THE POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S DIGITAL MEDIA PARTICIPATION
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Abstract

In this thesis I survey the terrain of digital interactions between youth, corporations and pop culture texts in order to complicate current visions of participatory culture. I argue that popular images of the empowered young users of a new digital democracy need to be complicated by asking questions about the politics of digital participation: about whose voices are heard, about where attention is centred, about how interactivity is defined, about who is rewarded for creative labour. The opening chapter introduces key issues within a critical examination of digital participation, including commodification, user agency and intellectual property. It also outlines my methodologies and my choice of research site – namely internet television, and the proliferation of corporate and youth practices around digitized television texts. The next two chapters provide case studies that identify and evaluate not only the interactions between corporate producers and young users, but also the power relations between the two. First, I analyze young women’s video remixes of the program Gossip Girl. I consider the remixes as gendered texts that contribute new aesthetics and concerns, even as they reproduce dominant interpretations of contemporary girlhood. I also consider the distribution of the videos on YouTube, noting how their circulation simultaneously challenges corporate ownership and creates profit and promotion for those same corporate owners. Next, I examine interactions around the The Colbert Report. Focusing on the program’s official discussion boards, I demonstrate how young fans have taken up Stephen Colbert’s invitation to join in the parody by
creating a vibrant, dialogic and rowdy community that has frequently come into conflict with Comedy Central producers. In their attempts to address these conflicts and create alternative spaces of their own, these young people gesture towards larger tensions over the control of public digital dialogue. The final chapter draws on my research and experience as a teacher to consider how these case studies might help us to frame our own educational projects. I call for a digital literacy curriculum that provides both a place for students to reflect on their daily activities within mediated environments and the opportunity to experiment with digital production.
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Chapter One
Introduction

Words like “participation,” “participatory culture” and “interactivity” have entered the popular lexicon laden with promises. Marketers of interactive technologies offer limitless entertainment choices, and breathless copy claims that Web 2.0 – epitomized by sites such as YouTube and Facebook – will create community, empower users and revolutionize communication. One of the most insistent promises of a new, participatory culture is the democratization of media production. Within this promise lies not only the possibility of equality between media users and producers, but even the convergence of their roles, as media audiences take on new functions as citizen journalists, bloggers, game designers and video artists. This celebratory script and its attendant vision of transformed social relations are evident in countless mainstream media accounts. At the end of 2006, for example, Time magazine declared “You” the Person of the Year, “for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game” (Grossman, p. 15), thereby positioning new media users as competitive, powerful and unpaid digital citizens.

Young people are accorded a prominent role within this participatory culture. Indeed, as the titles of popular books such as Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998) and Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) suggest, youth culture is becoming synonymous with digital technology and mediated practices like texting, tagging, blogging, social networking and remixing. David Buckingham (2003) notes that young people are frequently fashioned as the new “cyber-kids” who “somehow possess a natural affinity with technology, and are automatically confident and autonomous in their dealings with digital media” (p. 174).
Throughout the mainstream media, stories of teens who make it big in digital culture serve to emphasize young people’s new roles as media producers and creators, at the same time that they celebrate narratives of technological progress and entrepreneurial savvy.

I begin by noting these popular representations because they serve as an important backdrop to my own research. As Marita Sturken and Douglas Thomas (2004) write, new technologies are frequently the subject of fascination and hyperbole, and serve as a screen onto which a broad array of hopes are projected. Such visions impact how technologies are “marketed, used, made sense of and integrated into people’s lives” (p. 3), and no study concerned with new media can overlook their highly productive role. I also begin with these imaginaries because they were my own starting place. As a teacher of secondary school English and Media Studies and an instructor in a university Child and Youth Studies program, I have long been interested in young people’s cultural production and consumption. The possibility that young people might be at the forefront of media democratization was a proposition I wanted to examine more carefully. Yet as I became increasingly interested in the intersections of digital media, popular culture and youth practices, I found that phrases like “digital natives” and “net generation” and idealized narratives of connectivity, collaboration and empowerment did not adequately capture the tensions I noted between youth and corporate media, nor did they fully recognize the complicated forms of pop culture consumption and appropriation I observed happening in both online and school settings.

This thesis, then, is an attempt to trace and analyze the complex online interactions between young media users and corporate producers. Employing a combined methodology of web sphere analysis (Schneider & Foot, 2004) and critical discourse analysis, I have identified, collected and examined groups of linked websites, both corporate sites targeted at youth and
those created by youth themselves. These include blogs, social networking sites, discussion boards, and video-hosting sites. I have also analyzed youth-driven activities such as remixing, discussing, archiving and sharing, as well as producing and submitting user-generated content. Throughout this process, it has been my aim to identify and evaluate not only the interactions between corporate producers and young users, but also the power relations between the two. I want to argue that the popular images of the empowered young users of a new digital democracy can be – and need to be – complicated by asking questions about the politics of digital participation: about whose voices are heard, about where attention is centred, about how interactivity is defined, about who is rewarded for creative labour.

In this comprehensive opening chapter, I provide necessary background to these questions. I begin by outlining what I believe are key issues within a critical examination of digital participation. I then explain my choice of research site – internet television, and the proliferation of corporate and youth practices around recently digitized televisual texts. This is followed by a review of four concepts foundational to the thesis itself: interactivity, participatory culture, power and youth. I consider how these concepts have developed, what role they play in my work, and how my study shifts or extends their meanings. The final two sections explain my methodologies and outline the chapters to follow.

Towards a Politics of Young People’s Digital Participation

The material practices and discursive articulations associated with digital participation vary widely. Behind this variety is not ambiguity or confusion, but rather the deeply contested issue of just how participation will be configured, and for whose benefit. Such a contest has significant implications for the construction of youthful subjectivities, social relations and solidarities, and deserves to be considered with care. What is required now, I would argue, is a
critical examination of the politics of digital participation. Such an engagement would undertake a number of projects. To begin with, participatory culture should be analyzed in context, considering, for example, the consolidation of media ownership, the re-regulation of digital technologies, and the formation of publics and counterpublics. It can also fruitfully be linked to concepts such as digital capitalism and globalizing youth cultures. There must also be a recognition of the culturally-constituted desire to participate. Rather than falling into the trap of regarding digital participation as the outcome of technological innovation, we must relocate it within the realm of social desires, desires which create a demand for, shape and recreate interactive technologies and practices (Cover, 2006). Overcoming the burden of technological determinism also opens up spaces for pedagogical possibility, as I shall argue in the final chapter, for it recognizes the productive gaps between the intention and the use(s) of the technology, what Raymond Williams (1974) called technology’s “uncontrollable opportunities” (p. 134). Finally, I believe, we are required to step back from the discourse of novelty that surrounds young people’s digital participation. We must keep in mind, as Saskia Sassen (2002) writes, that new media “can indeed be constitutive of new social dynamics, but they can also be derivative or merely reproduce older conditions” (p. 77).

Accepting the need for a politics of digital participation means being attentive to the ways in which power, contestation and hierarchy inscribe participatory technologies and processes. Given the vast (and rapidly accelerating) range of interactive environments, there are countless practices, sites and discourses in which to ground such an analysis. But in a culture that promises new levels of collaboration and power-sharing – promises frequently transmitted through the invitations of the corporate media and extended towards young users – I would argue that the interactions between commercial media, young user-producers, and popular culture texts are a
particularly crucial site for an analysis of the production and circulation of power. Indeed, it is here that we can trace many of the most significant concerns currently debated by those interested in digital theory, cultural studies, and media education, including struggles over commodification, user agency, labor, intellectual property, and literacy. I briefly reflect on each of these five struggles here, describing the debates and tensions that attend each, before giving them more concrete form in the chapters that follow.

1. The past few years have seen the emergence of a set of corporate digital practices that constitute the *commodification of participation*. These include the takeover of a number of participatory child- and youth-oriented sites by large media corporations, including Google’s purchase of *YouTube*, News Corporation’s purchase of *MySpace*, and Viacom’s purchase of *Neopets*, as well as the appearance of companies such as Disney and McDonalds on social networking sites like *Facebook*. A more amorphous, but equally significant development is what Tom McCourt and Patrick Burkart (2007) observe as the shift of users from vibrant online communities to shopping destinations and “light virtual communities,” spaces where “online cultural distributors construct the appearance of community, while largely denying members the ability to communicate or otherwise interact directly” (p. 269). This shift may be particularly significant for young women and girls who, as Anita Harris (2008) has written, are increasingly interpellated as ideal neo-liberal consumers within digital space.

2. The context of commodification necessarily frames the remaining debates, and in particular leads to questions about the possibility of *user agency*. Scholars such as Mark Andrejevic (2004; 2007) have framed user interactions with digital media texts
and producers within the terms of surveillance, consumption and the reproduction of “communicative capitalism” (Dean, 2002). In her examination of corporate and user practices on YouTube, José van Dijk (2009) questions user agency by noting the ways in which the site’s interface steers users by means of codes that promote commercialized content. Other scholars have been intent to demonstrate users’ active role in shaping interactivity. Russell Richards (2006) stresses that while users may indeed be positioned by digital media producers and texts (for example interpellated as consumers), they also position themselves, and negotiate power relationships by taking on productive activities that include customizing and circulating content. Henry Jenkins (2006b), similarly beginning from a standpoint that affirms users’ transformative powers, argues that young fans of popular culture proliferate interpretations and attract new audiences through rereading, remixing and retelling corporately-produced content, thereby “repair[ing] the damage caused by an increasingly privatized culture” (p. 256).

3. Debates over the provision of free labor within the digital economy add another layer of complexity to questions of agency. Introduced by cybertheorist Tiziana Terranova in 2000, the concept of free labor has become even more relevant with the rise of time-consuming and skilled activities such as modifying commercial video games, circulating digital texts, and creating user-generated content, many of them tasks performed by young people. Drawing on neo-Marxist theory, numerous scholars have entered a discussion of “immaterial labor,” debating the degree to which free digital labor is structured and shaped by late capitalism, and its ability to exist outside of and subvert technocapitalist acceleration (Barbrook 1999, cited in Terranova 2000; Deuze
& Scholtz, 2007; Terranova, 2000). Other debates center around the usefulness of concepts of commodification and exploited labor in theorizing the relationship between commercial and non-commercial interests. In their study of the gaming industry, for example, John Banks and Sal Humphreys (2008) reject notions of user ignorance and exploitation that they see at work in neo-Marxist interpretations of user labor, and instead posit the need for new analytical models which recognize the complex, hybrid and changing power relations between users and producers.

4. It is impossible to consider the producer-user-text relationship without recognizing the way in which copyright laws, digital rights management, and users’ textual practices have brought media corporations and users into conflict. User-initiated practices provide serious challenges to dominant conceptualizations of intellectual property, ownership and authority. Corporations have responded with both the development of locking technologies and law suits. A number of scholars and popular commentators (Lessig, 2008; Sobol, 2006) have noted the ways in which these legal interventions criminalize the consumption patterns and creative practices central to young people’s identity-building. Others (Santo, 2007) have suggested that corporate invitations to participate that frame or regulate the ways in which copyrighted material can be used might also be interpreted as a new, more subtle mechanism of control.

5. Finally, a number of media scholars agree that with the rise in digital technologies, a new set of literacies is being practiced, with interactivity at the centre of this shift. Livingstone (2003) reports that it is “interactivity which marks the greatest disjunction in the literacy requirements of old and new media” (p. 19) and Jenkins
(2006a) argues that “participatory cultures” demand new skills in networking, negotiation and appropriation. Many scholars also suggest that intensified interactions between media producers, users and texts requires a rethinking of media education. Some argue that educating young people in content creation is crucial to repositioning users as producers rather than recipients (Livingstone, 2003) and that media users need to learn – and are learning – new ways of engaging with corporations and corporate content (Deuze & Scholtz, 2007; Jenkins, 2006a). Others place a greater emphasis on notions of management, arguing that young people must be taught to use corporate media in “safe” and strategic ways (Hobbs, 2008). Of course, young people’s engagements with digital media are greatly complicated by the questions of commodification, agency and labour outlined above, and any study of a contextualized interactivity needs to ask just what it means to “empower” contemporary users of digital media.

Although I have presented each of these debates separately, they are of course deeply connected, and it is their intersection that creates the contradictions, convergences and paradoxes that so many theorists identify with “network culture.” Rather than trying to resolve or simplify these tensions, researchers need to recognize them, and, more importantly, trace the ways in which power is reproduced, resisted and circulated within such struggles. That is exactly what I propose to do in the chapters ahead, which map the messy, uneven and contested interactions between corporate media, pop culture texts and young user-producers. Each of my examples is taken from internet television – a hybrid, transmedia set of practices that not only brings together the “old” and “new” technologies of television and the internet, but also draws in activities such as blogging, discussing, voting, spoofing, remixing, archiving and circulating digital texts. In the
sections that follow, I explain how internet television – less a technology than a set of texts, processes and relationships – provides particularly fertile terrain for my analysis by raising important questions about interactivity, convergence and shifting audience practices.

**Converging Screens and the Promise of Participation**

Although it is tempting to rush forward to examine the current migration of television to the computer screen and the emergence of new, youth-oriented participatory practices, it is perhaps worth pausing a moment to remember that there is in fact a long history of experiments in making television more interactive. “One of the common features of many technocultural discourses,” writes Erkki Huhtamo, “is their lack of historical consciousness. History evanesces as technology marches on” (1999, p. 97). Certainly contemporary popular discourses of interactivity seem to have shed all histories and appear as “new” opportunities not only to control technology but to have machines respond to us in unprecedented ways. Yet, as I suggest here, many earlier experiments in audience involvement demonstrate the same tensions that mark contemporary practices. Indeed, as early as 1974, Raymond Williams suggested that while television technologies of the future might hold increasingly interactive potential, dominant commercial interests would nonetheless define television viewers as reactive consumers (p. 151). Williams’ distinction between interaction and reaction continues to resonate in the current debate over whether interactivity should be defined as digital media’s dialogic capacities or the proliferation of consumer choice through such technologies, and also anticipates Mark Andrejevic’s (2001) more recent formulation of the “interpassivity” (p. 3) that is created when certain forms of interactivity draw viewers further into ideologies of consumption.
A brief history of interactive television

A small sampling of experiments in interactive television might slow our march towards reification of the “new,” and instead demonstrate the historical breadth in definitions of audience participation. Highlighting the way in which young viewers are figured as audiences who want tactile encounters with the TV set, for example, the 1950s program *Winky Dink and You* encouraged children to buy special transparent sheets to put over their TV screens. With the transparencies in place, young viewers used crayons to draw ladders, ropes, axes or other tools to help Winky Dink out of his scrapes (see Figure 1). Despite its popularity, *Winky Dink and You* was taken off the air after four seasons, due to concerns about the health effects of radiation and parents’ annoyance at childrens’ tendency to draw on the screen without the aid of transparencies. As well as configuring televisual participation as kinetic and largely directed by on-air personalities (not unusual in the world of children’s programming, in which children are routinely directed to dance, clap, jump and sing), *Winky Dink* is also a reminder that media corporations’ strategies for creating profit through “transmedia” encounters with the television text are not entirely new.
Two decades later, in a very different vein, video was attributed with the potential to revive forms of cultural participation thought to be lost in an age of mass media. Speaking at “Open Circuits: An international conference on the future of television” held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974, Nam June Paik predicted that “new forms of video…will stimulate the whole society to find more imaginative ways of telecommunication,” while other artists such as Wulf Herzogenrath hoped that the self-representational potential of video might democratize television (p. 45). In the 1980s, the movement for public access resulted in collectives such as Paper Tiger Television, a New York City media arts organization that provided alternative programming and emphasized access, collaboration and participation in the production process (Halleck, 2002). In Canada, community TV found a place on cable television through the 1980s and 1990s, and flourished in cities like Winnipeg, where it enjoyed large audiences and the enthusiastic involvement of community members, a uniquely participatory moment in Canadian media history recently celebrated in Daniel Barrow’s multimedia performance and archive *Winnipeg Babysitter* (Barrow, 2005).
Employing digital technology, CBC’s “open source television” program ZeD began from the same principles of access and community. Originally aired in the spring of 2002, ZeD was both a website and a late-night program targeted at young adults. As a website, it invited its members to upload animation, video, film, art work, music, and text to its site, as well as to join in group discussions, chats and contests. As a program, it broadcast selections of these contributions alongside musical, dance and spoken word performances, studio productions, and guest interviews, all presented by a regular host. The producers of the program, who deemed themselves “the world leaders in interactive television” (Gill, 2005, p. R3), embraced an experimental attitude not only to programming, but to production and distribution, switching to open source coding for their website in 2005, and becoming the first North American television outlet to make their program legally available through BitTorrent in the same year. The program was praised by critics and nominated for several Emmy and Gemini awards. It also generated extensive participation, attracting over 45,000 members and 50,000 submissions, and hosting almost 400 online user groups. Although it failed to meet many of its claims to open access, and raised issues of free labour and compensation, in a pre-YouTube era, ZeD made available artistic works distinctly different from those seen on TV, and it connected a wide array of new and established artists, displaying and organizing their work in ways unseen elsewhere on the internet. Despite its cancellation in 2006, ZeD was an influential program, providing inspiration for Al Gore’s interactive cable channel Current TV, which Gore promised would “empower” young people and allow them to “engage in a dialogue of democracy” (cited in Jenkins, 2006b, p. 240).

Signaling the role of fans in carving out television’s participatory practices and moving us forward to some of the most recent formulations of interactivity, are the much-commented on
interactions around the popular drama *Mad Men*. In 2008, when fans of the program began to write *Twitter* posts in character, setting up imaginary meetings and trysts, and revealing characters’ inner thoughts, they drew together a long history of television-inspired fan fiction with the practices of recent social media. When this activity first came to the attention of AMC executives, it was regarded as copyright infringement, and the Twitterers’ accounts were promptly suspended at AMC’s request. Within a week, however, the accounts were returned, after the marketing department convinced AMC that the role play might be better regarded as free promotion than copyright infringement (Pickard, 2009). By the next season, not only were Twitterers allowed to continue interacting with (and expanding) the original narrative, but were encouraged by AMC to move even deeper into the televisual text. With the introduction of the popular interactive marketing site “Mad Men Yourself,” fans could supplement their written intertexts with visual images, choosing from a menu of body parts, outfits, props and backgrounds to create icons of themselves as Mad Men-like characters for *Twitter* or *Facebook* accounts (see Figure 2).
Finally, cable companies and hardware manufacturers have had a decades-long focus on developing and marketing technologies that allow viewers to interact with their television sets, and to customize and control television’s flow. Such technologies have included the remote control, the VCR and most recently the PVR. Here, it is technological change that is seen to lead to increased involvement. This particular logic is well-illustrated (but also comically interrupted) in a 2006 interview between satirical television host Jon Stewart and his guest Bill Gates, in which the two discuss the future of television. When Stewart expresses his reservations about interactive television, speculating that people might just want to “sit and absorb” TV, Gates reassures him that it won’t mean “doing a lot – just pushing a button or even saying something.” Using the example of the Olympics, Gates suggests that an interactive television viewer could choose to watch only those sports they were interested in, and skip over the less desirable content. To this, Stewart jokes “Could I make someone fall?” to which Gates can only answer “We’re working on that.” Here, in Gates’ view, digital technologies directly provide the viewer
with “new” possibilities for interaction, but as Stewart’s quip implies, this interaction is neither particularly significant nor especially responsive. Gates’ promised participation is mostly comprised of increased choice of content and control over technology. Diminishing the potential for complex dialogic interaction to thin conceptualizations of user-to-hardware interaction, it reminds us that interactivity is, as Williams warned, increasingly “couched in terms that cast the individual as a consumer rather than as a citizen” (Hendy, cited in Parnis, p. 238).

**Internet television as a research site**

But television is undoubtedly undergoing far more change than simply the ability to customize content. In their aptly titled anthology *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (2004) argue that “if TV refers to the technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking that were associated with the medium in its classical public service and three-network age, it appears that we are now entering a new phase of television – the phase that comes after ‘TV’” (p. 2). Media scholars’ interest in television’s reinvention was also evident at a recent conference at MIT, where a gathering of American television scholars were asked to discuss “the evolution of television” and to consider questions such as “What is television today, and what is it becoming?” (Unboxing Television, 2007). Answers to those questions varied, but topics of discussion included the rise of horizontal networks, changes in television’s interpellation of citizens, shifts in the relationship between television producers and fans, and the increasing overlap between processes of production and consumption. Recitations of the many technologies and modes of distribution and consumption now associated with television were frequent; after rhyming off TiVo, Bit Torrent, Netflix, TV Links, *YouTube*, video phones and DVDs as current ways to watch TV, moderator Jonathan Gray was forced to ask just “What counts as television?” This was a question repeated by
participant Amanda Lotz, whose study of television production, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2007), moves from metaphors of evolution to revolution, a shift that might be seen to echo advertisers’ hyperbolic descriptions of TV technologies, but which also reflects Lotz’s vision of television’s abrupt break with its own past.

Certainly increasing audience participation is seen to be part of that (r)evolution, from reality television’s exclamations that “this time you choose,” to social viewing platforms that allow simultaneous viewing and online chat, to the proliferation of user-generated television remixes, spoofs and trailers. Beyond the history of attempts to make television more interactive, and the politics of defining (or confining) interactive practices, there are a number of other reasons why internet television is a particularly apt place to undertake an examination of the producer-user-text relationship now:

1. Internet television not only introduces a number of practices within participatory culture, but also demonstrates many of the key features of what Henry Jenkins calls “convergence culture” (2006b). Jenkins characterizes convergence as the flow of content across multiple media, the consolidation of previously separated media industries, and the shift in roles of media producers and consumers, and he places young people at the forefront of these changes. The corporate and audience practices and the political economy of internet television provide an ideal space through which to observe these changes and critically evaluate their meaning.

2. By bringing together television and web culture, internet television lends itself particularly well to an investigation of the claim that passive audiences and one-way communication flows (long associated with television) are being replaced by active user-producers and multidirectional dialogue (currently associated with the internet).
As feminist television scholars remind us, these notions of passive and active audiences are not neutral concepts but are overlaid with gender-, class- and age-based associations which need further investigation (Parks, 2004; Seiter, 2000). Young people’s place within these discourses is particularly complex. As viewers of television, they have long been imagined as passive, even victimized, audiences. As users of the internet, they are simultaneously figured as agentic “digital natives” and the targets of corporate manipulation. Exploring young people’s practices as they straddle both media gives us a means to examine these contradictory conceptualizations.

