidates, grassroots organizations (including activist groups), and individual citizens. (Some of the examples of rumors described earlier are civic in function, even if they may seem anticivic in their tone and content.) Without the means to reach wide audiences through broadcast channels and often working with very limited resources, many of these groups hope their calls for action communicated through online media can motivate supporters to help spread the word.

Unlike commercial producers that may be torn between their desire to create buzz and their interest in monetizing and regulating the flow of material, civic media producers typically care more about getting their message out to the world. As such, they have little choice but to embrace the participation of their supporters. In general, spreadability has lowered the costs of political speech. As a result, activist groups find it easier to design and circulate compelling media content, building stronger affiliations with a public that plays a much more active role in spreading their message. These tactics work because they create media (such as YouTube videos) which are easy to circulate, pay attention to the social motives which encourage supporters and more casual viewers to share this content with their friends, and design the content using some of the basic principles we've identified. Yet, as we will see, these civic media producers confront ethical issues, especially concerning what happens when some images of social turmoil and human suffering get decontextualized from the specifics of their historical and political origins, being read in ways which damage rather than strengthen the producers' calls to action.

This spreadable civic media content may be initially jarring in the ways that it abandons the sobriety with which we normally receive political messages, but producers count on the controversy around such unexpected tactics to inspire the further spread and discussion of their media. For instance, in early 2010, a group of five Palestinian, Israeli, and international activists painted themselves blue to resemble the Na'vi from James Cameron's 2009 science fiction blockbuster movie *Avatar* and marched along the fence which runs through the West Bank village of Bil'in. The azure-skinned protesters, whose garb combined traditional keffiyeh and hijab scarfs with tails and pointy ears, were eventually intercepted by the Israeli military, which assaulted them with tear gas and sound bombs. They uploaded a video on YouTube which juxtaposes home video footage of the action with quoted footage from the Hollywood film. As the activists chant about tearing down the fence, the viewer can hear the movie characters proclaim, "We will show the Sky People that they cannot take whatever they want! This . . . this is our land!"

Conservative U.S. critics worried that *Avatar*'s critical depiction of a military-industrial complex might foster anti-Americanism internationally, yet, as the image of the Na'vi has been taken up by protest groups in various parts of the world, the myth has instead been

rewritten to focus on local embodiments of the military-industrial complex (Deuze 2010). In Bil'in, the focus was on the Israeli army; in China, it was on the struggles of home owners against land seizures by developers working with the Chinese government; in Brazil, it was the Amazon Indians against dam construction threatening the rain forest; and, in London, it was activists protesting British mining interests on behalf of a tribe in India.[4]

The Bil'in protesters recognized potential parallels between Na'vi struggles to defend their garden planet against the Sky People and their own attempts to regain lands they feel have been unjustly taken from them. Their YouTube video makes clear the contrast between the lush jungles of Pandora and the arid, dusty landscape of the occupied territories, but the film's heroic imagery offered them an empowered view of their own struggles. Viewers worldwide would recognize timely references to the film because of the extraordinary power of the Hollywood publicity machine, and the ways these references are deployed here in relation to struggles over territory in the Middle East was sure to spark controversy. Further, the sight of a blue-skinned protester writhing in the dust and choking on tear gas shocked many people into paying attention to the type of message people often turn off and tune out. While one would hardly call the resulting images humorous, they are defamiliarizing and depend on the audience's access to contextual knowledge in ways similar to the claims made earlier about parody.

Activist and media theorist Stephen Duncombe argues in his book *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy* (2007) that the American Left has too often adopted a rationalist language which can seem cold and exclusionary, speaking to the head and not the heart. Duncombe argues that the contemporary cultural context—with its focus on appropriation and remixing of elements from popular culture—may offer a new model for activism, one both spectacular and participatory, drawing emotional power from stories that already matter to a mass public and rejecting the wonkish vocabulary through which policy debates are so often conducted. Duncombe cites, for example, a group called Billionaires for Bush, which posed as megatycoons straight out of a Monopoly game to call attention to the corporate interests shaping Republican Party positions. Yet he might have been writing about protesters painting themselves blue, Twitter users turning their icons green in solidarity with the Iranian civil rights movement, or Tea Party activists dressing in garb from the American Revolution to reflect their desire to return to what they see as the original intentions of the U.S. Constitution. In each case, activists have generated powerful images, often by appropriating and transforming elements from a larger shared cultural mythology which people feel an immediate emotional connection with and have an impulse to share.

The Harry Potter Alliance's Andrew Slack calls this process "cultural acupuncture," suggesting that his organization has identified a vital "pressure point" in the popular imagination by building on metaphors from a popular children's franchise (Jenkins 2009, 2012). Young Harry Potter, Slack argues, realized that the government and the media were lying to the public in order to mask evil in their midst. Potter thus organized his classmates to form Dumbledore's Army and went out to change the world. Mirroring that impulse, the Harry Potter Alliance has mobilized more than 100,000 young people worldwide to participate in campaigns against genocide in Africa, supporting workers' rights and gay marriage, raising money for disaster relief in Haiti, and calling attention to media concentration and many other causes.