3. As suggested earlier, a number of theorists (Castells, 2007; Deuze & Scholtz, 2007; McCourt & Burkart, 2007; Terranova, 2000) have noted the increased role of capital in shaping digital environments generally, and online social networks in particular. Because internet television necessarily involves the consideration of large media corporations and their impact on participation, it provides a space in which not only to evaluate the legitimacy of these claims, but also to understand how corporate media are shaping digital culture, particularly in relation to youth.

4. Television fandom has a long history, and its interactive practices of manipulating, re-imagining and sharing televisual texts are well-recorded (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Jenkins, 1992). The concept of the active audience, involved in decoding, interpreting and discussing televisual texts is similarly well-established (Ang, 1991; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1986). Such histories and scholarship provide an important context for evaluating the claims of “newness” in digital discussion forums, remixes and user-generated content.
In light of my argument for the relevance of internet television, for an expanded politics of participation, and for the social, cultural and political significance of interactions between youth, corporate producers and pop culture texts, the question which has focused my research is this: How do corporate television producers and young television users practice digital interactivity in order to (re)negotiate their relationship to one another and to television texts?

Before explaining how I attempted to answer this question in my methodologies section, I want to review four key analytic terms – interactivity, participatory culture, power and youth – and point out the ways I’ve taken up these concepts in order to help me formulate, revise and refine my own thinking around young people’s digital media participation.

Key Concepts

Interactivity

Eight years ago, when I first became interested in how audiences were being invited to take part in digital production practices, I used the concept of interactivity to frame my analysis. The practices and platforms that would come to be associated with Web 2.0 had not yet emerged, nor had the rhetoric of participatory culture. The language of interactivity, on the other hand, was everywhere – appearing simultaneously as a buzzword, a sales pitch and a scholarly concept. As I began to investigate the term more closely, I learned that current conceptualizations of digital interactivity could be traced back to cybernetics theories of American military researchers in the 1950s and 60s, and that interactivity had been an object of inquiry almost continuously since that time. Much of this research, I came to realize, was functional in purpose, intent on defining the properties of interactivity and on creating classificatory models. It was also surprisingly limited in scope, failing to acknowledge both the social constitution and socially constitutive aspects of
interactive technologies, as well as the contextual circumstances in which interactive processes occur. But there was also, I discovered, a second, smaller and more recent body of literature addressing interactivity that arose out of critical communications and cultural studies. Here, the emphasis was on the power relationships that structure mediated communication and the ways that digital interactivity is implicated in contemporary processes. It is this second body of literature which has most helped me in theorizing a politics of interactivity, and which I briefly review here.

“The concept of interactivity,” writes Rob Cover (2006), exemplifying this broader view, “need not be understood as the ‘making available’ of a newly-invented technological tool, but the extension to media technologies of a culturally-constituted desire for communication” (p. 143). Beginning from Raymond Williams’ cultural materialist perspective on technological change, Cover locates interactivity not in the realm of technology, but in the realm of social desires, desires which create a demand for, shape and recreate interactive technologies and practices. In doing so, he overcomes the technological determinism that underlies the definitional approaches to interactivity, and provides a fitting introduction to the work of recent cultural studies scholars.

Indeed, interactivity-as-desire poses a number of challenges, both to conventional communications definitions and to popular rhetoric. To begin with, it questions the implied “newness” of interactivity. Drawing on literary theorists such as Roland Barthes, Cover places recent manifestations of digital interactivity within a long history of tension between “an authorial desire for finality and an audience desire for control over arrangement” (p. 139). It also restores agency and creativity to users, recognizing that audiences often find imaginative ways to re-interpret texts, even when the texts themselves do not encourage such engagement (p. 143).
Interactivity-as-desire also relocates interaction not just in those familiar invitations to participate coming from grassroots and corporate-owned media alike (invitations to chat, add comments, create and contribute content), but also in those moments in which users *seize* interactivity, altering, rearranging and customizing digital texts uninvited. While Cover is careful not to equate interactivity with resistant activities, he argues that a revised concept of interactivity allows us to see user practices as a way of struggling against the presumed authority of the text, a struggle which, as I argue in the final chapter, holds considerable pedagogical potential. Equally significant, Cover’s essay is the only article I have encountered that directly proposes that interactivity might include unasked-for or oppositional interactions with the text, a scarcity that points to the pervasive spread of corporate definitions. It is this sense of interactivity as unsanctioned activity (or perhaps even unsanctioned desire), that has influenced my own work, particularly in examining young women’s emotionally-charged, sexually-fluid and entirely uninvited video remixes.

Where Cover theorizes interactivity as a “culturally-constituted desire for communication,” Russell Richards (2006) interprets it as a kind of environment, writing that “we are situated in fields/matrices of power, technology and culture, each of which effects how we receive, and to what extent we can transmit into interactive environments” (p. 537). Richards argues that interactivity should be reconceived as an environment which, in the Bourdieuan sense, positions users. Because digital technology and interactive programming – sparked by users’ own motivations – have broadened the positions available, users now have more potential roles, and Richards suggests that the concept of the consumer may need to be rethought to include the user as a generator of content. He coins the term “user production” to describe these possibilities (p. 537). According to Richards, “user production” could apply, for example, to the
posting of photographs to a photosharing website. In this case, the user of the site not only produces content, but also begins a process whereby other users may interact with the photos and themselves create new content in the form of comments or changes to the photographs, in a process that is both generative and communicative. Richards’ analysis here not only returns a sense of user agency and complexity to technocentric definitions of interactivity, but also generates a series of research questions, questions which Richards himself writes must be related to “the forms of power that can be facilitated by the different modes of interactivity” (p. 547) and which include: Who is producing content? How are users themselves produced? And what kinds of architectures, institutions and controls enable or shut down user production? Such questions become particularly useful – and urgent – when we consider that the majority of digital interaction now takes place on corporate platforms (Scholz, 2009).

Amongst the scholars whose work is surveyed here, Mark Andrejevic has shown perhaps the most sustained interest in interactivity, demonstrated in Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched (2004) and iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era (2007) plus a host of journal articles and online commentaries. Throughout his work, Andrejevic distinguishes between the rhetoric of interactivity – which holds the promise of participation and empowerment – and the actual uses to which interactive technologies and practices are routinely put. As the titles of his books suggest, for Andrejevic, these uses are increasingly linked to surveillance, the commodification of labor, and the consolidation of military and corporate power. Andrejevic observes a wide spectrum of sites, technologies and processes – including advertising, reality television, dating websites, mobile phones, the Internet, corporate data collection and peer-to-peer surveillance – to suggest that interactivity, shaped by dominant
interests, may be more correctly seen as a form of interpassivity that dis-empowers participants, exploiting their labor and drawing out personal data with the promise of better “service.”

Andrejevic pushes the analysis of interactivity onto new ground, recognizing the participatory claims of less-examined sites such as the Ready.gov website of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Noting the many intersections between surveillance, war and interactivity, he names the War on Terror the “first interactive, Internet war” (2006, p. 443) and observes the ways in which the website uses the language of interactivity to position the reader as a “citizen-soldier” responsible for participating in covert war. Part of this new interactive role is that of surveillant; the citizen-soldier is encouraged to become part of the program of “Total Information Awareness” through lateral surveillance in her community and workplace.

Despite the totalizing appearance of his theoretical viewpoint, it is important to note that Andrejevic denies neither the transformative possibility of interactivity nor the possibility to transform interactivity. In fact, Andrejevic suggests that interactivity, formulated as dialogue and exchange, holds the potential to provide a critique that could be turned against the hegemonic interests it currently serves, and is thus too risky to be implemented (2001, p. 3), a position which recognizes the centrality of interactivity and mediated communication to an understanding of current social relations.

**Participatory culture**

Just as I had completed my own study of interactivity and its scholarly configurations, a new set of practices and platforms emerged, and with it a new set of descriptors. The appearance of social-networking sites, blogs, wikis, video-sharing sites, user-generated content and folksonomies, and the rapid growth of specific sites such as *Wikipedia, Flickr, YouTube,*
MySpace and Facebook all signaled the potential for greater degrees of collaboration, sociability, and textual interaction. While the now-ubiquitous label Web 2.0 has been applied to these sites, implying not only change but progress, the language of participation has also accompanied the emergence of these practices and platforms. In 2004, for example, digital entrepreneur Tim O’Reilly used the term “architectures of participation” to describe “systems that are designed for user contribution.” Perhaps even more influential has been Henry Jenkins’ conceptualization of participatory culture. Coined by Jenkins (1992) in the 1990s to describe fans’ use of popular culture, it reappeared in Jenkins’ more recent work on media education (2006a) and convergence culture (2006b), but also in the work of numerous other scholars, particularly those studying young people’s online practices (e.g., Alvermann, 2008; Burgess & Green, 2009; Ito et al., 2010).

Where Andrejevic’s interpretation of interactivity emphasizes centralization, social control and regulation, Jenkins’ most recent observations of “participatory culture” hit exactly the opposite note, focusing on decentralization and heterogeneity. Jenkins employs French new media theorist Pierre Levy’s notion of collective intelligence to suggest that consumption is becoming a collective practice, bringing with it new forms of sociality, participation and networked knowledge creation. Similar to Lisabet van Zoonen (2005), Jenkins argues that participatory practices – epitomized by the “active fan” – will, in the future, be applied to more overtly political projects, although it is unclear exactly how such a process will occur, and what it means for democracy when the crucible for such learning lies within “consumption communities” (p. 246).

Perhaps the more interesting and less speculative part of Jenkins’ interpretation of participatory culture lies in his argument for the increasing diversification of media through user
activity. Backed up by detailed case studies, Jenkins argues that participatory culture is highly generative, increasing not only the amount of content, but more importantly, its range. This, he argues, occurs through both “top-down” and “bottom-up” processes (p. 257). Fans of popular culture proliferate interpretations and attract new audiences through rereading, remixing and retelling corporately-produced content. At the same time, Jenkins suggests, grassroots media content, increasingly picked up by corporate media, exerts a new influence over popular culture, again multiplying perspectives. While Jenkins fails to provide an adequate critique of the complicated circuits of finance and power that attend these exchanges between media producers and users, he nonetheless vividly captures users’ creative collaborative practices and conveys the ways they challenge conventional media production processes.

Jenkins (2006a) also puts the notion of participatory culture to work in theorizing new literacy and media education practices. In his influential report prepared for the MacArthur Foundation, Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century, Jenkins argues that children and youth are already actively engaged in participatory cultures, and that these cultures have significant potential benefits – such as peer-to-peer learning, the development of workplace skills and a more “empowered conception of citizenship” – that should be included more explicitly within the K-12 curriculum. Jenkins’ definition of participatory culture is somewhat different here from its earlier iterations:

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (p. 3)
A number of other scholars of youth culture and education have taken up this emphasis on participatory culture as places of support, creativity and learning, echoing Donna Alvermann’s (2008) suggestion that aspects of participatory culture need to make their way into formal education if classroom learning is to remain relevant to young people. In their study of young people’s online activities, Mizuko Ito and her fellow researchers rely on a notion of “genres of participation” to describe the myriad ways that young people interact with pop culture texts and with each other. Ito notes that the concept of participatory cultures is particularly helpful for those researching young people’s digital practices, for it displaces problematic presumptions about the automatic internalization of consumption practices, and “has the advantage in not assuming that kids are passive, mere audiences to media or educational content” (p. 15).

But just as the concept of interactivity has accumulated meanings that need to be critiqued, so too has the language of participation. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green write, participatory cultures, in which young people are “invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 290) might at first appear “like a rather comfortable arrangement” (p. 10). However, the connotations of creativity, consensus and empowerment embedded there need to be problematized by a deeper understanding of power arrangements, profit-making and the (re)production of hegemonic pedagogies. As education scholar Guy Merchant (2009) concludes after reviewing the main tenets of Jenkins’ vision, “a more nuanced account of the different kinds of social, economic and cultural capital that determine existing levels of participation and expertise is needed if we are to build on [Jenkins’] aspirations” (p. 115).

In fact more critical accounts of participation are beginning to emerge, as scholars and activists realize the ease with which the language of participation can be used by “individuals,
corporations, governments and DIY punks” alike (Economopoulos, 2010). Many of these rely on political theory. Beginning from the work of theorists such as Carole Pateman and Chantal Mouffe, Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen (2008) ask “what has happened to the concept of participation” with “the introduction of a new generation of media?” (p. 1). In answering this question, they reject the conceptual stability of participation, suggesting instead that it is a contested and contingent term, and that its definition is “partially constructed through practices – and partially constructs and structures these practices” (p. 3). Concerning new media, this means that “the participatory potential of media technologies remains dependent upon the way they are used…. [W]eb 2.0 technologies can be used perfectly in a top-down nonparticipatory way” (p. 7), an insight that becomes apparent in my own research into corporate strategies for using the internet. Not an Alternative, the co-curators of a recent New York City exhibit exploring the subject of participation, provide an even more stringent critique, identifying “participationism” as an emergent ideology that may obscure the workings of power. Power, they argue following Foucault, is diffuse and distributed, and because of this, can operate through networks, distributed systems and participatory architecture. Like Carpentier and De Cleen, they argue that participation “can turn into a vector for dominant ideologies as easily as it can liberate” and they advocate a critical analysis of “the contours of this emergent ideology,” as well as a re-evaluation of refusal, non-engagement and antagonism as responses to the constant enjoinders to connect, engage, get involved and build consensus (Economopoulos, 2010). Not only do these analyses provide a corrective to the celebratory accounts of participation frequently found in education and digital scholarship, they also make important connections between participation and power, propelling me towards the next topic in my conceptual framework.
Power

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in the relationship between power and digital networks within a number of disciplines, including cultural studies (Lash, 2007), political theory (Hardt & Negri, 2000), and communications (Andrejevic, 2009; Castells, 2007). Indeed, some scholars have suggested that in the current age, digital communication has become a main source – if not the main source – of power. Scott Lash (2007) argues that power is now post-hegemonic, and that one of its primary characteristics is its communicational nature. “Now domination is through communication,” he writes. “The communication is not above us, even as disciplinary power is. It is instead among us. We swim in its ether” (p. 66). More prosaically, Manuel Castells (2007) writes that “power relations, in our social and technological context, are largely dependent on the process of socialized communication” (p. 260).

Over the course of this thesis, I also hope to illuminate some aspects of the connection between power and digital media. At the very least, it is my intention to trouble the language of empowerment that circulates so freely within accounts of participatory culture that it is possible for Rupert Murdoch to say, after his 580 million dollar purchase of the youth-centered site MySpace that “now it’s the people who are taking control” (Reiss, 2006) or for the Time magazine article cited earlier to continue its ode to “You” by describing how “your” use of interactive media is “about the many wrestling power from the few” (Grossman, 2006). As I hope to make clear, participatory culture’s claims to empowerment through content creation, self-expression and collaboration must be read inside contexts that include a recognition of the political economy of the internet, a neoliberal project of self-making that operates through digital production, and the complexity of youthful forms of agency, identity-creation and community-making in a global age.
But as much as I want to problematize interactive participation’s claim to empowerment, I also want to demonstrate the complex, convergent and sometimes contradictory distribution and circulation of power through digital interactivity. Indeed, a study such as this that aspires to analyze the power relations between young users and corporate producers runs the risk of reducing power to “power over,” in this case figuring power as the possession of corporate media, wielded against youth who are either yielding or resistant. While a model of subversive youthful activity does at least acknowledge the possibility of young people’s power, this binaristic model of power and counterpower is nonetheless inadequate. It fails both to recognize Foucault’s insight into power as that which is productively “employed and exercised” by individuals (1980, p. 98) and to capture the pervasiveness, movement and diffusion that Lash alludes to in his description of communicational power as an ether in which we are immersed.

We might begin to complicate this binary model by thinking about corporate power in digital environments not as disciplinary power over, but rather, as Not an Alternative suggests, as power distributed across and through. Drawing on Foucault’s theories of the decentralization and circulation of power, we can see that power of any kind – including that which upholds dominant ideologies – moves well through diffuse and distributed networks. Not only can corporate power work through non-linear networks, drawing in participants, content and profit through its presence and invitations, it also, as many theorists suggest, seeks to control movement and activity within such networks. Thus Lash (2007) writes of communication’s “power through control” and Andrejevic (2009) suggests that “we might rethink cyberspace” as “directed” or “steered” space (p. 43). In my own analysis of corporate sites designed for young users, I also note how attention is channeled – and constrained – through a variety of mechanisms that include design factors such as links, menus, interfaces and the presence and placement of
advertising, as well as processes of interpellation, commodification and professionalization. And
not to overlook the political economy of new media as we chase across its capillaries, we must
also observe the ways in which global multimedia businesses have, in Castell’s (2007) words,
“taken advantage of the tidal wave of deregulation and liberalization” (p. 135) not only to buy up
but to integrate the networks of communication into their “multilayered organizations,” a move
that makes the circulation of corporate power through networks that much easier.

If it is the case, then, that corporate power not only owns but works through horizontally
networked spaces, and seeks to control and direct attention inside such networks, how then might
we theorize youthful resistance and counterpower? Certainly it is clear that with the proliferation
of networks and the expansiveness of digital environments, there is no single model of
subversion. Indeed, Lash (2007) calls upon Guy Debord to suggest that resistance to post-
hegemonic power must be situational, directly related to – and occurring within – the
environments and practices it purports to resist. Not an Alternative offers one means of
resistance within mandatory participatory cultures through their references to refusal and non-
participation, and Andrejevic (2009) suggests that “participation in shaping the structures that
regulate our social lives,” rather than merely paying attention and adding content to those
structures, constitutes a truly transformative interactivity. In my own research, I note both of
these strategies – the decision not to participate, the decision to participate elsewhere – as well as
strategies of appropriation, (re)construction and confrontation. My research and my many
months spent on these sites suggest to me that we must be alive to the many forms that young
people’s resistance may take, and be ready to acknowledge the complexity, difficulty and
imaginative work required to assert power within environments so thoroughly infused with
commercial interests that promise – and deliver – pleasure, participation, exchange and the resources for building belonging and identity.

**Youth**

Finally, I want to think about young people and their relationship to digital media. Vital to my research is an understanding of youth as a socially constructed category, an understanding rooted in the sociology of youth. Equally important is a recognition of the role that digital media and technology play in producing this category. As a number of scholars note, media and consumer culture have long been seen to play a part in defining generational differences and identities, but with young people’s growing use of digital technologies, that perceived connection has only become stronger (Buckingham, 2006; Ito, 2010). David Buckingham writes that the combination of youth and technology “serves as a powerful focus for much broader hopes and fears about social change” (p. 9). We can currently see a host of competing emotions projected onto youth-oriented practices like social networking, texting and online gaming, emotions that range from anxiety over internet addiction and cyberbullying, to anticipation about the possibility of renewed creativity and improved literacy.

But just as we must question the extent to which young people’s digital media use comes to define them as “cyberkids” or “the digital generation” – that is, as a generation radically different from their elders – we cannot overlook the significance of young people’s social media and production practices. It is not simply that digital media and online communication have become a pervasive part of young people’s everyday lives, but that youth are key actors in the shifting landscape of media and communication. As Mizuko Ito (2010) writes, “youth practices have been an important part of the drive toward … more networked, individualized, and diversified forms of media engagement” (p. 3), and on sites such as FaceBook and YouTube,
young people “have defined certain genres of participation” (p. 11). Indeed, an important aspect of the sociology of youth is this commitment to recognizing the ways in which young people are active, creative social agents who not only produce their own cultures, but also exert an influence on culture at large.

At the same time, this understanding of young people as social actors and producers must be placed within the context of social, political and economic change, including the rise of neoliberalism and the growth of digital capitalism, contexts that can be illuminated by the explicitly political work of cultural studies, as I outline in the section to follow. Here, though, I want to point towards the work of Paul Willis, Angela McRobbie, Anita Harris, Elizabeth Bullen and Jane Kenway as providing crucial frameworks for thinking about young people’s current relationship to commercial culture. Each of these scholars recognizes the productive and differentiated uses that young people make of popular culture, and their “desire not just to take up social or material space in a way governed by others, but to matter culturally” (Willis, 2003, p. 405). At the same time, they are attentive to the power of corporate entities to brand digital spaces and practices, and to foster particular kinds of youthful selves. By encompassing both positions, they encourage us to embrace the widest scope possible in recognizing young people’s drive to participate in the work of constructing cultural worlds, while still locating youth practices within the material and social circumstances that define and delimit participation.

Perhaps one final word about definitions and descriptions is necessary. As Ito (2010) and her co-researchers note in their introduction to a book that surveys an impressive range of youth practices, many digital sites – like YouTube or Facebook – attract an intergenerational group of users. While acknowledging this, and acknowledging the significance of interactions between adults and young people online, it is still appropriate to consider some sites as “youth-oriented”
or “youth-centric” given the ways in which young people have often been the first participants, continue to make up the largest number of users, and have had significant impact on the shape of the site. This is true, for example, in my study of Comedy Central discussion boards, where there are certainly adult participants, but also a large number of teen and young adult users who wield considerable influence over the tone, content and uses of the boards. Moreover, as I found in my studies of YouTube, many large sites host several smaller communities, and these may be distinctly generational. Throughout my research, I have tried to focus on sites, texts and practices implicated in youth production and sociability, recognizing, as Ito writes, that they may be “culturally identified with youth, but can be engaged with by people of all ages” (p. 11).

**Theoretical Frameworks and Methodologies**

Because my investigation is concerned with exploring youth agency, understanding the interplay between multiple activities (e.g., production, consumption and use) and recognizing participatory practices as sites of contestation, I see it as a cultural studies project. Like many cultural studies researchers, I draw on a number of methodologies in order to answer my central questions – How do commercial producers and young user-producers practice digital interactivity in order to (re)negotiate their relationship to one another? How might a better understanding of these practices change or add to current notions of participatory culture? The methodologies I’ve adopted in my attempt to answer these questions include web sphere analysis, critical discourse analysis, and conversation analysis, all of which I have tried to incorporate into a cultural studies framework committed to “a principled understanding of the complexity of contemporary cultural experience,” (Willis, 2003, p. 411).
Cultural studies

As the various cultural studies models demonstrate – from Hall’s (1980) “encoding/decoding” to Richard Johnson’s “circuit of production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products,” to the Open University’s “circuit of culture” – cultural studies examines not only multiple sites, but also the interworkings of these sites and the social totality in which they are located. Each of these elements – multiplicity, relationality and contextualization – is characteristic of, and central to, the cultural studies project. Speaking of the multiple sites of cultural studies and their relational nature, Lawrence Grossberg (2006) argues that cultural studies is concerned with conjunctures – that is, “moment[s] defined by an accumulation of contradictions, a fusion of different currents or circumstances” (p. 5). It is this understanding of cultural studies projects as both bound by specific cultural moments and marked by contradiction that particularly appeals to me, and it frames my understanding of my own project as one grounded in a particular historical moment and concerned with analyzing paradoxes within the nexus of production, consumption and use. Similarly, Grossberg’s call for a “radical contextualism” mirrors my sense that in the case of interactive participation, context is both a means of recognizing struggles over the uses of interactivity, and a method for critiquing oversimplified models of participatory culture. Without an acknowledgement of “the matrices of power” within which interactive processes take place, studies of interactivity become, in Richards’ (2006) words, “a sterile exercise” (p. 537). Ito (2010) similarly suggests that an examination of young people’s participatory practices cannot occur in isolation, but must make links to “a broader set of social structures and cultural patterns” (p. 5).

Cultural studies is not, of course, an isolated endeavor, and its intersections with other fields of study have also proven useful to my project. The history of cultural studies’ application
to television studies, for example, provides necessary frameworks for thinking about internet television. Early cultural studies texts from Williams, Hoggart and Hall prompted investigations into industrially-produced cultural texts and their uses by audiences, and contributed to television studies’ interest in reception, decoding, and active audiences. While many have suggested that a cultural studies-inflected television studies has gone too far in celebrating resistant audiences, the concept of the active audience nonetheless continues to be relevant. This is particularly true in thinking about current interactions between television producers and audiences, where probing questions need to be asked about how television producers recognize, respond to, and frequently channel young audiences’ desires to engage with televisual texts. Cultural studies has also laid important ground for investigations into popular culture, youth and gender (e.g., Harris, 2008; McRobbie, 1991, 2007; Stein, 2009) and this work too informs my research, particularly for the way it brings necessary insights into diversity, difference and subjectivity. Finally, I want to point towards the intersections between cultural studies and digital studies as an emerging space for critical theory. We can see this, for example, in the work of Andrew Ross (2009) and Mark Andrejevic (2007), both of whom ask questions about labour and exploitation within digital modes of production. This politically- and ethically-informed work is particularly significant within a new media theory that sometimes overlooks existing categories of critical thought in its insistence on digital media’s “newness,” and it informs my own goal of analyzing digitization inside a more continuous history of mediated social arrangements.

**Web sphere analysis**

While cultural studies provides a framework for recognizing complex and shifting relations between users and producers, and for analyzing these relations in context, we still require methods for gathering and analyzing data. As I want to suggest here, research on and
about the internet poses specific challenges associated with the quantity, ephemerality and proliferation of digital content. Certainly I encountered complications related to all of these issues. My central query about the relationship between corporate media and active young audiences, while expressing the question I wanted to address, still left me with an infinite number of paths to follow, not only in terms of choosing television texts, but even more in selecting youth-centric digital practices and sites to analyze. This quandary was exacerbated by the way in which texts (such as comments and videos) and even entire sites would frequently disappear, sometimes to reappear in new form but more often to vanish altogether, inaccessible except in snippets through archiving sites such as The Way Back Machine. The issue of ephemerality was itself indicative of larger changes to content on the net. For example, when I first began gathering data, I had difficulties downloading and storing fan videos, an especially urgent problem due to the way such videos were often removed from video-hosting sites for perceived copyright infringement. This problem was resolved, at least in part, as the online tools to download and store video improved. At the same time, however, corporately-produced television texts that had once been easy to view became much harder to access. This was the case with The Daily Show and The Colbert Report, for example. While video clips from both programs were once readily available on YouTube, fan sites and Comedy Central’s own Motherload site, after Viacom’s decision to centralize all material related to the two comedies, these were no longer available to me due to the dual processes of removing clips from all non-Viacom sites, and the “geoblocking” of U.S. commercial content to Canadian internet users. Still, however frustrating these obstacles may have been, they both highlighted digital practices as the location of struggles over power and profit, and revealed the increasing privatization of the web. Finally, in contrast to these disappearances, I also grappled with the constant proliferation
of material. Not only did the number of sites related to my data collection increase exponentially over the course of my research, the amount of content on the sites themselves also increased: discussion threads proliferated, blog entries accumulated, and remix videos exploded across video-hosting sites.

Certainly I am not alone in identifying the challenges that the web’s continuous flux poses to data collection and analysis. A number of researchers have recently described, analyzed and in some cases presented solutions to these dilemmas based on their own experiences (Baym, 2008; Boler, 2008; Hine, 2008). Perhaps the most concrete of the solutions presented – and the one I ultimately put to use – lies in the multi-method approach to “web sphere analysis” developed by Steven Schneider and Kristen Foot (2004). Arising out of the authors’ own work on political and social action on the web, web sphere analysis provides a methodological framework for analyzing the communicative actions and relations between web producers and users. The foundation of Scheider and Foot’s methodology is the concept of a web sphere as “not simply a collection of websites, but as a hyperlinked set of dynamically-defined resources that span multiple websites and are deemed relevant, or related, to a central theme or ‘object’” (p. 118). Within this method, the researcher conducts a series of searches to identify a web of sites related to the inquiry, and archives these resources on a recurring basis. As time passes, this web may change, as links and exchanges expand or disappear. Using the archive, the researcher may then conduct both macro and micro unit analyses. A macro analysis might look at the web sphere historically, noting its changes over time, while a micro analysis focuses on discrete texts, structures, features and links. At the micro-analysis level, other types of analysis – for example content, conversation or discourse analysis – can also be introduced.
Web sphere analysis provided me with both the tools to create a viable data set from the seemingly infinite number of choices and the opportunity to analyze that data in a variety of ways. After formulating my question, my next step, according to Schneider and Foot, was to choose a set of objects to organize my research. I decided that these objects would be television texts that generated a large quantity and broad range of youth participation. By choosing television texts rather than practices (such as, say, writing fan fiction), I could create clearer limits to my data, while still considering a wide range of digital practices. Although I initially intended to research participation around four televisual texts, I eventually cut that number to two, for reasons I detail below. Here, though, I want to introduce and explain my choice of texts: The CW Network’s teen soap opera Gossip Girl, and Comedy Central’s news parody The Colbert Report. Gossip Girl was chosen not only because it generated a great deal of participation on the web during its first season, but because it is a text that itself raises questions about interactivity, narrated as it is by an unseen blogger. And as a series of popular novels – novels I had seen many young women carry into my high school classroom – it also provided the opportunity to consider the convergence of written, television and web-based texts. The choice of text for my second case study was made more easily. The Colbert Report has been recognized by many media critics (Glaser, 2006; Linkins, 2007; Sklar, 2006) as uniquely participatory, and its pranksterish invitations were made all the more interesting and complex by the mantle of parody that lay over Colbert’s every word. By the end of its first year, it had attracted a large, young and surprisingly active audience. With these objects in place, I then had to create my “units of analysis” (Schneider & Foot, 2004, p. 117). This meant conducting searches for corporate and fan-based sites related to the two texts, scanning sites such as YouTube, FanPop and Television without Pity known for their television and youth-oriented content, and following
links between sites. It also meant efforts to archive these sites, efforts that, as I outline above, were not always successful, but that became easier as my research continued. As I created these two units of analysis, my attention was drawn to particular practices, and ultimately I began to collect more material around these activities. Nonetheless, the creation of these broader spheres provided a way to contextualize this material, and it is my hope that the chapters will convey a sense of the large number of interactions and sites around each program, how these sites are related to one another, and the ways they have changed over time.

The decision to focus on specific practices and texts fits well within the schema of web sphere analysis, as Schneider and Foot suggest that micro-level analysis of texts, features, actions or links inside the web sphere is relevant and useful. The two interactive practices I chose for my case studies were:

1. the production, distribution and reception of *Gossip Girl* fan videos on *YouTube*, and
2. discussion of *The Colbert Report* on the official *Colbert Nation* forums.

These activities were chosen for the quantity of texts they generated and the large number of participants they included. Both practices also demonstrated two important aspects of participatory culture I wanted to explore – sociability and the production of content – and demonstrated how these were intertwined. On *YouTube*, distribution of user-generated remixes was accompanied by extensive online commentary, revealing the site as not simply a space of exhibition, but also a space for “creating and negotiating social networks” (Lange, 2007). Similarly, *The Colbert Report* discussion boards are both “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2004) and forums where participants share user-generated productions, including fan videos, fan art, screen captures and icons.
In order to examine these participatory practices and their resultant texts (discussion threads, comments, video remixes, illustrations, photoshopped graphics) further, I employed and mixed elements of critical discourse and conversational analysis. Tuen van Dijk (1997) writes that “discourse studies are about talk and text in context,” (p. 3) making clear the need to link close readings to larger struggles over power and social inequality. Norman Fairclough (1998) and van Dijk (1993) have also demonstrated the ways discourse analysis can be applied to linguistic, visual and structural aspects of media texts. These guidelines proved helpful in reading both user-generated and corporately-produced texts. Asking questions about power, neoliberal discourse and the interpellation of young women as consumers, for example, was crucial to a better understanding of both the televisual text of *Gossip Girl* and the fan videos that rewrote that text. Discourse analysis was equally helpful in interpreting Colbert-related discussion threads, where there was a need to probe what threads revealed about current conceptions of media power and the relations between producers and users. I also called upon conversation analysis – and in particular Naomi Baron’s (2008) work on online writing as dialogue – to analyze the unique aspects of digital discussion, such as the use of emoticons, visual icons, abbreviations, links and message quoting.

The two case studies that emerge from this analysis do, I hope, demonstrate a degree of texture and depth that is informative and unique. Indeed, I believe that the comprehensive case study format I have used represents one the major contributions of this thesis, proving Nancy Baym’s (2008) assertion that “specificity is essential to making sense of the internet in contemporary life” (p. 175). While there has been much popular speculation that the relationship between producers and users is changing or even collapsing, little detailed attention has yet been paid to these struggles over the production of meaning and the centers of control, particularly as
they relate to young people. It is here that I hope my work might add new descriptions, insights and critical analysis, painting a vivid picture of the interactions, appropriations, affinities and confrontations which make up participatory culture.

**Chapter Overviews**

The three chapters ahead include both these case studies and a final reflection on how they might help us to frame our own curricular projects, particularly within media education. Chapters Two and Three each have a two-part structure that begins with an overview of the television text and its digital extensions, and then focuses more squarely on young people’s participatory practices. Chapter Two, “Rewriting the script: Gossip Girl and young women’s video remixes” begins with an examination of Gossip Girl as “conceptual commodity” (Pattee, 2006) that spans young adult fiction, television and the internet. After establishing Gossip Girl as a series of highly polished texts that interpellate young female audiences as consumers of fashion, technology and sensation, I go on in part two to analyze young women’s video remixes of the program. Here, I consider the remixes as gendered and appropriative texts that, combined, contribute new aesthetics and thematic concerns, even where they may continue to reproduce hegemonic interpretations of contemporary girlhood. I also consider the distribution and reception of the remixes on YouTube, noting how their circulation simultaneously challenges conventions of corporate ownership and creates profit and promotion for those same corporate owners.

Chapter Three, “Calling on the Colbert Nation: Parody, participation and the dialogic audience” begins with the same macro-level concerns as the previous chapter. In the first half of the chapter, I consider the program as a postmodern parody that invites dialogue, as a television text that upsets the conventions of genre, and as a series of digital extensions that promise its
young audience new levels of participation. In the second half of the chapter, I zoom in on *The Colbert Nation* discussion boards, and on the relations between users and producers. Within this space, young fans have taken up Colbert’s invitation to join in the parody by creating a vibrant, dialogic and often rowdy online community, a community that more than once has come into conflict with Comedy Central producers. In their attempts to address these conflicts, and to create alternative spaces of their own, they gesture towards larger tensions over the management and control of public digital dialogue.

While the production of *Gossip Girl* remixes provides us with a sense of the potential for imaginative practice and community-building created through fan culture, online discussion around *The Colbert Report* returns us to youths’ struggles with corporate media, and to the very real danger of employing communicative strategies that reproduce oppressive social relations. The overarching relationship between these two case studies, then, might be expressed as a hopeful glimpse at emerging possibilities followed by a long hard look at the difficult ground currently created by processes of commodification. Indeed, as Sonia Livingstone (2010) writes, it is essential that media researchers temper their efforts to understand and appreciate the “creative and expressive skills being acquired and enjoyed in digital environments” with a recognition of the ways in which “mediatization also facilitates the problematic dimensions of consumerism, individualization, and globalization” (p. 3).

Finally, in Chapter Four, “Pedagogies of digital participation,” I pull these two case studies together by considering media education and its potential response to the shifting terrain of media use. I argue that the questions around power and participation that animate my research into the relationship between corporate producers and young media users are equally relevant to an investigation of current media education, and that some of the same dynamics –
exploitation, appropriation, and resistance – are replicated in the relations between students, technology and schooling. Drawing on media education’s already established emphases on critical inquiry, creative production and design, I suggest ways of framing media education that might help us to develop “an explicit pedagogy of critical vocabularies” (Luke, 2000, p. 453) for thinking about digital interactivity, and lead to an imaginative stance in the creation of new cultural texts and production practices. Overall, I argue for a curriculum of digital literacy that is more critical and creative, more expansive and experimental in its approach to young people’s new media practices than it has been thus far.
Chapter Two
Rewriting the Script: *Gossip Girl* and Young Women’s Video Remixes

*Gossip Girl*, based on the bestselling novels about wealthy teens living in New York’s Upper East Side, first aired in September 2007. The pilot began with the return to New York City of Serena van der Woodsen, who had mysteriously disappeared to boarding school the year before. While all of Manhattan was abuzz with the news of her arrival, Serena’s former best friend, Blair Waldorf was less enthusiastic, still nursing hurt feelings about Serena’s sudden departure. Tensions between the two girls shape the series’ first few episodes, until, in the fourth episode, the two are reconciled in a particularly memorable scene. After an argument that begins at a fashion shoot, Serena and Blair make up and run away with handfuls of designer clothes. Each dons a matching dress and they flee to the park where they create their own spontaneous fashion shoot, posing and taking pictures of one another to the sound of Sean Kingston’s hit song “Beautiful Girls.” The mood of the short scene is ebullient, as the girls dance around a fountain, hug and kiss one another, and finally run out of the park holding hands. The scene is notable not only for Serena’s and Blair’s (temporary) reconciliation, but also for the way in which it crystallizes the program’s twin obsessions with fashion and technology. Indeed, the girls’ reunion is instigated by fashion, represented by matching dresses, and captured by technology, which serves here and throughout the series as a coveted accessory. The desirability of feminine consumption quite literally permeates every level of the televisual text, providing some of its most ‘interactive’ opportunities. Viewers who watch the series online (and as I shall detail later, there are many) can scroll over scenes to find out where the clothes were bought; fans who click on Serena’s and Blair’s matching dresses, for example, will be taken to the chickdowntown.com website, where they can order the dresses for $483.00.
But that same scene also makes quite different appearances in online contexts. It can be found in a number of places on YouTube, for example. In some cases, the scene is shown as it appeared on the original broadcast, part of the increasingly commercial content of the site. But in other cases, the scene has been considerably re-imagined by young female fans of the program. It shows up frequently in femslash videos, a form of fan art that remixes television programming to bring female characters into erotically charged relationships with one another. In the video remix “Blair/Serena: She Is” (buffyfan35, 2007), for instance, Blair’s and Serena’s friendship is re-envisioned as a romance. Four separate clips from the reconciliation scene described above are used to demonstrate the friends’ physical closeness, as the chorus from The Fray’s “She is” pronounces “She is everything I need.” In another femslash vid, “Blair Waldorf Gets All the Girls,” (iheartTandS, 2008) the scene comes at the end of over three minutes of remixed clips showing Blair Waldorf, in the words of the video’s creator, as a “play-yah.” Blair calls, commands, touches, smiles at and flirts with a number of the program’s female characters, all to the tune of Calvin Harris’ song “Girls.” As she runs out of the park at the end of the video holding hands with Serena, it does indeed seem that Blair, as the song intones, “gets all the girls.” While the girls in these remixed videos remain well-dressed and glamorous, the lens through which they are viewed has nonetheless shifted significantly through fan-initiated interaction. The reconciliation scene, for example, which has functioned in the original episode as a marker of friendship but equally of acquisition, is re-imagined in each of these young women’s videos as a marker of lesbian identity and sexuality, and in the case of the video “Blair Waldorf Gets All the Girls,” as a portrait of teenage power and prowess. It is young women’s practice of reinventing the teen television text, with all its attendant limitations and possibilities, that animates this first chapter.
Fan-instigated practices like remixing video, writing fan fiction, discussing TV online, blogging and creating fan websites are at the heart of current conceptualizations of participatory culture. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter One, it is fan practices that originally gave rise to that term. In his 1992 study of fandom, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins characterized fans as “readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (p. 23). With the advent of digitization and the development of social media, notions of participatory culture have certainly expanded well beyond fandom, as I suggested in the opening chapter. Nonetheless, new fan practices remain important starting places for theorizing participatory culture and the shifting relations between producers and users. As Eve Ng (2008) succinctly puts it, “the conjunction of optimism about the democratizing potential of cyberspace with theories framing fans as creatively resistant produced an obvious invitation to see new fandoms as posing significant challenges to traditional models of media political economy, particularly the relations between media producer and consumer” (p. 104). Still, not all media theorists are convinced of the potential of fandom and fannish practices to upset conventional media hierarchies and social relations of power. In his study of fan discussion on the forums of *Television without Pity*, for example, Mark Andrejevic (2007) notes the ways in which the interactivity practiced on the website invites fans to identify with the interests of the producers (p. 137), while Mark Jancovich’s (2002) analysis of the production of distinction amongst fans of cult films argues that fan subcultures can reproduce rather than resist social and cultural taste hierarchies.

But whether their creative potential, oppositional status and democratizing role are celebrated or challenged, fan practices are key to investigating participatory culture, and they
make a fitting place to begin an analysis of the circulation of power between users and producers. In this chapter, I focus on young women’s production of video remixes, contextualizing these practices within the large and complicated network of fan-initiated and corporate-sanctioned activities that surround televisual texts. Because fandom is often associated with young (celebrity-obsessed, ‘emotional’) women and television-viewing denigrated as a female pastime (Parks, 2004), young women’s television-related fan practices provide us with an especially apt space in which to explore the potentially gendered aspects of user-producer relationships. I’ve chosen to further focus this exploration on the popular teen melodrama *Gossip Girl*, for a number of reasons. As a television program narrated by a young female blogger and depicting legions of texting girls, *Gossip Girl* illuminates current discourses around young women’s relationship to technology and social media. It is also a television text that has generated critical attention and an active fan base (Pressler & Rovzar, 2008; Stein, 2009), and given rise to novel online practices. Finally, as a series of books, a television show, a neighbourhood in *Second Life*, a network of websites, and the starting place for fan videos, fan fiction and fan discussions, the *Gossip Girl* franchise includes a number of significant examples of interactivity, and its fans take part in many activities that fall within the rubric of participatory culture. Yet as a commercially-conceived “conceptual commodity” (Pattee, 2006), and a narrative that interpellates its young female audience as consumers, *Gossip Girl*’s links to processes of commodification challenge celebratory notions of interactivity and participation, and pose important questions about emerging configurations of media power.

My analysis in this chapter proceeds in two parts. In Part One, I consider *Gossip Girl* as a web of products generated by the multimedia company Alloy Entertainment, with the commercial goal of “strategically directing the youth gaze” (Pattee, 2006, p. 157). Employing a
cultural studies model that recognizes the complexity and interconnectedness of contemporary transmedia productions, I examine Gossip Girl’s multiple texts, and consider relevant aspects of their production, reception and representation. Drawing on feminist analyses of global media culture, I consider the ways these texts interpellate their young female audiences as consumers of style and technology, and the role that commercially-instigated interactive processes play in this address. With this framework in place, I go on in Part Two to think more specifically about video remixing as an unauthorized and contested form of interactivity, recognizing that fan remix practices often occupy a slippery space between celebration and resistance, simultaneously reifying and rewriting the remixed object. I ask how and to what extent we might interpret young women’s Gossip Girl video remixes as forms of recoding that resist their interpellation as passive consumers, and challenge the encroachment of corporately-managed participation through autonomous acts of appropriation and interaction. But I also contemplate whether these same videos are themselves acts and archives of textual consumption that might ultimately extend the Gossip Girl brand. In posing such questions, I raise issues of authorship, imagination, appropriation and intellectual property. Throughout this opening chapter, my aim is less to pin down the exact nature of interactive practices related to Gossip Girl (for these are huge and constantly increasing) than to open up the study of interactivity to the possibility of imaginative and gendered forms of appropriation, set within the context of the commodification of teen lives and participatory practices.