Slack's efforts draw together passionate fans of J. K. Rowling's fantasy novels to work in concert with more traditional activist groups, asking his followers what Dumbledore's Army would be battling in the real world. Many of the group's supporters said they had never considered themselves "political" before; the ability to move from participatory culture to civic engagement was effective at overcoming their reluctance to become activists (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2012). Such efforts tap the realities of a news media apt to pay much more attention to what's happening at Hogwarts (or at least the opening of a new Harry Potter theme park) than what's happening in Darfur.

To be sure, *Avatar* can't solve an age-old struggle over territory, and the YouTube video that the Bil'in protesters produced is no substitute

for informed discourse about what's at stake in that conflict. But it wasn't intended to be. Instead, its goal was to circulate beyond the core audience already invested in these issues by speaking to the wants and interests of other communities—fans of *Avatar*, cultural commentators interested in grassroots appropriations of media content, and so on—in a visual language familiar to various international audiences. As Simon Faulkner explained in a discussion which placed the *Avatar* video in a larger context of the Bil'in protesters' ongoing media strategies,

> Viewers of a video of the Bil'in demonstration on YouTube, or photographs of the same demonstration on Flickr might turn to text-based forms of communication as a means of informing themselves about why these images were produced. [. . .] The organisers of the *Avatar* demonstration in Bil'in aimed to produce strong images that would have an impact upon those who saw them and would attract the attention of a much wider audience. [. . .] Whatever loss of conceptual understanding occurs through the immediate impact of the images of '*Avatar* activism' can be made up for in how these images relate to the written word. (2010)

The hope is that such provocative videos will encourage greater information seeking, inspiring those who encounter them to follow links back and to drill deeper into the content-rich sites that these activist groups have constructed around them. In turn, the act of sharing such videos has the potential to pull participants into closer emotional ties with the communities that produced them.

Despite critics who dismiss a politics grounded in the spread of messages through social media as "slactivism," research by Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication and Ogilvy Worldwide in 2010 suggests that the small investments in time and effort required to pass along such messages (or to link to causes via our social network site profiles) may make participants more likely to take more substantive action later (Andresen 2011). In the national survey, people who frequently engaged in promotional social activity were:

- As likely as non-social-media promoters to donate
- Twice as likely to volunteer their time
- Twice as likely to take part in events such as charity walks
- More than twice as likely to buy products or services from companies that supported the cause
- Three times as likely to solicit donations on behalf of their cause

All of this suggests that more spreadable forms of civic media may not only reach unexpected supporters but may be planting seeds which can grow into deeper commitments over time.

Despite the benefits of such strategies, the ease with which such content spreads, and is reshaped, raises significant concerns. Sasha Costanza-Chock writes in his work on the immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles about tensions between younger activists who seek to use social media for spontaneous responses to real-time developments and those who want to maintain the more careful structuring and shaping of the campaign's core media elements:

> Many organizations continue to find transmedia mobilization risky, because it requires opening movement communication practices up to diverse voices rather than relying only on experienced movement leaders to frame the movement's narrative by speaking to broadcast reporters during press conferences. [. . .] Those movement formations that embrace the decentralization of the movement voice can reap great rewards, while those that attempt to maintain top down control of movement communication practices risk losing credibility. (2010, 113–114)

Sam Gregory (2010), a spokesperson for WITNESS (a human rights organization which emerged amid the controversy surrounding the Rodney King videotape in the 1980s), has published a series of reflections about the potential risks and benefits of allowing videos of human rights abuses to circulate freely. When the pop star Peter Gabriel first launched WITNESS, he asked, "What if every human rights worker had a camera in their hands? What would they be able to document? What would they be able to change?" (quoted

in Gregory 2010, 192). Expanding access to low-tech tools of media production and distribution has brought the group much closer to fulfilling that vision, with many more human rights abuses documented and made public.

WITNESS's embrace of participatory culture allows activists to produce and share such videos, yet the organization also recognizes that the circulation of human rights videos far beyond their original contexts raises core ethical issues. First, Gregory identifies issues of consent. Those who are victims of abuse may not be able to meaningfully anticipate the range of different uses of their images in the context of a spreadable and remix culture. This concern remains true, whether with images of government torture or videos of school bullying, in developing countries or in the United States. Second, Gregory warns against the potential "re-victimization" which can occur when humiliating footage enters contexts that encourage comic or erotic interpretations:

> The most graphic violations—violent attacks, or even sexual assault—are seen as the material that most easily translates into a loss of dignity, privacy, and agency, and which carries with it the potential for real re-victimization. [. . .] Video distribution in and of itself can also contribute to creating further layers of victimization: individuals in torture videos shot are already being doubly humiliated—in the first instance by what happens to them in custody, and, in the second, by the act of filming. They are then further exposed as the footage achieves widespread circulation. (2010, 201)

Confronting these challenges, Gregory pushed his organization to develop an ethics for the way such material gets circulated. In some cases, WITNESS allowed its content to circulate via YouTube and other video-sharing sites, while other videos were locked down and (in theory) could be seen only via the group's own site, the Hub, where WITNESS could more clearly shape the viewing context. In reality, of course, it is increasingly hard for any group—whether a human rights organization or a company—to control how its material spreads. In 2010, WITNESS shut down its Hub.