Part I: You Know You Love Me, Across All My Platforms:
Gossip Girl as a Transmedia Production

“You know you love me. XOXO,” purrs Gossip Girl’s blog-happy, rumour-loving, all-seeing narrator at the beginning and end of every television program. But Gossip Girl’s purr isn’t
limited to Monday night broadcasts. In fact, in an age of media convergence, *Gossip Girl*’s bold pronouncements can be heard across numerous platforms. In this first section, I examine *Gossip Girl*’s modes of production, varied reception and controversial representations, as these form a crucial background to vidders’ own interactions with the program, providing the texts, interpretations and practices which they work with and against. I begin by considering *Gossip Girl*’s origins as a literary commodity conceived and owned by a corporate entity yet marketed to teen girls as a single-author text. I also consider the numerous scholarly reactions to the *Gossip Girl* novels as examples of a recent trend towards pedagogies of branding and consumer capitalism within young adult literature. I then move to an examination of *Gossip Girl* as a television program broadcast by the youth-oriented CW Network. While the program has received critical praise for its glossy veneer and cheeky portraits of teen life, its audiences have been smaller than anticipated. Yet what it does appear to have are devoted and media-savvy fans who watch the program anywhere but on TV. Indeed, while the show’s fans view, discuss and interact with their favourite program on multiple platforms, the producers of *Gossip Girl* - a show that explores the effects of social technologies – have ironically been forced to catch up to their own fans (Pressler & Rovzar, 2008). This has resulted in numerous extensions to the *Gossip Girl* brand, including a neighbourhood in *Second Life*, *Facebook* and *Twitter* updates written in the voice of *Gossip Girl*. These extensions, and questions about how to theorize them as examples of interactivity, make up the final consideration in this first section. Taken together, the myriad interlocking interfaces of *Gossip Girl* seem to confirm cultural studies’ claim that “the nature of meaning in cultural products and practices must be located within the dynamic interrelationship of the production context, the texts and their creators, and the audience” (Shuker, 2001, p. 214). This is a claim that appears to be particularly true in the case of
contemporary transmedia productions that span – and spawn – multiple texts, audiences and modes of consumption, and in a media environment in which the exercise of power “relies not on scarcity but on the proliferation of narratives” (Andrejevic, 2009, p. 48).

**Gossip Girl as literary commodity**

The twelve novels in the young adult *Gossip Girl* series were produced between 2002 and 2009. In commercial terms, the books have been extremely successful, with four of the titles appearing on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Pick up one of the novels, and its cover will proclaim that it was written by Cecily von Zeigesar. Yet as is often the case, the author’s single name covers up the books’ more complicated, collective – and in the case of *Gossip Girl*, more corporate – beginnings. In her Marxist-influenced examination of *Gossip Girl* as a “literary commodity,” Amy Pattee (2006) identifies two publically-available narratives that explain the series’ origins. In the first, the novels begin as “conceptual product” developed by the entertainment division of the target marketing conglomerate Alloy Marketing + Media. A *Publishers Weekly* article from 2000 suggests that the series was under development by the company at that time, and that plans were already being made to seek a publishing partner and generate pre-publication interest. Such a narrative certainly fits with Alloy Entertainment’s (2009) own description of its corporate activities as an “entertainment company that develops and produces original books, television series, and feature films. The company originates entertainment properties and then partners with leading publishers, television networks and movie studios to deliver those properties to the world.” However, a more widely-circulated narrative suggests that a young female editor at Alloy first wrote the proposal for the series and sent it to the publisher Little, Brown and Company. This particular narrative presents von Ziegesar, who herself grew up in a wealthy New York family, as an insider to the glamorous
world the novels depict, and it works to create a bond between author and reader that is not only common to modern discourses of authorship but that serves as a tool for marketing books to young readers. As Pattee writes, such a version deliberately masks the fact that the plots of the books are the product of von Ziegesar’s collaboration with a committee of conceptual ‘owners’ (p. 163), a mode of production that becomes more visible when one realizes that von Ziegesar has neither control nor ownership of the series as intellectual property. As Pattee notes, a collaborative approach to writing young adult fiction is not new. The Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys and Sweet Valley High novels, for example, were all written under a syndicate mode of literary production (p. 164). What is new, however, is the fact that the novels were created by one arm of a highly specialized target marketing conglomerate whose properties also include the controversial classroom television network Channel One, and that the goal was, from the beginning to sell products – as Pattee writes, any products – linked with the original concept.

Also new is the way in which the language, characterization and plots of the novels reflect their mass production origins. In fact, the novels’ celebration of consumption, liberal use of brand names, and commodification of almost every aspect of teen experience has been the topic of a number of popular and scholarly articles. In a New York Times review entitled “Wild Things,” feminist critic Naomi Wolf (2006) writes that the novels commodify teen sexuality, encourage consumption, and glamorize adult corruption and teen meanness. She ends her review with the lament that within the world of the novels, “sex and shopping take their places on a barren stage, as though, even for teenagers, these are the only dramas left.” In her scholarly examination of the Gossip Girl, A-List and Insiders series, Wendy Glenn makes similar observations. Glenn undertakes a critical discourse analysis that identifies four themes within the series: empty relationships, entitlement, disparity of class and race, and conspicuous
consumption. While such themes might seem like the starting place for worthy reflections, Glenn makes clear that each of these conditions is not so much explored as reinforced through the novels. Although meaningful relationships with family and friends may be non-existent, belonging to the closed world of wealth and entitlement and participating in acts of conspicuous consumption more than makes up for these deficits. Glenn suggests that such texts are “alluring to adolescents” and fuel a desire “to be among those in the know” (p. 40). Finally, in her examination of recent young adult titles including *Gossip Girl*, Elizabeth Bullen (2009) provides a particularly strong argument for seeing much contemporary young adult literature as an instrument of consumer capitalism. Bullen bases her argument on the convergence of informal product placement with the conventional role of young adult fiction to “teach” its youthful readers and writes:

Given that advertising and fiction for young people have in common ‘an impulse to intervene in the lives’ of their “target audience” (Stephens, 1992: 8), product placement in children’s and young adult fiction, whether formal or informal, creates a situation in which two technologies of persuasion and socialization operate simultaneously. I would argue that these two technologies actually converge in the service of consumer capitalism in an emerging genre of young adult fiction that is distinguished by the conspicuous consumption of its teenage characters and that the informal product placement in them points to the hybridization of advertising and fiction. (p. 500)

For Bullen, then, product placement acts like a “hidden curriculum,” (p. 500) and the novels themselves function as “pedagogies of consumerism” (p. 505).

Taken together, these interpretations construct a vivid and compelling picture of the novels’ representations of consumption and their potential role within the lives of young female readers. Yet none of them consider that adolescents’ own acts of decoding and their creative and social uses of digital technology may considerably complicate modes of reception. In fact, it is only Pattee (2006) who entertains the possibility of oppositional readings. Referring to the
plethora of independently created fan sites and message boards around the novels, Pattee asks whether they might “be considered a form of reader resistance and an attempt to take control of the series and the characters in the reader’s own terms?” (p. 172). As I want to suggest later in the chapter, questions around control, resistance and what it means to remake a text on one’s “own terms” are not easily answered, particularly in a mediated environment so thoroughly marked by processes of commodification, yet if we are to gain a better understanding of the shifting relations between users and producers within participatory culture, these are exactly the questions that need to be asked.

**Gossip Girl as televisual text**

The CW Network was established in the fall of 2006, created as a joint venture between CBS, former owner of United Paramount Network (UPN), and Warner Brothers, former owner of The WB Television Network. In their separate incarnations, both The WB and UPN featured programming aimed at young adult audiences, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson’s Creek* from The WB, and *Everybody Hates Chris* and *Veronica Mars* from UPN. Fittingly, at The CW’s launch, director of programming Dawn Ostroff announced that the network’s target audience would continue to be youth, this time young women between 18 and 34. In later interviews, Ostroff also made a commitment to minority viewers, suggesting that the new network would be “reflective of their lives” (Smiley, 2006). During the three years since its launch, the network has continued to broadcast shows from its pre-merger days and has also added a number of new programs, including *Gossip Girl* and a remake of the 1980s teen hit *90210*. In the spring of 2009, it announced that its fall line up would include the return of *Gossip Girl* and *90210*, plus the addition of a number of new shows, including *The Beautiful Life*, a drama about models, and the *Vampire Diaries*, a series about teen vampires. It also announced
the end of its only two shows featuring African American characters, *Everybody Hates Chris* and *The Game*. This new line-up confirmed the *New York Times* (Elliot, 2009) description of the network as the home of beautiful, well-dressed, and – despite Ostroff’s stated commitment to multicultural representation – mostly white young people.

Certainly *Gossip Girl*, with its cast of wealthy upper-Manhattan teens, fits this mould. Developed and produced by *The O.C.*’s creator, Josh Schwartz, the network hoped to draw a young female audience from both fans of the novels and *The O.C.* The television version of *Gossip Girl* provides many of the features that have come to characterize teen television: witty dialogue, frequent intertextual references, melodramatic emotions and a prominent pop music soundtrack (Davis & Dickinson, 2004; Stein & Ross, 2008). But it also includes a number of distinctive features. A *New York Magazine* article dedicated to the program calls up its “cultural clout” and suggests that its unique appeal lies in the way “the show mocks our superficial fantasies while satisfying them, allowing us to partake in the over-the-top pleasures of the irresponsible superrich without anxiety or guilt or moralizing” (Presslar & Rozvar, 2008).

Indeed, the program’s “over-the-top” representations of the “superrich” do appear to simultaneously celebrate and mock the commodified and commodity-obsessed teenager. Yet despite its knowing, semi-satirical tone – a familiar gesture in the irony-saturated landscape of contemporary teen programming – the show nonetheless puts on display a series of discourses that have much to reveal about current configurations of youth within global corporate media. These include the performative “spectacle of femininity” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 725), the passive consumption of technology, and the carnivalesque reversal of adult and teen roles, all three significant themes which young female remixers must negotiate in their creative appropriations of the *Gossip Girl* text.
With its New York location, its genesis in a best-selling book, and its cast of affluent, white characters preoccupied with shopping and sex, *Gossip Girl* has more often been likened to *Sex and the City* than to other teen programs. Perhaps the most important similarity between the two programs, though, lies in their representations of post-feminist female empowerment. Indeed, *Gossip Girl* bears all the marks of Angela McRobbie’s (2007) identification of new categories of womanhood, in which young women are figured as the ideal consumers within emerging neoliberal economies. The depoliticization of young women in Western societies, McRobbie argues, takes place through a series of interpellative processes and recommended technologies of the self, including the “post-feminist masquerade” (p.722). By voluntarily participating in dramatic enactments of seductive femininity and the adoption of consumer-oriented identities, McRobbie argues, young women are promised individualization, agency, and economic and social success within neoliberal regimes. Figures of the powerful – and political – feminist and lesbian fade into the background, as the terms of visibility for young women are defined through the commercial domain. Corporate media’s role in producing and disseminating the discourse of the feminine masquerade is evident in its range of representations of the “worked upon” female body in television dramas and makeover shows (McRobbie, fn), in its relentless interpellation of the young woman as consumer (Stasko, cited in Harris, 2008), and in its interactive invitations, which, I argue later, draw female audiences into feminized digital environments saturated with advertising and commerce.

The “facade of excessive feminine adornment” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 725) is not difficult to locate in *Gossip Girl*’s endless stream of young women trying on, taking off, buying, modeling and designing clothes. Indeed, as suggested earlier, matters of style permeate the text. This television fashion parade is not entirely new, however. There is in fact a history of fashion
and lifestyle marketing integrated into teen television (Ross & Stein, 2008), and as Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen (2008) argue, the appealing, surface-oriented texts of the corporate media commonly offer up consumption as a cultural resource through which young people can construct identities. Fashion, lifestyle and “look,” in particular, are marketed towards young women as a means of creating individual identities and agentic selves. This discourse is very much in evidence in *Gossip Girl*. For example, a short video posted on the network’s official site (and later reposted by fans to *YouTube*) features an interview with the show’s costume designer Eric Daman, in which he describes Blair’s and Serena’s personalities through their wardrobe choices. He ends with the hope that “the audience at home can look at each character and then they can go out and see things either at the mall or that they have available to them and say ‘Oh that’s a Serena van der Woodsen look’ or ‘that top is very Blair Waldorf and I kind of want to dress like Blair,’” coaching them to create their own identities through acts of copycat consumption (Eric Daman Reel, 2009). Fan sites and discussion threads, many of them devoted solely to discussions of fashion on the show, seem to confirm an interpretation of the program as “a style manual of aspirational consumption” (Bullen, 2009, p. 505).

Of course, fashion not only plays a role in normalizing female consumer identities, but also in generating profit. Many observers suggest that the program is as much a vehicle for fashion as it is a form of entertainment, and Daman himself reports that one of the aims of the program was to “launch trends” (La Ferla, 2008). Not only do interactive features allow viewers to buy outfits worn by the cast, but a portion of the program’s revenue is derived from the placement of designer clothes, which are either worn or mentioned – or both – by characters on the show. In a *New York Times* article entitled “Forget Gossip, Girl: The Buzz is About the Clothes,” merchants and designers report that *Gossip Girl* has had a significant impact on their
sales (La Ferla, 2008). In making Gossip Girl and its website an interactive “launching pad” for style as well as a vehicle for promoting specific brands, Gossip Girl producers draw on not only the established commercial history of teen television and the discourse of the feminine masquerade, but also on corresponding developments in digital culture, which have reframed the internet as a space for gendered consumerism, where females are encouraged to experience the web primarily as a space for shopping (Consalvo, 2002).

While bodily display and the consumption of fashion are perhaps not surprising elements of the feminine masquerade, a less conventional but no less potent marker of feminine empowerment lies in the consumption and use of technology. In keeping with its own shifting status, technology plays varied and sometimes contradictory roles in the formulation of the “independent, successful and self-inventing” (Harris, 2004, p. 11) young woman. As Kim Toffoletti remarks, “being a savvy and switched-on teenage girl requires technological capital. It means having the latest camera phone and a presence on social networking sites like MSN, Facebook and MySpace” (p. 72). The Gossip Girl series, she writes, reflects “the increasing prevalence of communication technologies (iphones, blackberries, laptops, mobiles, MP3 players) as necessary ‘lifestyle’ accessories” (pp. 72–73). Indeed, as Toffoletti implies, technology – or more accurately technological hardware – functions in part as a commodity that bestows coolness on its owner, a stylish accessory that is judged by its newness, size and design. Within the Gossip Girl televisual text, this translates into multiple close-ups of characters using cell phones, Mac books, cameras and blackberries, images that not only underline the desirability of ownership but also generate significant revenue for Gossip Girl producers. Just as the possession of technology bestows status, so too does a presence within the circuits of digital networking. As Anita Harris (2008) writes, social networks frequently act as spaces of display
where young women are encouraged to create “celebrity selves” for whom looking good, being seen, and engaging in consumption are essential (p. 491). The desirability of these cyber-celebrity selves is reinforced in numerous scenes in Gossip Girl’s first two seasons, in which characters demonstrate their presence in digital social networks as an assertion of identity and belonging. In season one, for example, we watch as Serena signs into a social networking site and, after establishing her credentials as wealthy and beautiful, quickly finds a date for an important party, thereby keeping intact her reputation.

But while ownership and display are important elements in the young female characters’ relationship to technology, they are far from the only representations of technology on the program. In fact, the show’s very structure is premised on the use of social software and technology, as its eponymous narrator provides a constant stream of updates via her blog, Gossip Girl. For the unseen but all-seeing Gossip Girl, technology is less about passive consumption and display, and more about productive power. Through her blog, Gossip Girl creates networks, controls the flow of information, and props up and strips away social status. Through these very active uses of technology, Gossip Girl is easily the most powerful (non-) presence on the show, and while her gender is occasionally debated by the program’s characters, her name and the feminine voice-over that begins and ends the program create a clear impression of young female power. The central characters’ relationship to Gossip Girl, however, is far more ambiguous. They voraciously consume her blog, contributing to it with their own photos, texts, comments and readership, and they extend its network effect by rapidly distributing her updates. But despite their role in maintaining the blog’s popularity and power, and regardless of Gossip Girl’s breezy sign-off – “You know you love me” – they often feel deep resentment toward Gossip Girl and her (mis)uses of information. At the end of Season Two, for example, Serena threatens to find
out Gossip Girl’s identity, after Blair’s reputation is destroyed on the blog. Indeed, in many cases, the blog and its network of readers and contributors is deeply disempowering to the characters. This is especially true for the female characters, whose social standing is more closely linked to their sexual activity than the male characters. In this way, Gossip Girl’s blog and its attendant networks take on conventional moral roles, chastising young women for overstepping sexual boundaries even within a mediated environment that encourages a sexualized and spectacularized femininity. That Gossip Girl responds to Serena’s threat by saying “We are all Gossip Girl” seems to further imply the young women’s complicity with a state of affairs that denies the more equal distribution of power and keeps them immobilized, while it grants a single, unknown female the power to hurt, marginalize and exclude.

One final aspect of Gossip Girl’s representation of contemporary teen life worth noting is its depiction of parent-child relationships. As many critics have noted, the program appears to reverse adult and teen roles. Teens drink heavily, have sex, host extravagant parties, make important decisions alone and often take care of parents and siblings. Adults, on the other hand, seem to have abdicated parental roles, abandoning their children for careers or lovers and frequently criticizing them for behaviour very much like their own. While this representation of teen-adult relationships and behaviour is indeed somewhat “over-the-top,” it nonetheless corresponds to a broader trend that Kenway and Bullen (2008) note within global corporate media. They write that within the flashy, carnivalesque texts of young people’s corporately-produced media, youth are:

- encouraged to live only in the present, to delight in the impertinent and the forbidden, and to transgress adult codes. They are offered agential identities as pleasure-seeking, self-indulgent, autonomous, and rational decision-makers, in effect, identities as adultlike youth. These features turn the orderly relationship between adults and the young, citizens and society, upside down. (p. 20)
Yet like Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, this seeming subversion of conventional “age-appropriate” roles ultimately upholds the status quo. This paradox is crystallized in an ad campaign run in *Gossip Girl*’s second season. Large billboards and short video clips depicting the program’s main characters in passionate encounters are overlaid with quotations taken from outraged reviews and condemnations from the Parents’ Television Council, such as “Mind-blowingly inappropriate” and “Every parent’s nightmare” (see Figure 3). While such advertising appears to invert the parent-child hierarchy and gesture towards a disordered space in which traditional authorities – adults, parents’ organizations, mainstream media critics – are displaced by the excess of teen desire, it also plays into rather conventional ideas about teen rebellion and offers up television viewing to young women as a contained space for youthful – and feminine – opposition to adult authority.

*Figure 3. Ads from Gossip Girl’s first season feature quotations from the Parents’ Television Council and negative media reviews. (Images from www.billboard-outdoor.com)*
Just as contradiction and complexity mark the discourses of youth and girlhood that circulate through *Gossip Girl*, so too do they figure in the program’s reception, particularly in the seeming opposition between its low ratings and perceived cultural impact. As television critic John Doyle (2009) wrote in the *Globe and Mail* in the spring of 2009, “This mystifying hit series is back with new episodes. It’s mystifying because hardly anybody watches it live, yet it is hugely influential.” Amongst its many references to the program, *The New York Times* labelled *Gossip Girl* not only “zeitgeisty” and “one of the most talked-about shows on television,” but also “the low-rated but much-buzzed-about drama” (Carter, 2008; Stelter, 2009; Wyatt, 2009).

*The Los Angeles Times* similarly remarked on the program’s low ratings, but nonetheless described the program as “pop-culturally potent” (Lloyd, 2009). And yet, as I argue below, in the context of shifting relations between users and producers, the program’s pop culture “potency” might be attributed to these very ratings, and to young audience’s changing modes of consuming television.

In fact, the changing nature of viewership has resulted in a great deal of press for the network – including some very “buzzed-about” missteps. While the program has drawn an average of only 2.5 million viewers per week, and ranked 100 or below in the Nielsen ratings, it is widely regarded as the “most downloaded, DVR’d and streamed show among its teen fan base” (Hampp, 2009 May 18). In fact, new episodes of the program often reach the number one spot as iTunes downloads, and hundreds of thousands of viewers download the week-old episodes available for free on The CW website. While watching television on platforms besides the TV set is hardly novel, Pressler and Rovzar (2008) write that *Gossip Girl* appears to be the first show that has “succeeded primarily on the internet.” The wonder of *Gossip Girl*, they continue, is that “it’s not appointment television; it’s a 24-hour conversation...And the whole
thing can happen sans television.” In fact, what is perhaps most remarkable is that CW executives seemed unprepared for this new reality. As Amanda Lotz (2007) demonstrates in her recent study of the television industry, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, these new ways of viewing have been the source of much discussion amongst television executives; CW executives themselves made the decision to market the program by appealing to its audience’s interest in technology and by making the program available for free online. Yet they were clearly dismayed by the gap between their poor ratings and the amount of activity the program had generated online. In 2008, when the program returned after the writers’ strike, Dawn Ostroff announced that the final episodes of the season would not be available on the program’s website. Instead, she declared that “for these next five weeks, the epicentre of the *Gossip Girl* universe will be the CW’s broadcast television airwaves,” revealing a kind of nostalgia for less fragmented audiences and technologies (Pressler & Rovzar, 2008). The reason behind the move was clear. Executives hoped that by cutting off access to online streaming, more viewers would tune in to the television broadcasts, where advertising revenue continues to generate the network’s greatest source of income.

Directly after the network’s announcement, a number of commentators weighed in on the change. In the *Globe and Mail*, technology columnist Matthew Ingram (2008) wrote that the announcement was ironic given the program’s focus on new media, and that it “sum[med] up the conflicting ambitions and tension within the TV business,” while *Wired* (2008) called *Gossip Girl*’s “online success a preview of TV 3.0,” and ridiculed Ostroff’s decision (Zjawinski, 2008). On the CW’s official discussion forum, fans had mixed reactions; many were confused about why they were unable to find new episodes online, some were annoyed, and still others encouraged fellow viewers to watch the broadcasts, identifying with producer interests. Only two
weeks later, after negligible increases in the program’s Monday-night ratings, the ban on streaming was lifted. By the third season, CW appeared to be embracing – or at least employing – fans’ online habits with its updated series of slogans: The CW – “TV to text about,” “TV to tweet about,” “TV to post about,” and “TV to blog about.” Still, the network’s earlier decisions – both to cut and later restore online streaming – represent a significant example of the current instability created by the convergence of narrowcasting and consumers’ use of new technologies, and of the struggle for control between producers and audiences, a struggle animated by rapidly changing models of advertising and profit-making.

**Gossip Girl as an interactive online experience**

Overlapping with young people’s new ways of watching *Gossip Girl* are a proliferation of ways to interact with the program’s text(s), producers, and other viewers. These examples of interactivity – some carved out by viewers, many created and controlled by media corporations – take place on a multitude of sites, including independent and corporately-owned blogs, fan sites, social networks, video-hosting sites and corporate web pages owned by The CW and Alloy Entertainment. I list some of these interactions below in order to convey a sense of their immense quantity and scope. I do so also because I think it’s important to specify the kinds of material practices particular programs generate, for these are deeply indicative of corporate priorities, producers’ interpellation of their audience, and audiences’ own identities and cultures. I have written the list from the point of view of audiences, expressing each interaction as a practice in which viewers of *Gossip Girl* engage. It is important to keep in mind, however, that some practices and sites are far more popular than others. As Will Brooker (2001) demonstrated in his study of viewer interactions around the teen drama *Dawson’s Creek*, certain kinds of sites
(in his study, usually those created by The WB network) were more likely to be visited than others. With that caveat in mind, then, viewers of *Gossip Girl*:

- Discuss the program with other viewers on the CW’s official site in a discussion forum called “The Lounge” or on other corporately-owned forums
- Post comments about the program on corporately-owned blogs that cover television and new media programming or on independent, fan-run blogs
- Create their own fan websites, blogs or podcasts
- Watch promotional video clips (e.g., interviews with the *Gossip Girl* cast) or clips from the program on The CW or Alloy websites
- Repost those promotional clips to sites such as *YouTube* and *Facebook*, or circulate them to friends
- Use “The Lab” on the CW’s website to create their own video remix of *Gossip Girl* using clips and music supplied by the network
- Create their own video remixes of the program using their own software, and selecting their own clips and music, and post them to sites such as *YouTube*, blip.tv, or Bam Video Vault
- Join the *Gossip Girl* neighbourhood in Second Life
- Listen to and download music from the program’s soundtrack on the official CW site
- Join the official Facebook *Gossip Girl* fan group and receive updates from *Gossip Girl* or join unofficial Facebook *Gossip Girl* fan groups
- Receive official Twitter updates from *Gossip Girl*
- Write Twitter posts about the program, either in their own voice, or the voice of *Gossip Girl*
- Buy *Gossip Girl* DVDs, books, mugs and t-shirts on the official CW site
- Link to online shopping sites through the CW site to buy clothing and accessories seen on the program
- Write *Gossip Girl* fan fiction and post it on corporately-owned or independent sites
• Create “fashion sets” for *Gossip Girl* characters using online collage software (see Figure 4)

*Figure 4. Gossip Girl*-inspired fashion collages created by using interactive software on the Polyvore.com shopping site. (Images from polyvore.com.)

How to capture, and more importantly, how to think about this web of interactivity has been a crucial undertaking for television scholars trying to follow their subject’s fragmentation and expansion across multiple screens. In this respect, their explanatory theories and metaphors might be helpful here. For example, by arguing that convergence is more than just the flow of content across platforms, but also includes the consolidation of previously separated media industries, the intersection of grassroots and corporate media, and the shift in roles of media producers and consumers, Henry Jenkins (2006) helps us to avoid the potential trap of viewing these practices merely as the result of technological change, insisting instead on the importance of recognizing *cultural* shifts. Will Brooker’s (2001) notion of television’s “overflow” is also helpful in capturing the sheer quantity of texts and sites related to the *Gossip Girl* brand, and the way in which they invite the viewer to constantly “extend the show’s pleasures, to allow the
show into her everyday life” (p. 461). And in his reflections on television intertextuality, Jonathan Gray (2006, p. 76) suggests that it is not only the multiple and chaotic nature of television texts and their extensions that produces television’s rhizomatic quality, but also the way in which a viewer makes her own way through these paths, continuously constructing her own text, a notion that is useful in recognizing the agentic viewer in the midst of corporate expansion.

Yet to linger only on the complicated and proliferating nature of these televi
sual flows would be to overlook the profound shifts and renegotiations in the circuits of power and finance that have occurred as part of the digitization of television. It would also be to overlook the consumer capitalist ideologies and modes of production that have driven the Gossip Girl brand, from its origins as a concept developed by a target marketing conglomerate to its experiments in product placement and click-through advertising. In fact, it is both possible and necessary to identify a number of patterns in the circulation of power within this list of interactions. Here, I want to look at two that appear particularly relevant in a discussion of audience-based creativity and remix – the corporate appropriation of fan practices and commercial strategies of centralization. Although I want to affirm, with Louisa Stein (2009b), that young women have created a “vibrant and creative” (p. 117) fan community around Gossip Girl, it is nonetheless essential to acknowledge the powerful and encompassing corporate practices that channel young people’s online activity, for as we shall see in Part 2, it is exactly within such a context that vidders create their alternative texts and production practices.

A number of scholars have noted the ways in which media corporations increasingly co-opt fannish practices and conventions (Santo, 2007; Stein, 2009b). This cooptation takes many forms. Television producers have sought to incorporate spaces for fan practices directly on their
own websites (e.g., the inclusion of discussion forums on most network websites), while both established and upstart media companies have sought to control the spaces where fans produce and distribute their work (e.g., NBC’s purchase of Television Without Pity or FanLib’s attempt to create a commercial site for the distribution of fan fiction). In the case of Gossip Girl, this appropriation has a particularly gendered dimension, as many of the borrowed fan practices are those associated with female television fandom. In her analysis of the Gossip Girl neighbourhood in Second Life, for example, Louisa Stein (2009b) writes that “through an emphasis on social networking, social play, identity play, and fashion, Gossip Girl Second Life emulates assumed female fan modes of engagement” (p. 118). Indeed, The CW’s addition of a virtual simulation game, although a relatively new form of interactivity, is nonetheless deeply informed by past histories of female television fandom, which have similarly centred on dialogue, playful re-writing of televisual scripts and the creation of supportive fan communities (Baym, 2000; Bury, 2005). While Stein rightly argues that the game-play of Gossip Girl fans on Second Life should not be interpreted solely in the light of corporate appropriation, she does suggest that it represents new directions in media marketing to young women based in established fan conventions. The CW’s addition of “The Lab” to its official website, a set of tools that viewers can use to create their own video remixes, is yet another example of the appropriation of the practices of female television fandom. Even the website’s “Lounge,” or discussion forum, can be traced back to early Usenet groups of the 1980s, where female fans of gendered (and often denigrated) television genres such as the soap opera set up their own groups to discuss and critique their favourite shows (Baym, 2000).

Some scholars, like Jenkins, view this corporate borrowing as part of a more fluid and equitable exchange between commercial organizations and grassroots users. While it is certainly
true that convergence includes both “top-down” and “bottom-up” processes (Jenkins, 2006, p. 257), that many fans appreciate attention from producers, and that fan practices are complex and multidimensional, it would nonetheless be misleading to suggest that there are not significant power relations at work in these appropriations. This is not simply a case of corporate profit-making, which in itself is unsurprising (if still noteworthy). Instead, the patterns that become apparent here demonstrate more insidious and discursive ways in which the role and imaginative labour of the (often young, often female) fan is re-written, diminished and commodified. Avi Santo (2007) notes these techniques at work in his discussion of MTV. Remarking on a contest held by the broadcaster in which young fans are invited to create a movie trailer spoof, Santo notes the way in which the language of the invitation reconfigures fan remixers, once “radical alterers of meaning” involved in “illegal” practices, into young professionals-in-training, thereby diffusing the transgressive potential of their work. Very similar observations can be made about The CW’s corporate practices. By providing music soundtracks and carefully-chosen clips with which viewers can create videos, producers limit the range of possible reinterpretations and “contain excessive fan productivity within proprietary commercial spaces” (Russo, 2009, p. 127). They also limit the ways users interact with texts, depriving them of the “potential to become creators of media culture in an autonomous, spontaneous and disorganized way” (Winseck, 2002, p. 807). By ensuring that remixes made in “The Lab” cannot be uploaded to video-sharing sites such as YouTube, producers further centralize attention on the site while restricting the users’ distribution options. And finally, by hosting video remix competitions like their “Making the Cut” contest, in which the winner was offered the prize of an internship in the CW’s promotion department, producers not only professionalize and de-politicize creative fan
practices, but also realign fans’ affiliations and labour with their own promotional and profit-making priorities.

Corporate strategies such as interactive labs and contests work both to contain audiences’ desire to “participate in the textuality of the text” (Cover, 2006, p. 144) in imaginative ways and to limit their actual creative output. Working in conjunction with this containment of imaginative engagement is another form of restriction – the constraint of users’ movements through digital space. While the idea of constraint runs counter to the most popular metaphors used to describe virtual mobility, it has recently appeared in a number of critical communication scholars’ analyses of new media. Andrejevic (2007), for example, writes of the “digital enclosure” (p. 132) in which interactivity is employed as a strategy to bring users into digital spaces, where their movements and personal information are then gathered for purposes of commerce and surveillance. Dwayne Winseck (2002) similarly writes about the “walled gardens” of the internet in which information flows become unidirectional and users are discouraged – or unable – to move “nomadically” through cyberspace. The aim of multimedia conglomerates, he argues, “is to keep users within designated zones of cyberspace” through the use of menus, interfaces, and elements of design that includes links, language and images (p. 811).

Certainly in the case of Alloy we can see these attempts to channel users’ attention – an essential component in the currency and capital of new networks – along very particular corporate paths. This might be illustrated by tracing a single path through Gossip Girl’s digital territory, where one click on a Gossip Girl update in Facebook takes a user into a self-referential and enclosed system of Alloy properties. From Facebook, the user is linked to the site Teen.com TV, a teen entertainment site owned by Alloy, where a promotional video begins to play. The video advertises The Private, a web series based on the popular young adult novels developed by
Alloy. Surrounding the video are links that take the user in only two directions: to other Alloy properties (such as the in-school TV network Channel One, the shopping site Delias.com, and the girl-centred social networking site gURL.com) and to those companies advertising on the site (such as Neutrogena and LG). Each of the sites offers up not only consumer goods, but an explicit and gendered pedagogy of consumption. Indeed, as an Alloy press release (2009) suggests, advertisers can use the site’s many advertising possibilities to “educate” young audiences about the ways advertised products “fit into their lives.” Inside these enclosures, users leave traces, as Andrejevic suggests, both of their paths and their identities, as various interactive invitations ask them to register, respond, react and discuss, in an effort to create what Alloy terms “deep brand engagement” (O’Malley, 2007). The attempt to hold and direct young women’s attention inside such spaces, with their insistent interpellation of girls as consumers – of beauty products, fashion, technology, media texts and images of highly aestheticized female bodies– is both a symbol of and a process within what Angela McRobbie has identified as young women’s “containment in the landscape of spectacular femininity” (2007, p. 734).

It would be misleading – and against the grain of my project – to end this consideration of Gossip Girl’s interactive extensions with the suggestion that commercial appropriation, confinement and centralization are the only patterns which emerge from the list above. Even within branded environments like those designed by Alloy, users negotiate power and make choices about their degree of engagement and interaction. And the presence of audience-initiated blogs, websites, podcasts, fan fiction and videos suggests that young viewers of Gossip Girl can and do create their own spaces and interact with the text and with one another in ways that are critical, creative and witty, reminding us of Andrejevic’s (2007) observation that fans’ own productions sometimes outshine the original. While global corporate media may indeed be
“designed to encourage young people to consume rather than interpret its texts” (Kenway & Bullen, 2008, p. 21) that does not stop young people from undertaking a range of imaginative, interactive and interpretive digital practices that rewrite commercial media narratives and redress media power relations. In order to trace some of these activities and the interplay between users, producers and texts, it is perhaps wisest, in the face of so many sites and practices, to focus our attention more locally. By looking at a single practice on a single site (albeit a sprawling one), we might further complicate our picture of commercialization and commodification by considering acts of youthful reinterpretation that blur the lines between production and consumption, reproduction and resistance, and user and producer.

**Part II: Talking Back to Gossip Girl: Young Women and Vidding**

While a production-oriented analysis might focus only on the corporate appropriation and containment of youth cultures through interactive invitations, a more complete analysis of user-producer relations must also consider, in Paul Willis’ words, “the other half of the equation” – that is, users’ practices of cultural appropriation and acculturation (2003, p. 404). Acculturation, Willis writes, consists of “the processes and activities whereby human beings actively and creatively take up the objects and symbols around them for their own situated purposes of meaning-making” (p. 404). Looking at young people’s acculturation practices in particular, he notes that they “creatively respond to a plethora of electronic signals and cultural commodities in ways that surprise their makers, finding meanings and identities never meant to be there” (p. 392). With their references to creativity, meaning-making, symbol and surprise, Willis’ descriptions gesture towards practices such as vidding, in which media consumers take up mass-produced texts and create new and deeply personal meanings from them, meanings that often create surprise – as well as delight, disgust and legal action. Willis also asserts that young
people’s engagement with the products of popular culture arises out of a desire to create cultural and social visibility and to have one’s cultural identity acknowledged in shared social space – in other words, a desire “to matter culturally” (p. 405). Still, he reminds us, this desire does not always correspond to “progressive” appropriations of popular culture, and he demonstrates that practices of appropriation may carry resonances of homophobia, misogyny and racism. This reminder is important, for it helps us to avoid interpretations of young people’s appropriations – and by extension participatory culture – as necessarily transgressive and liberating.

Like Willis, youth scholars Jane Kenway, Elizabeth Bullen and Anita Harris read young people’s practices of media participation inside the context of commercialism. Kenway and Bullen (2008) posit a global “corporate curriculum” that teaches youth that “consumption, identity and pleasure are one,” and that “reifies the general shift from a society of producers to a society of consumers” (p. 20). While Kenway and Bullen see this corporate curriculum as powerful and productive (of youth identities and relations, for example) it is not totalizing. In fact, they argue that young people’s proximity to media culture allows them to see it more clearly, and gives them a unique vantage point from which to provide commentary and critique. Such critique can be expressed through aesthetic means, including the production of texts that employ interactive formats (such as linking, blogging and video-sharing) and postmodern genres (such as pastiche, bricolage, parody and montage). Through these playful interventions, the authors argue, young people are able to enjoy and employ their extensive knowledge of popular culture while also retaining a critical distance. Beginning from the position of young women in late modern politics, Anita Harris (2008) similarly argues that while girls within neoliberal economies are interpellated as “ideal consumers,” their use of new technologies “indicates their active negotiation of this interpellation” (p. 483). Examining young women’s use of DIY culture,
blogs and social networking sites, she notes critical engagement with both the products of media culture, and the discursive encroachment of the “consumer imperative” (p. 491) into girls’ everyday lives. Like Willis, she argues that young women’s creative uses of technology reveal “a desire to be a cultural producer; that is, to actively engage in the construction of one’s cultural world, rather than simply consume” (p. 491).

The work of these youth-centred cultural studies scholars insists that young people’s acculturation practices are not derivative but imaginative, and signify a desire not to hang out in corporate “lounges” or “labs” but to take part in the difficult, creative and unauthorized work of constructing cultural worlds. At the same time, such scholarship also recognizes the power of corporate entities to brand digital spaces and practices, and to foster particular kinds of youthful selves. By embracing both positions, it encourages us to grant the widest scope possible in understanding what “matters culturally” for young people while still locating youth practices within “the material and social interconnections and historical conjunctures that constrain and channel” (Willis, p. 405). I endeavour to take this same wide embrace with me into Part Two, as I undertake an analysis of vidding as form of unsolicited interactivity that is productive of new texts, meanings and communities – and also tied into market paradigms in complex and sometimes paradoxical ways.

Taking the cultural studies framework already employed in Part One as my guide, I undertake a three-part analysis of Gossip Girl vids. I begin by looking at vids as texts that variously reproduce, redirect and resist the source text’s “feminine masquerade,” and in doing so, both challenge the producer’s authority and highlight the complicated nature of authorship in a media environment saturated with corporately-produced and individually-altered texts. I then consider the process of making Gossip Girl vids. I discuss vidding as an appropriative activity in
which young women seize the technical tools of interactivity, refusing their interpellation as passive consumers of technology but also providing unpaid labour in promoting the *Gossip Girl* brand. Finally, I examine vidders’ *distribution* of their work on video-sharing sites like *YouTube*, and the ways in which the increasingly public circulation of digital remixes has led to conflict over the use and management of intellectual property. Before beginning this analysis, though, I provide a brief overview of vidding, a subcultural practice which is still largely unknown.

Vidding has a 30-year history that begins with women’s underground creation and exchange of analog remixes and moves into a contentious present in which media corporations continue to alter or remove vids from public digital spaces. Young women’s video texts – with their unique modes of production and distribution – draw from these histories and are best understood as part of a feminist-inspired redirection of the pop culture text.

**“Women’s work”: Fanvids as pop culture commentary**

The production of television-related video remixes – known to those who make them as vids – requires creative and technical skills, as well as in-depth knowledge of pop culture texts. Usually made by women, vids are created by selecting clips from television programs and films, rearranging them and setting them to music. Although the final product – typically a 3-5 minute video with a pop music sound track and rapidly-edited footage – may at first glance resemble a music video, the form is actually quite different. Unlike music videos, in which images are created in order to popularize a piece of music, vidders use music as a kind of script through which to reimagine the original text. As media scholar and vidder Francesca Coppa (2008) writes, music within the vid “is used as an interpretive lens to help the viewer to see the source text differently” (par. 1.1). In this way, she continues, “a vid is a visual essay that stages an argument, and thus is more akin to arts criticism than to a traditional music video” (par. 1.1).
Vids are often, though not exclusively, created out of “genre media,” such as soap opera, science fiction, fantasy, romance or mystery (Trombley, 2007). Vids themselves also fall into a number of different subgenres. “Slash” places two male characters in a sexual relationship, while “femslash,” a growing area of production (Coppa, 2008), does the same with female characters. “Alternate universe” vids use source material to imagine new narratives, while hybrid “crossovers” introduce characters from one program into another. Other vids seek to create in-depth analysis of a single character, to parody an aspect of a program, to bring forward subtext, or to provide political critique. Overall, then, vids might well be read as a form of pop culture commentary, one that employs methods of cultural appropriation and recontextualization to create uniquely compressed and often emotionally-charged texts.

The production, distribution and consumption of vids has become easier in the digital environment, with greater access to digitized source material, the introduction of inexpensive video editing software, and the development of video-sharing sites. Indeed, fan vids are a significant category of non-commercial media on sites like Vimeo, blip.tv, and YouTube. But although vids may have become associated with the video-sharing sites where they are often hosted, vidding has a much longer history; when YouTube was founded in 2005, fans were celebrating the 30th anniversary of vidding. As Luminosity, one of vidding’s most prominent artists, noted in a New York Magazine interview, vidding has not remained static during its three-decade long history, but has undergone a number of “waves and schools,” moving into “modern and postmodern interpretations of the source” (Hill, 2007). Nonetheless, certain aspects of vidding have remained consistent, and continue to exert an influence on the aesthetics and politics of contemporary vidders, including the young women producing Gossip Girl vids. In her important history of the form, Coppa (2008) traces the vid back to 1975, when Star Trek fan
Kandy Fong made the first-ever vid by setting a slide show to music at a Star Trek convention. Fong’s presentation led to more innovations, and soon female fans of Star Trek and other programs were creating analogue vids using a laborious process of taping between VCRs, often working collectively and teaching each other new skills. Without means to mass distribution, vids were screened at conventions and parties, and video tapes passed from fan to fan through the mail. Coppa places all this subcultural activity in the context of second-wave feminism, and the emergence of feminist media theory, which, like the work of Laura Mulvey, revealed visual culture’s “male gaze” and proliferation of sexist images. The work of vidders, Coppa argues, is grassroots filmmaking that has, for the last three decades, reversed that gaze, highlighting women’s desires and concerns and putting them in control of the camera. For Coppa, vids represent “a distinctively female visual aesthetic and critical approach” (par. 2.1), and she notes that “many vids still make overt or subtextual arguments about gender,” engaging “issues of female representation, displacement, and marginalization in visual culture” (par. 2.20). This is evident, for example, in the work of Luminosity, who suggests that vidding is tied to “talking back to male creators,” a position exemplified in her vid “Women’s Work.” A visually shocking and highly-publicized reworking of the television horror series *Supernatural*, “Women’s Work” (2007) is in Luminosity’s own words, “a critique of the eroticization of the violence done to women in all media” (Hill, 2007).

As fan consumption moves into the mainstream, becoming part of the structure of everyday life within global capitalism (Gray et al., 2008), interactive fan practices like vidding also move out of the margins. Indeed, vidding is now not only a strategy for corporate profit-making, as noted in Part I, but also a source of public interest. In 2009, for example, fan vidding was showcased on both National Public Radio (Ulaby, 2009) and the *Political Remix* website,
where it was introduced as an early form of remix in which women became participants in
culture creation by “taking ownership over corporate owned media” (McIntosh, 2009). Vidders
have also recently taken part in a number of media literacy initiatives. Vidders Francesca Coppa
and Laura Shapiro produced a series of videos about vidding for Project New Media Literacies at
MIT, intended as resources for teaching about participatory culture. Due to its practice of
recombining copyrighted material to make a new work, vidding has also become an important
exemplar for those interested in questions of fair use and intellectual property, and has been
highlighted by organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the Center for Social
Media.

It would be inaccurate to suggest, however, that all this activity is being generated outside
of the vidding community. The new visibility around vidding and fan culture more generally, for
example, has led to the establishment of the “Organization for Transformative Works,” a group
that works towards the recognition of fan productions as legitimate creative activity and defends
them from both legal challenge and commercial exploitation (Organization for Transformative
Works, 2008). It would also be inaccurate to suggest that this attention hasn’t included
considerable gaps and oversights, attributable in part to enduring discourses around gender and
technology. A high-profile panel on remix culture at the New York Public Library in 2009, for
example, included only white men, overlooking both women’s contributions to remix through
fandom, as well as Black artists’ uses of music sampling. These omissions are reproduced in
other popular “remix manifestos,” including Lawrence Lessig’s book Remix (2008) and Brett
Gaylor’s documentary Rip: A Remix Manifesto (2009), which focuses on White male remix artist
Girl Talk. Indeed, there continues to be reluctance to see remix as an art and theory aimed at, in
Paul Miller’s (aka DJ Spooky) words “dismantling meta narratives,” (2006, par. 1) narratives
that are not only about intellectual property and ownership, but equally about those people who have been marginalized or left out of the production of official culture.