The persistence of rumors and the porousness of the communication landscape (as we saw earlier) and the risks associated with the spread of decontextualized videos and images (as WITNESS suggests) represent arguments for us all to take greater responsibility for the media we choose to circulate, to avoid posting information which has not been vetted carefully, to help challenge rumors we know to have been discredited, and to try to help frame materials which may be controversial or disturbing when encountered in inappropriate contexts. In our enhanced book, MIT lecturer and software developer Christopher Weaver and Sam Ford argue for the importance of developing critical skills for appraising content, as well as ethical frameworks for taking ownership of the consequences of what we share with our communities. As Weaver and Ford point out, it is especially important for educational institutions to critically engage with these processes of content evaluation, as digital texts play increasingly prominent roles in how people make informed decisions as citizens. Another important step for increasing the consistency with which we all can vet information online (and for combatting new forms of plagiarism in an era of spreadability) comes from projects like the Curator's Code (http://www.curatorscode.org/), an initiative providing guidelines for standardizing how to credit both the content creator and the circulator from whom a person has found material once he or she chooses to share that material with others.

In short, the collective control over meaning making and content circulation we all now have may provide powerful new ways to participate as citizens and society members. However, it also necessitates new means to vet the quality of the information we share. And responsible use of these new forms of circulation demands that we both make clear where we received the information we share and think twice before passing along material we have not closely evaluated.

This book has embraced the values of circulation, seeing how spreadability gives the public a much more active role in shaping the media environment, but that does raise the ethical stakes in our collective decisions about what media should circulate and how we all ensure the integrity of the information we share with others. We are not arguing here that spreadability necessarily leads to a utopian vision of a more informed, more responsible, more ethical society. Rather, as more people take an active role in shaping the creation and circulation of media texts, the public has access—for better and worse—to a greater range of voices.

Our belief is that content creators of all kinds—from Madison Avenue executives that want to sell us Old Spice to civic groups that want to call attention to social injustices—can design texts that audiences want to spread if they recognize the basic desires and mechanics which inspire these grassroots acts of circulation. As we have seen, material that spreads is producerly, in that it leaves open space for audience participation, provides resources for shared expression, and motivates exchanges through surprising or intriguing content. People want to share media texts which become a meaningful resource in their ongoing conversations or which offer them some new source of pleasure and interest. They want to exchange and discuss media content when the material contains cultural activators, when it offers activities in which they can participate. As we saw with regard to rumors, this content often spreads when it speaks, consciously or not, thoughts that people are compelled by but lack a language to communicate.

This is not to say that such material becomes irresistible, a claim that would take us back to the passivity associated with viral media theory. Rather, participants appraise the content to see whether it is valuable and meaningful for the groups with which they regularly converse.

As we enter more decisively into an era of spreadable media, we are seeing new kinds of brand strategies and new kinds of civic discourses, both imagined to reflect a shift in power away from top-down distribution of content and toward empowering grassroots intermediaries to act on behalf of a larger organization or cause. Advertisements are becoming more playful and participatory, no longer counting on their ability to demand attention by disrupting our chosen entertainment experiences. Instead, advertisers are striving to create texts that people actively seek out and willingly circulate. Meanwhile, the concept of civic media moves away from the discourses of public service institutions, taking on more of the qualities of entertainment media as creators seek to expand the communities through which they circulate. These producers are no longer dependent on traditional kinds of public broadcasting to reach audiences. In chapter 6, we will explore more fully what this push toward spreadability means for independent media producers. Such creators have often been the first to innovate with social media as they seek to route around traditional roadblocks to distributing their content and have tapped into collaborative models as they seek to court and sustain a community of supporters around their works.

6

COURTING SUPPORTERS FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Animator Nina Paley and science fiction writer Cory Doctorow are two of a growing number of independent artists rethinking and reinventing the process through which their texts enter circulation. Both offer their art to fans as "gifts," hoping the community will support their efforts. While they differ on the best models (Paley and Doctorow 2010), both artists are strong backers of the concept of a "creative commons," and both want to escape what they see as constricting copyright regimes. Here, for example, is part of Paley's open letter to the fans who visit her website:

> I hereby give *Sita Sings the Blues* to you. [. . .] Please distribute, copy, share, archive, and show *Sita Sings the Blues*. From the shared culture it came, and back into the shared culture it goes. Conventional wisdom urges me to demand payment for every use of the film, but then how would people without money get to see it? How widely would the film be disseminated if it were limited by permission and fees? Control offers a false sense of security. The only real security I have is trusting you, trusting culture, and trusting freedom. (2009)

As we argued in chapter 1, such "gifts" do not represent "free content." This sort of gift-giving frequently implies some form of reciprocity, and that is openly acknowledged in both these cases. But the willingness of these artists to sacrifice some control over the circulation of their works helps the works to spread. Doctorow has been explicit about the publicity and relationship-building potential of embracing