Such omissions have been the subject of a number of recent scholarly examinations that have accompanied the popular interest in vidding. Many of these academic contributions seek to take vidding out of the margins of media study. Louisa Stein (2009a), for example, uses vidding as a lens through which to read contemporary developments in media culture. She writes that the “vid’s meaning is borne... out of montage, bricolage, pastiche, the collision and layering of image after image after image” and suggests that vidding makes “visible the emergent nature of spectatorship, as spectators become authors, orchestrators, and conductors of digital media flow.” As Stein suggests, these new intersections of spectatorship and authorship as well as the practice of layering characterize many emerging media platforms, including social networking. Other scholarly work has taken up vidding as a contested form of interactivity that raises issues of narrative control and intellectual property, issues that go to the heart of user-producer relationships within remix culture. Much of this work is undertaken by legal scholars. In her essay on “user-generated discontent,” for example, Rebecca Tushnet (2008) argues that vids are “transformative” and therefore protected under fair use. Transformation, she writes, can be broadly defined to include not only the creative acts of appropriation located in practices like vidding, but also the transformative effect such appropriations may have on creators, as they grapple with the sexual, racial and political assumptions of the source text (p. 110). Sarah Trombley (2007) uses fanvids as a test case for user-generated content on YouTube and similarly argues for fanvids to be seen as examples of fair use. Trombley sets her argument within the context of larger social trends, and the irony – and risk – of a culture steeped in privately-owned symbols:
[M]ore and more powerful, widely-recognized symbols and icons have become private property even as corporations invest billions of dollars in ensuring that they saturate public discourse. We are in danger of creating an impoverished “look, but don’t touch” world, one in which the very public whose enthusiastic response to certain symbols and icons gives them their resonance cannot use those symbols and icons themselves to communicate. (pp. 681-682)

Scholarship on vidding generated by legal and non-legal scholars alike argues for interpreting vidding as an audience-driven interactive practice that addresses the power relationship between users and producers via the recoding of film and television texts; what Trombley imagines here – a world of widely-circulated, privatized and untouchable cultural symbols – is already prefigured in strict interpretations of copyright law and in the increasing commodification and management of interactive practices. If, as suggested by both Trombley and Tosenberger (2008), the re-writing of popular culture is most often undertaken by those pushed to the cultural margins – youth, women, queer folk – then such corporate strategies arguably hold the potential for further forms of disempowerment and silencing. In the present moment, however, it appears that audiences still do find ways to look, touch, play with and comment on the electronic signals that surround them, and that appropriative practices like vidding flourish. It is to a closer study of these vids that I turn now.

“I get all the girls”: Rewriting the *Gossip Girl* televisual text

We might begin our exploration of *Gossip Girl* vids as texts with a brief foray into the dizzying world of digital search results. In August 2009, a search for all content related to *Gossip Girl* on *YouTube* (using *YouTube*’s own search engine) yielded over 90,000 results. A quick scroll over the first 200 results of this search shows that most of this content is commercial in nature, and includes previews, clips, promotional videos, bloopers and interviews with the cast. Some of these videos have been uploaded by corporate interests, including The CW Network,
TV Guide, CosmoGirl and CelebTV; others have been reposted by individual users. A separate search for user-created content related to Gossip Girl – using terms like “Gossip Girl vid” “Gossip Girl fanvid” “Gossip Girl parody” and “Gossip Girl slash” – returns approximately 300 separate results. Leaving YouTube and searching Vimeo, a video-sharing site which prohibits commercial content and which hosts a large number of vids (including over 700 entries for Supernatural) returns only a single result for Gossip Girl vids. On the Bam Video Vault, a password protected site that hosts a large number of vids, a search for Gossip Girl-related material leads to 360 results, almost all of which are fan vids. Finally, a search for Gossip Girl vids on iMeem, once a popular site for hosting fanvids, now yields 0 results, since iMeem deleted all user-generated content, unannounced, in the summer of 2009, citing its inability to create profit.

These numbers tell a variety of stories. To begin with, they suggest that YouTube – at least at the moment – makes the most fitting place to research Gossip Girl vids. Perhaps because they are younger and unacquainted with the secrecy which once shrouded vidding culture, Gossip Girl vidders seem unfazed by the publicity of a site like YouTube. But the rise in popularity of Bam Video Vault also suggests that some younger fans may be moving to password-protected sites as they find their work removed from YouTube without warning. (Indeed, during the course of my research, I noted at least two Gossip Girl vids that were removed from YouTube reappear on the Bam Video Vault site.) On YouTube itself, the numbers tell another kind of story. We note, for example, the huge volume of corporately-produced content related to Gossip Girl, and the fact that this content is the most easily accessed. These numbers also show that Gossip Girl vids exist alongside (and to some extent in the shadow of) their source texts and that it is impossible to understand them outside of the increasingly
commercial context of YouTube in general, and the Gossip Girl material that frames them in particular. As I examine, in turn, vids’ textuality, creation process and distribution, I will return to the influence of this context. For now, it might suffice to suggest that the content, architecture and political economy of YouTube means that the “you” of YouTube seeks to broadcast herself (to reword the site’s slogan) on a highly commercialized platform that is “an important node in an evolving ecosystem of media conglomerates” (van Dijk, 2009, p. 54).

Although the Gossip Girl vids swim in a sea of commercially-produced clips, previews, trailers and celebrity interviews, and may even re-use material from these sources, they are significantly different texts. Following the work of cultural theorists Linda Hutcheon (2006) and Julie Sanders (2006), we might fruitfully read them as adaptations or appropriations. Both Hutcheon and Sanders argue for the cultural importance of the adaptation, citing it as an imaginative mode that has been marginalized within a cultural purview that values originality and authenticity, denying postmodern claims of intertextuality and influence. They suggest that we might locate significantly expanded (re)readings within the adaptation, readings that speak to (and of) the new contexts in which they were created. These new texts may re-interpret the source text’s formal qualities – for example shifting its point of view or redirecting elements such as irony, image, metaphor, symbol, silence or subtext – and reveal its politics. As Sanders writes, appropriations may be “oppositional, even subversive. There are as many opportunities for divergence as adherence, for assault as well as homage” (p. 9).

These observations parallel current interpretations of vidding. As noted earlier, Coppa (2008) views the fanvid as a means of redirecting the male gaze, while Stein (2009a) writes of the vid as a “radical decentralization” of media texts. Still, it is certainly not the case that all vids subvert the source text’s politics. Stein (2008) reminds us that some remixes may in fact
reproduce dominant cultural values, and she rightly warns researchers not to focus only on those appropriations that feel most transformative. Nonetheless, all vids do rewrite the source text to some extent. As Trombley (2007) notes, even the most faithful fanvid involves commentary (through the selection of music and synchronization of lyrics to clips) and editing (through the choice and juxtaposition of images). In the case of Gossip Girl vids, we might note the appropriation’s capacity to displace the relentlessly narrow representation and interpellation of young women as consumers. While Gossip Girl vids, like all vids, are constrained by the pool of images from which they draw, they nonetheless work – as a group – to rewrite and comment upon character, relationship, sexuality, and affect and to provide new levels of interiority. In doing so side by side with the original representations, they come into dialogue with their source texts, highlighting the surprising malleability of commercial narratives and voicing the possibility of other representations of teen life.

In the paragraphs below, I focus on Gossip Girl as a form of melodrama, and on Gossip Girl vids as a mode of amplifying melodrama’s emotional intensity, thereby shifting attention away from the fashionable body of teen TV. This shift is achieved through a focus on embodiment, in particular the face as the locus of emotion, and the body as a site of desire. While these new tropes interrupt the program’s “facade of excessive feminine adornment” and corporate teen culture’s fetishism of the consumer, they nonetheless enact their own excesses and restrictions. My analysis here relies on cinema theory as it has taken up questions of gender, genre, emotion and embodiment. This use of cinema scholarship is not a repudiation of television scholarship’s invaluable contribution to questions of gender, but rather an acknowledgement of the sizeable body of cinema scholarship that addresses emotion and affect, an area of analysis that is still quite new to television studies (Gorton, 2009). It is also a recognition of young
vidders’ rich and distinctive visual experiments, experiments that shift television melodrama’s realist aesthetic towards a more cinematic gaze.

In her essay “Film bodies: Gender, genre, and excess,” Linda Williams (1991) argues that what characterizes genres such as melodrama, horror and pornography – and what brackets them off from “classic cinema” within film theory – is their “apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion” (p. 5). In each case, she writes, the display of sensation teeters on the edge of respectability, threatening to push the genre into critical disgrace. But rather than simply equate these genres with sensationalism, she argues, film theorists need to more carefully analyze their “system and structure” (p. 3). In her own analysis of melodrama, horror and pornography, Williams notes the compelling connection between emotional excess and the female body, leading her to label them “the body genres” (p. 4). In the case of melodrama, this translates into the spectacle of the female body caught in states of intense emotion – most often anguish and sadness – and displayed as tears, sobbing or “ecstatic woe” (p. 9). Contemporary teen melodrama certainly functions as a kind of “body genre,” on a number of counts. In Gossip Girl, as Williams suggests, the teenage female body is the site of the program’s most excessive experiences and emotions, including bulimia, drug overdose, depression, delirium, panic, sexual ecstasy and sexual violence. It is also, as I have argued earlier in this chapter, a site of style and consumption. While neither the use of the young women’s body as a vehicle for marketing nor its service as a site of affect is new, Gossip Girl draws heavily on these conventions, combining them in new ways. Much of this excess is achieved through the formidably fashionable, troubled and bulimic character of Blair Waldorf, whose body is marked with a series of intertextual references that point towards all three of the most sensational genres. Within the first season, for example, we see Blair as a melodramatic trench-
coated Audrey Hepburn-esque character crying in the rain, Blair as a stripper in a nightclub peeling off layers of expensive lingerie, and Blair as the target of an attacker, running away in horror and high heeled shoes. Indeed, as Kenway and Bullen (2008) write, *Gossip Girl*, like much of the “textually rich, entertaining, and engaging” global corporate media targeted at young people, is simultaneously about sensation, affect, agency – and consumption.

Like many vidders, but particularly those working with genres such as soap opera, melodrama, or horror, *Gossip Girl* vidders seek to produce intensely emotional texts. This is apparent in reading vider’s own descriptions of their work, and in the large number of vidding contests that judge entries based on “the ability to make us feel” (a phenomenon I examine in a latter section). Certainly the most notable visual resource vidders use to create this emotion is the close-up shot. As Carl Plantinga (1999) writes in his work on “The scene of empathy and the human face on film,” the close-up functions not only to convey the emotion of characters, but also to elicit feeling from the audience. While there is no shortage of close-ups within the *Gossip Girl* source texts, vidders are also able to create their own close-ups using vidding editing software, resulting in quite novel uses of such shots, particularly within the relationship, slash or character study subgenres.
Figure 5. GossipGirlSource’s “Blair Waldorf Tribute” uses superimposition and split screens to showcase Blair’s emotional states, while KCTerra’s “Everybody’s Fool” uses rolling screens to disrupt the program’s conventional images of beauty.
We might begin by remarking simply on the sheer quantity of close-up shots. Because they often edit to a song’s beat, young vidders use a huge number of shots within a single vid, a large percentage of which are close-ups. GossipGirlSource’s vid “Blair Waldorf Tribute” set to Billy Joel’s song “Vienna,” for example, includes more than 50 close-ups of Blair in a three and a half minute song. While this accumulation of close-ups acts as a kind of catalogue of the character’s emotions over the course of a season, Gossip Girl vidders also use the digital tools at their means to add further layers of meaning. The Blair Waldorf tribute video, for example, uses split screens and superimposition to show multiple close-ups of Blair at once (see Figure 5). While in some cases these shots may emphasize a single emotion (most often sadness), in other cases they provide contrast, suggesting a split, fragmented or contradictory subject, an effect that is enhanced by the dizzying pace of the vid itself. Rather than uphold the integrity of the close-up, KC Terra’s study of Blair in “Everybody’s Fool” works to disfigure Blair’s conventional beauty and disrupt the coherence of the televisual image by using static, rolling screens and supersaturated colour to create avant-garde discord, mirrored in Evanescence’s gothic rock soundtrack. And in her study of Blair in “Stand in the Rain,” skategirl88 applies the zoom feature in Sony Vegas (the most commonly used editing software among young vidders) to the majority of her shots, beginning with the source text’s original shot, but then moving in towards the face of the character. The result, in frame after frame, is a sense of closing in on the character, an effect that not only implies a kind of interiority (getting past the exteriors of stylized body, clothing and setting to reveal the “true” emotion and the “authentic” person) but that also, as I shall argue later, borders on the erotic.

In fact, within relationship and slash vids, close-ups are used in a quite direct manner to suggest intimacy and erotic encounters between characters. In imagining characters into new
relationships (or in the case of slash, in foregrounding a homoerotic subtext), vidders are forced to be particularly creative in their choice of shots. Most vidders make careful use of those scenes in which the two characters appear together, particularly if the scene may be used to convey affection, longing or erotic tension. But it is also common practice to edit together close-ups of the two characters in rapid succession, with the suggestion that they are gazing at one another. By using their software’s colour options, such as black and white, or tinting, vidders can create continuity between the successive shots. Other editing techniques can also be used to create a feeling of close intimacy between the two characters. Like skategirl88, the vidder fadingspark makes liberal use of the zoom feature in her femmeslash vid “Umbrella.” Here, the camera action not only invokes interiority, but also a more literal sense of movement, as the vidder uses over the shoulder shots to create the sense of embrace for both the characters and viewer. Similarly, in “Blair’s Fantasy,” iheartTandS uses extreme close-ups of the faces of both Serena and Blair to create a visuality that merges with the tactile (see Figure 6). Borrowing Laura Marks’ (2000) conceptualization of “haptic visuality,” which she uses to describe a bodily relationship between the viewer and image that imitates touch, we might note the way in which these collaged close-ups, so often watched in private and at arm’s length distance, collapse distance, and create a sense of affective and bodily nearness.
Figure 6. Extreme close-ups on the faces of Blair and Serena in “Blair’s Fantasy.”

While character, relationship and slash vids all have an observable emphasis on the face as a site of affect, slash films also include an important place for the body. In these vids, sexual encounters provide the climax to the imagined relationship, revealing the body not only as a site of yearning, but as actively and pleasurably sexual. Vridore’s “Breathe Me,” for example, places best friends Nate and Chuck into an intense and difficult romantic relationship with each other. The repetition of scenes in which Nate and Chuck leave each other, visibly frustrated and hurt,
creates an atmosphere of tension and angst, underscored by Sia’s melancholy ballad song “Breathe Me.” In this, Vridore, like many other Gossip Girl slash vidders, reproduces a mainstream narrative of same-sex relationships as doomed, a discourse that ultimately has the effect, as Michael Warner (1999) notes, of policing sexualities. In fact, it is only those shots of bodies intimately intertwined, interspersed throughout the vid, that provide a sense of pleasure, possibility and hope. Similar to iheartTandS, Vridore uses extreme close-ups of the unclothed body (See Figure 7). This is in part a response to the physical limitations of vidding, and the lack of source footage that shows the two characters in sexual encounters, but like “Blair’s Fantasy,” these blurred images evoke a “haptic visuality” that brings the viewer into an embodied relation with the image on the screen.

Figure 7. Extreme close-ups of the body in Vridore’s “Breathe Me.”
Finally, we might note those slash vids which don’t so much reimagine a relationship as celebrate a character’s (or many characters’) gay sexuality. Here too, the body plays an important role. For example in “Blair Waldorf Gets All the Girls,” mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, iheartTandS employs a variety of long shots, showing Blair confidently strutting her way in and out of rooms, relationships and hearts, as Calvin Harris’ electropop hit brags, over and over, “I get all the girls, I get all the girls.” While Blair’s super-stylish clothes stay on, and continue to market both brands and a consumer lifestyle, they are simultaneously rewritten as camp, so that Blair’s femininity reads less as submission to neoliberal expectations and more as a powerful and parodic performance of gendered identity, a rewriting that is particularly significant for these vids’ mostly young female audiences, who find themselves “increasingly regulated ... in relation to almost every aspect of their lives, including the most personal and bodily” (Harris, 2008, p. 485).

Taken together, these remixes, both earnest and playful, perform a number of functions. By focusing on melodrama’s use of the female body – and in particular the face – as a site of affect and intensity, they largely exclude the program’s script of empowerment through consumption, challenging the interpellation of young woman as consumer. But while their amplification of emotion through the close-up and their fetishization of the female face through repetition may refuse the body as brand, it nonetheless reinscribes the teenage body as a site of almost uncontrollable emotion. This is a move that pushes against a neoliberal privileging of economic success and independence, but nonetheless contains its own limitations as a politics of change, reproducing as it does, the female body as a site of spectacle. Just as important, though, is to consider these vids as aesthetic and technical challenges to televisual norms. Through their innovative use of digital editing effects – such as static, superimposition, tinting, split and rolling
screens and lightening fast edits – they not only shift the program’s tone, but challenge television’s realist aesthetic. They appear as signs of an emerging visual culture that favours the fragment and the quick cut over the story. Their richly textured and varied surfaces evoke a (virtual) nearness that draws the viewer into closer relation with the image on the screen, gesturing towards Marks’ (2000) theorization of a category of cinematic representations that replace the pleasures of narrative identification with bodily response.

Stepping back from their particular aesthetics, we can also see that these vids gesture towards wider possibilities for the meaning(s) of interactive participation, revealing something beyond corporately-sanctioned invitations or the offer of new technological tools. Instead, interactivity here appears as a “culturally-constituted desire for communication” (Cover, 2006, p. 143) and for participation in the acts of meaning-making. The vids perforate notions of completeness and authority in the original text, and demonstrate young audience’s desires not simply to consume but to engage with digital narratives. By emptying out the soundtrack, dialogue and narrative coherence of Gossip Girl and replacing it with an excessive commentary on emotion, desire and sexuality, these vids gesture towards Sonia Katyal’s (2007) theorization of “semiotic disobedience,” achieved through “reoccupying the symbol, and then reinscribing it with new meaning” (p. 512). This is not to suggest that Gossip Girl vids are unqualified subversions of the original text – indeed as I have tried to show, many may reproduce its dominant discourses and replicate its fascination with the young female body. Nor is it to suggest that the very presence of these vids empowers the young and inverts media hierarchies. Vids and vidding are deeply embedded within – indeed are a part of – consumer corporate culture. As I demonstrate in the next sections, the process of making vids may actually entail a heightened consumption of the text, while their distribution across digital networks serves to extend the
*Gossip Girl* brand. Yet this does not diminish their importance as evidence of young women’s desire to “matter culturally” and to participate in the construction of their own cultural worlds. Nor does it negate the imaginative, aesthetic and technical work done to rethink the characters of *Gossip Girl* into other worlds in which youthful and feminine identities are constituted not only through consumption but also through relationship, desire, discord, sexuality and emotion.

“Say it’s possible”: Producing (brand) new texts and communities

In her study of multimedia adaptations, Hutcheon (2007) argues that we must theorize adaptations not only as texts but as *acts* of creative reinterpretation. Taking her cue, I consider the production of *Gossip Girl* vids in this section, arguing that the activity of making vids counters the interpellation of young women as passive consumers of technology. More than just a marker of style and status, technology is actively used by *Gossip Girl* vidders to produce texts and communicate ideas. It is also a means of creating community. Through their production of *Gossip Girl* vids, young women form circles of support and recognition, and a unique gift economy, using their altered texts as the basis of social dialogue and exchange. Still, vidding cannot be read as expression of audience autonomy separate from the circulation of power and profit, and so I finish with a reflection on the commodification of vidding, and on the sticky matter of fans’ role in branding. I take much of my data here from the comments, notes and channel pages of *YouTube*. As Patricia Lange (2007) notes, *YouTube* is as much a social network as a video-hosting site, and for young people in particular, it is a space where ties are built and maintained through a variety of activities that include sharing videos, commenting, corresponding, rating, inviting and subscribing.

The first episode of *Gossip Girl* begins when an unknown girl snaps a picture of Serena van der Woodsen arriving at Grand Central Station. Within seconds the picture is sent to the
*Gossip Girl* blog, where it is promptly posted and circulated, accompanied by a vicious outpouring of gossip. This opening scene captures the ambiguity of young women’s relationship to technology within the series: while they are voracious consumers of communication technology and contribute to its streams of rumour and hearsay, they are often deeply disempowered by its uses. Many of the CW’s interactive features extend this same discourse. Facebook updates from a fictional *Gossip Girl*, for example, focus on the lives and misdemeanours of the wealthy and famous, interpellating fans as consumers of celebrity gossip.

Although a number of *Gossip Girl* vids on *YouTube* include scenes of characters using technology, none that I could locate directly addressed the character’s relationship to it. Despite this absence of textual commentary, it is difficult not to read young women’s actual practices as a rejection of corporate culture’s configuration of the young woman as passive technological consumer, and the internet as a place where girls go to shop. As Anita Harris (2008) notes, even when girls’ uses of technology are acknowledged, they are often undervalued. Yet the process of making vids is a complex one that requires the development of sophisticated technical skills, a thorough knowledge of popular culture, and active participation in learning communities, as young women’s *YouTube* homepages (or “channels”), comments, and notes make clear. *Gossip Girl* vidders often provide commentary on their own progress as vidders in the notes beside their vid. Typical, for example, is Tobey89’s remark that “This is just my second vid. Sorry about the manips...I’m still learning. Hopefully I’ll get better!” Observations on the vidder’s skill also feature in the comments section. Sometimes these are solicited, as in camillaaa91’s appeal for feedback: “I'm slightly worried that I overdid with the effects, cause I'm not very used to editing a song with such fast beat. But you tell me!” Similarly, Baritoneslur requests help in using the “additive dissolve” feature in the Sony Vegas 7 editing software. But even without such requests,
vidders commonly provide one another with feedback on editing skill, choice of music, ability to match lyrics to images, and use of special effects, creating what Coppa calls “grassroots peer learning sites.” These activities parallel the findings of Mizuko Ito and Patricia Lange (2010), whose ethnographic research into creative digital production shows that young people learn from their peers through observation and informal dialogue in social forums. Gossip Girl vidders learning strategies are perhaps all the more remarkable for taking place on YouTube, a platform that does not overtly encourage or support community-building (Burgess & Green, 2009). But by using private messaging, providing and receiving feedback, rating one another’s work and inviting collaboration, young vidders not only improve their skills, but as Ito and Lange (2010) write, actively negotiate “with one another about standards of quality and craftsmanship,” participating in the work of shaping and defining new cultural forms (p. 292).

While the comments sections are regularly used to remark on a vidder’s ability, they are even more noticeably a place where vidders provide encouragement to one another. Indeed, it is clear that many vidders have produced not only a body of work but also a circle of friends on YouTube, maintained through comments, ratings, dedications, favourite lists and channel pages. As Lange (2007) notes in her study of social networking on YouTube, comments in particular “enable people to express feelings of affinity for the video or the video makers” and her interviewees reported that supportive commentary on a video could initiate closer social connections. Although most comments posted in response to a vidders’ work are short, they are remarkable for their effusiveness, warmth and quantity, and often lead to interactions between viewer and vidder, like this typical exchange between fadingspark and a viewer of her femmeslash vid “Say it’s possible” (2007):
Woow! I have never thought about these two as something more than best friends, but this video totally worked! It was freaking amazing! You are an amazing video-maker, I hope you know that! :D Loved it hun!

Aww, thank you so much, that means so much to me. :D

It is also clear from the comments that many viewers become fans of a particular vidder. Another commenter on fadingspark’s work tells her that while she doesn’t like Blair and Serena as a couple, she watched it anyway “Cause I didn’t want to miss a video from you :).” Appreciation for another vidder’s work often translates into influence, which is acknowledged and celebrated in the form of a “shout-out”:

This video was also partially inspired by fadingspark’s “Popular,” which has got to be the best Blair Waldorf video I’ve ever seen. Check it out!” (ChibiSakura91, 2008)

Subscribing to a video maker’s channel is another way of showing support, and many vidders with a large number of subscribers thank their supporters by dedicating remixes to them. Favourites lists and ratings, although anonymous, also demonstrate admiration for a vidder’s work. In keeping with the general tone of the Gossip Girl vidding community, almost all vids receive 5 star ratings. Spending any prolonged amount of time watching Gossip Girl vids on YouTube, it becomes clear not only that there are strong connections between vidders, but also that these connections provide the motivation to make vids and to improve one’s craft, confirming Kristina Busse’s (2009) suggestion that within fan creation, “community interaction and creative production become indistinguishable, as creative endeavours turn into commentary and criticism into fan works” (p. 106).
Many observers of fan culture suggest that the process Busse describes constitutes a kind of exchange or economy. For example, Julie Levin Russo (2007) views fandom as a complex gift economy in which “creative production, feedback, and critical reflection are the products and name recognition, attention and feedback are the currency” and Karen Hellekson (2009) identifies acts of giving, receiving and reciprocating as central to fan community. The reasons for this unique system of exchange are diverse. Hellekson writes that “at the heart of this anticommercial requirement of fan works is fans’ fear that they will be sued by producers of content for copyright violation. The general understanding is that if no money is exchanged, the copyright owners have no reason to sue” (p. 114). However, she goes on to argue, fans insist on gift economies not only out of fear, but also out of a desire to create stable communities and social cohesion, particularly valued attributes amongst women. While highly structured codes of reciprocity exist within some fan subcultures, the same is not true of Gossip Girl vidders on YouTube, perhaps because YouTube is not a site devoted exclusively to fandom. Nonetheless, the exchange of recognition, praise, advice and work amongst Gossip Girl vidders, however informal, implies elements of a gift economy, as do certain conventions amongst the vidding community. Contests, for example, are a common occurrence amongst vidders that create both bonds and a notable circulation of attention. A typical contest hosted by RazGirl77, for instance, put out a call for vids remixing Smallville, Supernatural, One Tree Hill, The O.C. and Gossip Girl. In her contest announcement, RazGirl 77 promised the winners three prizes: she would provide them with comments on 10 of their vids, send their winning vid to her list of over 300 friends, and make each of them a vid based on their own specifications. RazGirl’s offered rewards of increased recognition, commentary and returned creative production make clear the
kinds of gifts that are valued by participants. In return for bestowing these gifts, RazGirl77 increased her own contacts and recognition.

Such gift economies call into question capitalist models of exchange and labour – but they also participate in them. Indeed, fan productivity is inextricably linked to processes of consumption, commodification and brand promotion. Even as vidders rewrite mainstream media texts, creating vids is simultaneously an immersion in the corporate text, for as Kathryn Hill (2008) notes, the painstaking act of making a vid “reflects an acutely emotional involvement with the primary text,” perhaps even a form of hyper-consumption (p. 178). As Alexis Lothian (2009) succinctly puts it, to make vids is to “fuel the engines of capital, even as it is to play with theft and rebellion” (p. 135). Moreover, vidders’ labour is increasingly harnessed by media conglomerates as a means of branding. We can see this in many of the CW Network’s activities noted earlier, such as its promotion of official vidding contests, and also in the more general move to authorize, centralize and monetize user-generated content. Yet these developments are not entirely antithetical to fandom. Indeed, some fans may perceive these corporate practices as legitimation of their work, particularly given that many vidders produce texts with the intention of creating new fans, already seeing their activities – at least in part – as promotional. As Mark Andrejevic (2007) notes, given interactivity’s promise of closer relations between users and producers, many fans seek out producer attention. Comments on Gossip Girl fan vids, for example, commonly reveal the hope that producers will use their suggestions for new storylines.

Scholars of fandom have attempted to explain the complicated dynamics between users and producers, recognition and exploitation, in a variety of ways. Russo (2007), for example, looks to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of immanence and to flattened models of power and control to hold on to the contradictions within fan labour and production. She writes that aspects
of fans’ free labor “are always flowing into the dominant economy, while other aspects are always flowing around and in excess of it” (par. 14). Other critics (De Kosnik, 2009; Hellekson, 2009) have suggested that there is a troubling gendered nature to this exploitation. While the work of mostly male gamers, for example, has translated into employment and compensation, the work of vidding undertaken by women, youth and queer folk has yet to generate profit for those groups. Indeed, while young women’s productive uses of technology contribute to communication and community, and counter interpellations of them as passive consumers, their labour is nonetheless absorbed into larger operations of branding and promotion. As I suggest in my final section on distribution, this inequity may only be exacerbated in a context like YouTube, which adds a further layer of commercialization and the complications of copyright to young women’s efforts.

“The distribution and display of Gossip Girl vids on YouTube

The advent of digitization has not only changed the aesthetics of vids (including faster cuts and increased use of special effects) and eased their production (through greater access to source texts and editing software), but also radically altered the conditions of their distribution and display. Where the sharing of vids used to mean sending VHS cassettes through the mail and watching them at living-room gatherings (Jenkins, 1992), the circulation of vids is now a far less onerous and time-consuming process, but also a far more public one. Once subcultural, even secret, texts have now entered streaming culture, and can be uploaded and watched on password-protected sites, fan sites and large commercial sites like YouTube or blip.tv. This shift has a number of significant consequences for user-producer relations. It means, first of all, greatly expanded audiences for vids, including those who may know little about the form. This new visibility not only leads to new audiences, but also to increased attention from media industries,
including television networks, film and recording studios, and the digital platforms on which vids are streamed. Such attention has multiple – and often contradictory – effects. As noted earlier, it has meant a greater commodification of vidding, as media industries seek to harness fan production for profit and promotion. At the same time, it has also led to struggles between large media conglomerates and vidders over questions of copyright, particularly with the recent use of automatic content filtering. Finally, as a result of this new visibility, vidders experience a certain loss of control over their finished works, as vids can be moved, altered and deleted without the vidder’s knowledge once inside the digital sphere. Indeed, a sense of continuous flux seems to mark both the digital distribution of vids as they move from one context to another, and the relationship between vidders and media producers, as they take part in constant negotiation regarding the terms of use and display. In this final section, I attempt to trace that movement – including its points of friction – by examining the exhibition of *Gossip Girl* vids. I begin with a short example that captures some of the contest around the distribution of *Gossip Girl* vids on *YouTube*, using it as a starting place to reflect on the relationship between copyright, commerce and control. As Rob Cover (2005) suggests, the management of intellectual property – and resistance to such management – is one of the key sites of struggle within digital interactivity, and serves to highlight continuing power differentials.

In March 2009, two young vidders, NatyS86 and Aranam24, announced their “Big Multifandom Emotional Contest.” In a three-minute vid posted to their channels, they presented the rules of the contest, which stressed that although vidders could use source material from any TV program or film, they had to convey emotion through their work. While good editing and special effects would be taken into account, “being able to show emotions is what makes the
difference!...Just make us FEEL.” Four months later, the two vidders announced the winners in a
follow-up video. In their notes, they also explained (and exclaimed) the delay:

First a big thank you to all that submitted their videos! It was fascinating watching such amazing works!! And extremely hard having to choose amongst them. The maximum entries we got were around 650, but the number kept changing due to videos being deleted, accounts changing or people dropping out. It was really crazy trying to keep up with all the changes!

Amongst the winning vids was CarrieSophiaFan’s “Fragile,” a black and white character study of Blair Waldorf. CarrieSophiaFan, a prolific vidder with over 1000 subscribers to her channel, noted the award in the notes beside the video, and continued to accrue more than 2,000 views for the work. Just a few weeks later, however, the vid disappeared. In its place was a video message, printed against a black backdrop and accompanied by a harsh and repetitive heavy metal strain:

Here lately, YouTube hasn’t been very nice to my account. Over the past 2 weeks, I had to delete 7 vids of mine because of copyright (content ID matches).... I realize that I could have kept them up, but I didn’t want to risk losing my account. And for some reason, my account status says not in good standing. The weird thing is that the only strike listed is from my old account Codanielle6S. I’m not sure what to do about that (or why it’s even on this account). But in conclusion I will be uploading all of these vids to Bam Video Vault. So if you don’t have an account or haven’t added/subscribed to me there yet...now is the perfect time! The link is in my sig.

In the comments that follow the video announcement, CarrieSophiaFan and a number of other vidders carry on a conversation about the unfairness of YouTube’s removal, about whether or not to continue to post on YouTube, and about the benefits of the password-protected Bam Video Vault (where the removed videos can indeed be found). In one thread, another vidder writes that
“it sucks so much to work so hard on a video, that you are making no profit from and then have YouTube delete it.... I've been thinking of giving up making videos, because i'm sick of wasting my time” to which CarrieSophiaFan replies “Agreed! It can be very frustrating. Aw, don't quit though! I know there's been times where I wanted to quit, but I love it too much that I could never stop completely. If we quit, that means YT wins. And I refuse to let them win!”

“Fragile’s” removal and reappearance on another site, alongside the accompanying conversations about copyright, filtering and the transitory nature of fanvids on YouTube all point to the current instability of YouTube as a platform for remix, as well as the contested relationship between vidders and YouTube. This sense of precarity and struggle are in direct contrast to the many celebratory claims made for YouTube’s democratic potential, such as Henry Jenkins’ and John Hartley’s (2008) happy pronouncement that “[w]ith YouTube, there is almost infinite scope for creative content and new ideas to be produced by just anyone, without the need for avant garde leadership, expert filtering or institutional control.” But the presence of angry commentary posted on YouTube, along with more extended critique by scholars, suggests otherwise. In her consideration of user agency on YouTube, for example, van Dijk (2009) notes the way in which, far from abdicating “institutional control,” the site’s codes direct users towards commercial content. She also complicates new media studies’ current fascination with the producer-consumer dyad by pointing out the often-overlooked third role of online advertisers, and by reminding us that YouTube users are far less significant as content providers than as data providers, as users’ personal information is harvested and sold in ways beyond their control.

Robert Gehl (2009) similarly aims to “trouble the current discourse on YouTube” (p. 44), and he notes users’ investments of time and skill in uploading, tagging, titling and describing content that YouTube ultimately controls through its use of interfaces, and from which it derives profit.
“The erosion of YouTube’s democratic ideal” (van Dijk, p. 52) is notable not only in its bottomline, its introduction of advertising and its architectures of control, but also in the authority it exerts over questions of copyright, an authority that ultimately decides what will remain on the site, and in what form. Many users – especially those who upload vids and other transformative works – view its decisions as unjust and inexplicable. And indeed, YouTube’s response to competing claims of copyright infringement and fair use has shifted considerably during its brief history. Shortly after Google’s purchase of YouTube in 2006 came Viacom’s notorious billion-dollar law suit against Google for copyright infringement, as well as “purges” of Viacom-owned material, including The Daily Show and The Colbert Report from the YouTube site. Around the same time, however, many other media corporations (such as CBS and Universal Music Group) chose to negotiate with YouTube, placing content on the site as a way to promote programming. (The CW, for example, has its own channel on YouTube, with over 22,000 subscribers). In 2007, all copyright holders (whether they had deals with YouTube or not) won a decision that allowed them to block copyrighted video content loaded onto YouTube, without seeking prior permission.

Soon after, responding to continued pressure from copyright owners, YouTube developed its "Content ID" technology. According to YouTube, this system enables "copyright holders to easily identify and manage their content on YouTube" (Content Management, 2009). It works by checking every video uploaded against a database of audio and video "fingerprints" submitted by copyright owners. After finding a match, copyright owners have three choices – they may “block,” “track” or “monetize” a video. Different media corporations have used the Content ID technology in very different ways. Many, like Summit Entertainment, the producers of the Twilight films, have chosen to monetize video containing their copyrighted material by placing
relevant ads on the same page. A vid that uses footage from *New Moon* or *Eclipse*, then, will
often have an ad in the right margin for that film. Other studios may have the work removed
entirely without notice, while still others will notify the user that the work must be removed, as
in the case of “Fragile.” Perhaps most famously, and most relevant here, has been Warner Music
Group’s (WMG) recent use of Content ID. Warner at first chose to monetize copyrighted work,
placing a pop-up box at the bottom of video works that featured Warner music that informed the
viewer of the song title and artist’s name, and provided a link to “Buy the song.” But in January
2009, WMG altered their policy drastically, using the system to automatically take down or mute
the audio of a huge number of videos, resulting in the deletion or alteration of works that would
almost certainly – if challenged – fall under fair use. Cuircorp’s first episode of “Gossip Gays,”
for example, which contains samples from 9 songs, was muted by WMG with an accompanying
note that reads “This video contains an audio track that has not been authorized by WMG. The
audio has been disabled.” While remixers and vidders can respond to these takedowns by
contacting YouTube and claiming fair use, they risk beginning a process of notices and
counternotices under the Digital Millenium Copyright Act (DMCA), a process that the
Electronic Frontier Foundation warns can be costly and lead to legal suits. Yet each time a user
receives a takedown notice and does not respond, they have a “strike” against their account. With
three strikes, their right to upload work to YouTube is rescinded. While vidders like Cuircorps
and CarrieSophiaFan have found ways to circumvent the haphazard application of Content ID –
for example by adding introductions to their vids which foil the identification software, by
tagging their work with abbreviated codes, and simply by creating multiple accounts – there is no
doubt their work has been hit particularly hard.
Many legal scholars, as suggested earlier, interpret vids and other works of remix as fair use, and use them to argue that a heavy-handed approach to intellectual property privatizes popular culture and stifles creative expression, particularly amongst those pushed to the margins of cultural production (Lessig, 2008; Trombley, 2007; Tushnet, 2008). While such analyses are significant contributions towards an ethics of copyright in a digital age, as Pat Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi (2009) write, questions about the legality of online video “will be settled at least as much by practice and private negotiation as by legal action” (p. 1). It becomes equally important, then, to analyze technologies like Content ID, and the processes through which vidders’ texts are either taken down as copyright violation or taken up as advertising. While the use of content ID is relatively new, and still changing, we can certainly make some speculations about its significance. We might begin by noticing, for example, how the options it offers to copyright holders – to block, track or monetize – exemplify current corporate activities on the internet. The control of content through massive automated takedowns, the tracking of individual users, and the right to create profit from user-generated content by recontextualizing it with advertising all point towards rather clear power imbalances between YouTube users and global media corporations. We might also note the complex entanglements of copyright concerns and commerce. For example, the mass removal of user-generated remixes in the face of proliferating corporate content undercuts the You in YouTube and affirms it as an increasingly commercial space: while fans’ alternate portraits of Gossip Girl’s characters as alone and fragile or proudly gay are removed, the CW Network’s promotional interviews, clips and fashion tips remain. Moreover, the placement of ads over or near user-generated remixes draws all work into the same rubric of advertising, and suggests a blurring of the roles of user-producer that is based less in a democratizing of media roles and more in a blanketing of commercialization, branding and
advertising over all forms of content. Within such a context, *Gossip Girl* vids become complicated and layered artifacts of resistance and reproduction.
Chapter Three
Calling on the Colbert Nation:
Parody, Participation and the Dialogic Audience

On the first broadcast of The Colbert Report, host Stephen Colbert, puffed up with the Bill O’Reilly persona that would become his trademark, announced to his studio audience and viewers:

This show is not about me. No, this program is dedicated to you, the heroes. And who are the heroes? The people who watch this show, average hard-working Americans. You’re not the elites. You’re not the country club crowd. I know for a fact my country club would never let you in….You’re the folks who say something has to be done. And you’re doing something. You’re watching TV.

In the same way that “truthiness,” also introduced in this very first episode, would become key to Colbert’s critique of mainstream media and politics, so too would his direct appeal to the television audience become a central mode of address. Dedicating his program to the American “heroes” who watch TV, he mocks the right-wing media pundits who condescendingly celebrate a manufactured, one-dimensional representation of the “common people” while speaking from a place of elite privilege. Yet even as the opening address works as a parody of attention-seeking media personalities, it does, as subsequent shows and fan activities attest, have the very real effect of naming and creating an audience; it is, in the manner of postmodern parody generally, a “doubly coded” address, undercutting but also lending legitimacy to that which it parodies (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 97). As the program continues, Colbert and the show’s writers will refine their relationship to the audience, not only interpellating it as the “Colbert Nation” but calling upon it to take part in a number of online activities and pranks. But even in these very first moments, the writers’ invitation for the audience to participate in the parody is evident, a
participation that will both extend the parody’s reach, but also risk reinscribing the cult of
celebrity it intends to ridicule.

*The Colbert Report’s* tremendous popularity is part of a larger flourishing of television
satire in the post-network era. Many commentators have argued for satire’s ability to “energize
civic culture” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 4) and contribute to the formation of online publics and
counterpublics (Baym, 2010; Boler 2006). But while the significance of an emerging culture of
screen satire is clear, this certainly does not mean that it operates in any simple or easily-defined
manner. Indeed, as Linda Hutcheon (1994) reminds us, irony is marked above all else by its
complexity. This complexity lies in part within irony’s ability to function in the service of a wide
array of political interests, what Hutcheon identifies as its “transideological” status. Employing
irony, parody is similarly politicized, particularly in the way it acts as a kind of “complicitous
critique,” destabilizing but also legitimizing dominant ideologies (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 104). Even
more importantly here, the complications of irony also arise from its social, interactive and
dialogical dimensions. “With irony,” Hutcheon writes, there are “dynamic and plural relations
among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the
circumstances surrounding the discursive situation” (p. 10). Translated into the terms of
television, this suggests that screen satire is created out of an extraordinarily complicated set of
interactions between migrating media texts, corporate writers and producers, interactive
audiences, and contextual factors that include media convergence and shifting modes of public
discourse.

Nowhere are these complexities more notable than in *The Colbert Report*. To begin with,
it is difficult to even think about the program without taking participation into account, for the
program has not only assigned its audience the role of the “Colbert Nation,” but has also
generated a flurry of fan activity. At the invitation of Colbert and the program’s producers, fans have created videos featuring Colbert as a Jedi warrior, changed numerous Wikipedia pages, and stuffed an online ballot with 17 million votes in order to name a Hungarian bridge after the late-night cable host. Of their own accord, fans have also initiated several thriving blogs dedicated to *The Colbert Report*, organized protests in support of striking writers, and devoted countless threads to online discussion of the show. The level of audience input into the show, as well as the producers’ public recognition of fans, have lead both critics and fans to remark on the program’s online experiments and its high degree of interactivity. Journalist Rachel Sklar (2006) remarked in *The Huffington Post*, “The people behind *The Colbert Report* may be the smartest minds in television: While everyone else frets about *YouTube*, web TV, and platform integration, Stephen Colbert & Co. are already galvanizing the online to action and integrating fan content into the show.” Echoing a common feeling of audience empowerment and even intimacy, one fan enthused “Other fandoms are just passively running alongside the limos of their objects of fanship; we're doing a tango with ours” (Colboards, 2006). Stephen Colbert himself has noted the role fans played in generating response to his speech at the White House Press conference by creating and circulating images and video. In more than one interview, Colbert has suggested that fans are essential to the Report, that they “are a character in a scene I’m playing” (Snierson, 2007), pointing towards a key role for the audience in the creation of parody. The surrounding conditions of production within which such invitations to participate are made add further layers of complexity, especially given the ways in which, as we have seen in Chapter 1, media corporations seek to manage and profit from audiences’ desire to interact. The vice president of digital media at Comedy Central, Erik Flannigan, himself signalled the profitability of audience participation around *The Colbert Report*, when he stated in an interview “that we want to make
This chapter, then, is an attempt to explore the interplay of parody, participation and dialogue on *The Colbert Report*, and to trace the flow of power between the program’s producers and young fans as they struggle over the ways in which the parody’s meanings will be interpreted, discussed and ultimately controlled. Using the structure established in examining *Gossip Girl*, I move from a macro- to a micro-level analysis. In Part One of the chapter, I follow the text across its many platforms, paying special attention to questions of interactivity and participation. I consider the program as a postmodern parody that holds the potential to encourage dialogue, as a television text that blurs discursive boundaries, and as a series of interactive invitations that promise a heightened role for the audience. Drawing on understandings of the double-edged nature of parody, I examine the way in which these calls for audience interaction combine with parody to create a risky politics that is, as often as not, complicitous with the corporate goals of convergence. Having established the complex nature of the audience’s involvement in Colbert’s parody, I go on in Part 2 to focus on the relations between users and producers on *The Colbert Report*’s official discussion boards, “The Colboards.” Within this space, young fans have taken up Colbert’s invitation to join in the parody by creating a vibrant, dialogic and often rowdy online community. In doing so, they have sought to draw Comedy Central executives into discussion and debate, gesturing towards larger tensions over the management and control – and ultimately the ownership – of public digital dialogue.
Part I: Satire in Action: *The Colbert Report* as Participatory Parody

In February 1996, a New York Times headline reprised readers that “Giggles Intact, Political Satire Is Back on TV.” In the paragraphs below, critic Caryn James argued that networks’ aversion to risk was responsible for the widespread dearth of sharp political satire. But, she suggested, Bill Maher’s *Politically Incorrect* might be reversing that situation, “almost single-handedly reviving political satire on television.” Indeed, James was right, and within just a few short years, the landscape of television had changed considerably, with satire not only gaining in popularity and stature, but becoming “a key part of televised political culture” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 6). Even as Maher’s *Politically Incorrect* was dropped in a rush of post-911 censorship, political and social satire flourished on programs such as *The Chris Rock Show, South Park, TV Nation, The Daily Show,* and of course *The Colbert Report,* many of which found a home on the cable channel Comedy Central. In the first half of this chapter, I analyze *The Colbert Report* as an example of this new breed of screen satire, and as a program that has drawn large and youthful audiences, plus a good deal of critical praise. I begin by taking a step back, though, focusing not on *The Report,* but on the genre of parody, and the multiple meanings that have been attributed to it by literary and media scholars. Having established parody as a potentially dialogic genre, I return to the text of *The Colbert Report,* and to the analyses of Geoffrey Baym and Don Waisanen, who emphasize the program’s ability to cut across news and entertainment genres and encourage renewed forms of civic culture. As much as these readings reveal, however, they nonetheless leave out the interactive aspects of the program, and it is here where the difficult politics of parody and of participatory culture are best understood. In the final section of Part One, then, I examine *The Colbert Report’s* earliest attempts to involve its audience, highlighting issues of appropriation, agency and digital labour.
**Parody as a dialogic genre**

Satire has been adept not only at finding its feet in the post-network television terrain, but also at riding the waves of televisual overflow, pushing its presence past late night TV, and onto computers, laptops and handhelds as viral bites that criss-cross blogs, social networking sites and email accounts. Yet it is not simply the texts of contemporary political satire that, broken down and repurposed as digital content, have found wide circulation. Equally, it is *talk* generated by such satire that has raced across multiple public forums. We can see this, for example, in the viral quality of Jon Stewart’s appearance on Crossfire or Colbert’s address at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner. Both texts spread like wildfire across the internet, fuelled by the enthusiasm of fans, digital citizens and political commentators. Video clips as well as remixes and images like the “Speak Truthiness to Power” graphic that followed Colbert’s speech circulated widely. But both texts also became the subject of much heated discussion, in conversations that took place in online discussion groups, political blogs from both the left and right, newspapers and magazines, and ultimately made their way back to television again. It is this role – as an instigator of dialogue and debate – that has lead many scholars to suggest that contemporary satirical programs draw audiences into political culture (Gray et. al., 2009, p. 4) and have become “discursive resources to be used, not simply consumed, by increasingly active audiences” (Baym, 2010, p. 163).

But while the new visibility of screen satire cannot be denied, its meaning and influence can certainly be debated. Even as some scholars laud satire’s role in encouraging civic participation, others have been intent to demonstrate its potentially detrimental effects, particularly on the young people for whom it holds so much appeal. In their study of “the effects of *The Colbert Report* on American youth,” for example, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris
undertook a controlled experiment in which young adults were randomly assigned to watch either *The Colbert Report*, or programming from the person Colbert most often parodies – Bill O’Reilly. In their findings, the authors report that “exposure to Colbert increases support for President Bush, Republicans in Congress, and Republican policies on the economy and the War on Terror” and that “Colbert’s satire seems to confuse some young viewers” (p. 634). In noting the constraints of their research, the authors cite the absence of data studying the long-term effects of watching the program, as well as the generation of data within an artificial setting. Yet the limitations of such quantitative, effects-driven studies are really much greater. Such scholarship, often widely cited in the mainstream media, both exemplifies and fuels a moral panic around youthful consumption of political humour, especially as a replacement to conventional news programming. In doing so, it not only overlooks the sophistication and diversity of young audiences, but also flattens complex satirical texts and the complicated relationships audiences have with them. Indeed, critical scholars beginning with Mikhail Bakhtin have shown that satirical texts – and particularly those that employ parody – are extraordinarily dialogic, involved in complicated conversations not only with the texts, genres and dominant ideologies they take on, but with the audiences and public culture that take them up. It is this more complex understanding of the relational nature of parody, explored here, that will most help us to illuminate *The Colbert Report*’s participatory parody in the sections that follow.

In their discussion of contemporary satirical television programming, Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones and Ethan Thompson (2009) provide a useful gloss on the relationship between satire and parody. Satire, they write, “draws on social conventions” while parody “draws on aesthetic ones. Parody attacks a particular text or genre, making fun of how that text or genre operates” (p. 17). Still, while parody may work to foreground issues of representation through its
intertextual references, that does not mark it as entirely distinct from social and political critique, particularly in a postmodern era that instantiates a politics of surfaces. Indeed, Gray and his co-authors argue, the recent genre of news parody exemplified by *The Colbert Report* is deeply satiric, for it “launch[es] a satiric missive on the nature of the political process and our tolerance of the status quo” (p. 18). For literary theorist Linda Hutcheon (2002), who embraces a wider sense of the political, postmodern parody is always by its very nature political, though never in any simple or single way. A “doubly-coded” mode of address, parody “both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (p. 97). This sense of parody’s doubleness (duplicity, even) is echoed by Robert Hariman (2008), who writes of parody as consciously duplicating some part of the communicative act. “Parodic imitation works,” he writes, “by turning an organic moment into something mechanical, and so reveals the mechanization underlying the original communicative act” (p. 250). Like Hutcheon, Hariman notes the risk of the parodic move: for Hutcheon, the risk that parody may reinscribe the values it seeks to critique, for Hariman the risk that parody itself may become inelastic or mechanized. Despite this risk, however, parody remains for both theorists a productive means by which to expose the limitations of official discourses and challenge idealization and mythification, in part because of its very intertextuality and indeterminancy. “Every parody is an intentional dialogized hybrid,” writes Hariman. “Within it, languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another” (p. 258).

While parody brings texts into conversation with one another, defamiliarizing them and highlighting their constructedness, it can also function as “a key moment in the genesis of the dialogic imagination” (Hariman, p. 259), an imagination that we might ascribe not only to the parodic text itself, but also to the text’s relationship with its audience. It is here, in its interaction with the audience, that the parody’s comedy is ignited, as it casts discourse into a “carnivalesque
spectatorship” for whom the “parodied object is held up to be seen, exposed and ridiculed” (Hariman, p. 255). Such an audience, writes Hariman with obvious relish, basking in Bakhtin’s theorization of parodic play, may be “unruly, mixed, possibly drunk or stoned, maybe crazy, and at times also perhaps stupid, deluded, out of work, or otherwise deviant from the norms of serious, respectable, daytime routine” (p. 255). While Hariman’s characterization of carnivalesque spectators may sound hyperbolic, in fact, in our later examination of discussion threads associated with *The Colbert Report*, we do encounter this sense of a young, unruly and exuberant audience. In its mocking play with the texts of official power, parody asks its audience to accept the parodic text in a state not quite of derision, but surely one of irreverence and cheeky insolence. And in doing so, parody takes another risk – not only the risk of complicity with the texts it seeks to undermine, but also the risk of being reinterpreted, redirected or rejected. Indeed, as Hutcheon (1994) writes of irony more generally, the relations between the ironic utterance and the receiver are always dynamic, plural, shifting and messy, as an audience actively reads and attributes the ambiguities of irony in ways that may be unintended.

But for all of its slipperiness – or perhaps because of it – many theorists nonetheless assign to parody a uniquely pedagogical quality. Both Hariman (2008) and Gray (2006), writing about contemporary parody, suggest that the genre provides an education for its spectators. Hariman argues that as discourses are transformed through parody – whether through audience efforts at photoshopping, remixing or subtitling, or through corporately-produced forms of televisual or film parody – their conventions become apparent as conventions. Similarly, Gray, writing about *The Simpsons*, argues that parody’s critical intertextuality reveals and threatens the ideological apparatus and strategies that uphold generic conventions, in particular the news and advertising. Parody, Gray (2006) writes, can uncover “a genre’s inner workings. It can both show
how the genre has housed a given ideology and made it appear “natural,” and denaturalize that ideology’s presence, by rendering it a fully visible object of attention and parodic play” (p. 227). In this way, Gray writes, parody instructs, promoting a kind of media literacy that is especially effective for the way that it takes place at the site of media consumption itself. Gray (2008) speculates that such a pedagogic voice speaks particularly clearly – and usefully – to young people, who have grown up surrounded by the television genres, conventions and programs that parody takes aim at. While Gray’s conceptualization of media literacy here is grounded in an interpretation of media education as means of revealing and deconstructing media message – a notion which fails to adequately account for the (inter)active audience – it nonetheless points towards parody’s potential to provide moments of critical distance for generations immersed in a televisural environment.

Because an understanding of generic conventions and their ideological apparatus is a significant aspect of citizenship, this pedagogical potential of parody has also been connected to a potential revitalization of the public sphere. Hariman (2008) writes that:

in the modern public address system, citizenship requires recognizing the limits of a wide range of discourses from presidential inaugurals to television ads to soft news stories to terror alert codes. Every time one of these discourses is parodied, a particular set of conventions are marked while all discourses are “novelized,” that is, made potentially subject to the same displacement. (pp. 264–265).

As Hariman suggests here, parody not only exposes the grammar of the particular discourse it ridicules, but implies the possibility that all forms of public speech can be displaced. For Hariman, this potential displacement can lead to an attitude of critical inquiry and awareness, an interpretation of parody’s influence that directly counters those critics, like Baudrillard (2001) who see in postmodern parody a sort of “radical disillusionment” (p. 263) that pacifies rather than activates its audiences. Similar to Hariman, Henry Jenkins (2006) reads contemporary
parody as provocative. Writing about *The Daily Show*, he suggests that its opening news parody has the important effect of posing questions rather than providing answers in a manner that pushes audiences to learn more about the issues. But as well as allowing for a critical re-evaluation of dominant discourses, parody can also encourage audiences’ own acts of parodic reinterpretation, inviting user-generated forms of political argument, such as the photoshopped images and remixed political speeches that are particularly appealing to young citizens (Kenway & Bullen, 2008). Such user-generated parodies can themselves be seen as part on the dialogic imagination, for they have the potential to begin conversations between users and producers over the politics of representation. They also have the potential to initiate dialogue between citizens, and, as Jenkins has suggested, may be one aspect of maintaining an active political sphere.

Hutcheon (1994) too speculates on the civic influence of postmodern irony, writing that the use of parody may anticipate “a polity wherein commitment does not exclude but accompanies an ability to achieve critical distance on one’s deepest commitments and desires” (La Capra 1987, cited in Hutcheon, 1994). But it is also Hutcheon, insisting on parody’s ability to cut both ways, who reminds us that while parody may indeed be productive, it does not guarantee the production of a critical, democratic discourse – nor of any one kind of discourse at all. Both inviting and distancing, subversive and legitimizing, postmodern parody is a complex genre fraught with complications and risks. In its incitements to laughter, dialogue and possibly even to change, parody is perhaps best understood in its interactive capacity. Yet as *The Colbert Report* and its young fans suggest, the relational and socially-activated nature of parody can hardly be read as a straightforward narrative of empowering participation nor enlightening critique, but rather must be explored as a series of indeterminate, contested and even oppositional moments and negotiations. It is to *The Colbert Report* as an open-ended, postmodern parodic text
extraordinaire that I turn now, returning in the second half of the chapter to a more focused inquiry into the kinds of online dialogue provoked by Colbert’s parody.

**The Colbert Report as boundary-breaking television text**

When *The Colbert Report*, a spin-off from Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, first aired on Comedy Central the fall of 2005, it had already received far more promotional ink than most new programs. Articles in The New Yorker, New York Times and Washington Post not only announced the program, but featured interviews, biographical details, descriptions of Colbert’s office and praise for his abilities, including the New Yorker’s comment that “since Bill Murray’s departure for the movies, no one has done fatuous like Colbert does fatuous” (Remnick, 2005). Fake ads – in keeping with the fake news genre – appeared on *The Daily Show* for weeks before the premiere. When the show finally debuted on October 17, it had 1.13 million viewers. Since that time, *The Colbert Report* has continued to receive critical praise, and to pull in sizable audiences of up to 2 million people, much of it located in the 18–29 year-old demographic.

In fact, sizable describes not only the program’s audience, but many aspects of the program itself, including Stephen Colbert’s larger-than-life character. Unlike Jon Stewart, who mostly plays himself, Colbert has created an exaggerated, over-the-top media persona. It is a highly performative role, out of which he rarely steps, and part of his effort to ridicule right-wing media pundits and critique the “mythification of the newscaster” (Gray, 2006, p. 101). In an interview at the Harvard Institute of Politics (2006), Colbert stated that his work takes aim at the “cult of personality,” “megalomania,” and the “monolithic tone and shamelessness” that have arisen within the contemporary news aesthetic. Self-aggrandizement, then, is a primary facet of Colbert’s character – and of his critique.
Equally grand has been Colbert’s reach deep into American politics, media and popular culture. Over the past four years, Colbert has hosted almost all of the US’s most prominent politicians, including Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, Sarah Palin and John McCain, as well as countless senators, congress men and women, authors, and media personalities. His appearance at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner in 2006, while initially ignored by the mainstream media, was widely circulated on the Internet, and voted by media scholars as one of the most important moments of television that year (Mittel, 2006). In 2008, Colbert took the lead of earlier American satirists (see Osborne-Thompson, 2009), and launched a fake run for president that generated huge publicity and more than a million members on the Facebook group “One million strong for Stephen T. Colbert,” started by a 16-year old fan. And in 2009, after taking the program to Iraq for a one-week stint, Colbert guest edited an edition of Newsweek dedicated to the war. Employing his trademark mask of the wilfully ignorant patriot, Colbert quipped:

I know what you're thinking: "Isn't the Iraq War over?" That's what I thought, too. I hadn't seen it in the media for a while, and when I don't see something, I assume it's vanished forever.....Turns out there are still 135,000 troops in Iraq, which I don't understand because we've already won the war. And we've won it so many times. We should win something for the number of times we've won it. We eliminated the weapons of mass destruction by having them not exist. We took out Saddam Hussein—or a really convincing and committed Saddam Hussein double. We helped write the Iraqi Constitution and clearly gave Iraqis the right to bear a lot of arms. And by August of next year we'll withdraw every single one of our troops, leaving behind only memories and 50,000 troops. (Colbert, 2009)

Despite their biting critique of not only American political deception but mainstream media complicity, each of these interventions in the public and political spheres has been widely
reported. During Colbert’s run for presidency, he was interviewed by Tim Russert on NBC’s Meet the Press and appeared as a guest columnist for Maureen Dowd in the New York Times (Osborne-Thompson, 2009), while his editorship at Newsweek was commented on in numerous blogs and newspapers, including the political pages of The Washington Post. Indeed, Colbert’s satire seems to have spread well beyond the borders of his half-hour program, confirming the Associated Press’ (2008) suggestion that Colbert’s is “a kind of satire in action.”

But perhaps more than anything else, Colbert’s larger-than-life persona and his strategic use of hyperbole have had the important effect of breaking down boundaries – between politics and entertainment, news and comedy, television and the internet. According to Geoffrey Baym (2007; 2010), it is exactly boundary-breaking that exemplifies the work of The Colbert Report. Providing the most comprehensive analysis of the program to date, Baym’s textual readings offer insight into Colbert’s complex use of parody, persona and spectacle. Baym begins his interpretation by recognizing the emergence of “a media environment defined by the collapse of previous distinctions among once-differentiated genres, social practices, and discursive fields. In this environment, politics and popular culture, information and entertainment, laughter and argument, the real and the surreal have become deeply inseparable” (2007, p. 15). This “discursive integration” (2007, p. 3) is epitomized, Baym argues, by The Report. We can see this hybridity in numerous aspects of the program, most particularly in the Better Know a District segment, which Baym (2007) analyzes in some detail. Each segment focuses on a different Congressional district and features an interview with its representative, in which Colbert playfully pokes fun at his interviewee, at American politics, and at the obvious partisanship of much right-wing American media. While interviewing Democratic representatives, for example, Colbert routinely asks whether George W. Bush was a great president or the greatest president;
when his interviewees demur or ask for other choices, Colbert pronounces that there are no other choices, and that he’ll “put them down for great.” Speaking with Democratic Representative Darlene Hooley from Oregon, Colbert begins by lampooning both the democratic process and the right’s depiction of Democrats as drug-taking hippies:

Colbert: What does it feel like to represent California's Canada?

Hooley: I represent Oregon.

Colbert: Right, which is the Canada of California. If you prefer, it is Washington's Mexico, if you want to put it that way.

Hooley: It is a fabulous state to represent.

Colbert: Your state is one of the few that has a medical-marijuana program.

Hooley: We do. It was something that the voters voted on.

Colbert: And you think those voters should just get what they want?

Hooley: Sometimes I disagree with them, but I respect their right and their vote has to count.

Colbert: Are you high right now?

Yet for all their absurdity, as Baym argues, these interviews are hardly without value. Indeed, like the rest of the program, Colbert’s deliberate creation of spectacle and his conflation of the silly and the serious work to provide a “satire of provocation” (Baym, 2007, p. 9, italics in original) that uses parody, ironic inversion and discursive integration to denaturalize mainstream media representations and stimulate questions. Arguing against those critics who suggest that the program promotes a cynical attitude to politics by engaging in postmodern forms of theatrical simulation, Baym demonstrates how the segment recasts politics as a form of play not as mere
indulgence, but rather as critique of the right wing’s cynical cooption of postmodern skepticism and its consistent undermining of the deliberative process. His reading of *The Colbert Report* takes us beyond simplified notions of “infotainment” and into more thoughtful reflections on a media landscape marked by “permeability of form and fluidity of content” (Baym, 2010, p. 262). For Baym, this rupture in once tightly-bound discursive genres holds profound possibilities. By blending affective consumption with democratic discourse, hybrid forms of public affairs media like *The Colbert Report* provide imaginative and accessible routes into political discourse and involvement. And in an age in which citizenship appears to be less a matter of civic responsibility than a lifestyle choice (van Zoonen, 2005), such programming also serves the purpose of imbricating politics into leisure time, providing viewers with informational content, political critique and entertainment.

Like Geoffrey Baym, Don Waisanen (2009) views *The Colbert Report* as expansive and complex, locating these characteristics within the program’s distinctive rhetorical styles. For Waisanen, both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are marked by the use of “parodic polyglossia” and “contextual clash” (p. 119). Connecting Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and the polyphonic voice, Waisanen uses polyglossia “to describe the sheer degree of expanded linguistic and vocal capacities” evident in both comedies (p. 122). While Jon Stewart demonstrates this range through frequent shifts in tone and character imitations, Stephen Colbert, more firmly locked into character, still finds inventive ways to multiply discourses – and in doing so, to highlight the complexity of language. As Waisanen observes, this is most apparent in the nightly segment of “The Word,” perhaps the best known and most widely viewed part of the show. Employing a split screen in which Colbert, on the left, lets forth a reactionary rant while written statements on the right comically undermine his speech, The Word is an excellent
example of the playful proliferation of voices that Waisanen writes of, as well as a primer in recognizing the instability of language. But Colbert’s linguistic experiments are evident throughout the program. We see them, for example, in a special feature entitled “Meta-free-for-all,” in which Colbert takes on Sean Penn in a metaphor face-off, hosted by poet Robert Pinsky. Here, the language of poetry, parody and political conviction come together in an anarchic and heady mix, resulting in a powerful statement on the necessity of imagination and metaphor for an ethical discourse of democracy.

Waisanen also suggests that Colbert creates such polyvocal spaces through the use of “contextual clashes,” in which seemingly unconnected contexts and social environments are strategically juxtaposed. A rhetorical tool particularly suited to Colbert’s use of the dramatic persona, contextual clash is evident in Colbert’s absurdist analogies and quick switches. Most often, Colbert drags topics of political significance into the realm of pop culture spectacle and hyper-consumerism. After the election of previously-unknown Republican Scott Brown to the U.S. Senate, for example, Colbert jokes about his appearance in Cosmo magazine, and mistakes him for a series of celebrities and brands, before finally remembering his name. Waisanen also extends the concept of contextual clash to Colbert’s activities outside the half-hour comedy, such as his appearance on The O’Reilly Factor. Colbert’s visit, Waisanen writes, had the effect of displacement, taking “O’Reilly’s deafening discursive style out of the naturalized world of Fox News and into a separate comic world” (p. 134). We can see this conscious construction of incongruity and clash in Colbert’s more recent endeavours too, such as his run for president or his role as editor of Newsweek, in which Colbert brings his out-of-control persona into the rule-bound contexts of politics and news-making in order to open up spaces for critique. Indeed, Waisanen suggests that that is precisely what the rhetorical strategies of *The Colbert Report*
achieve – an expansion of public communication. Through his deliberate play, Colbert not only creates a more pluralistic mode of communication, but invites further inventive expression. Like Baym, Waisanen argues that Colbert’s antics, interventions and linguistic acrobatics “make a vital contribution to the advancement of inclusive and expansive democratic attitudes within society” (p. 121). And like Gray and Hariman, Waisanen argues that this contribution is pedagogical, teaching audiences not only about the complexity of language, genre and meaning, but also about the possibilities of reinterpreting and redirecting political communication.

Both Baym and Waisanen provide nuanced readings of *The Colbert Report*’s discursive strategies, together creating the sense of a program – and a persona – that use parody in productive and border-crossing ways. Each of them also makes a clear case for the democratic potential of *The Colbert Report*. But for all that these two readings achieve, both make little mention of the audience participation that fans, critics and the program’s producers insist is not only unique, but crucial to the parody’s success. And yet it is here, in these highly visible interactions between audiences, producers and texts that we see the dialogic nature of parody at work, here that we encounter parody’s true riskiness. In fact, despite its limitations, it is the work of media effects scholars that point us towards both the need to consider the interactions between text and audience (oversimplified as these may be in such scholarship), and the possibility that *The Colbert Report* is taken up in multiple ways that include not only the expansion of democratic discourse, but also the re-entrenchment of the conservative and reactionary values the program ridicules. As Linda Hutcheon (2002) reminds us, parody is always a doubly-coded address, and matters of reception and context – the social *activation* of parody – add greatly to that complexity. Colbert’s ironic invitations to the audience spin out into a space beyond authorial intentions and production plans: a space where meanings, collectively and contextually
generated, can be neither prescribed nor guaranteed. In the next section, I look more closely at
the way in which the parody’s meanings are shifted through both audience interaction and the
political, economic and technocultural environment in which they are received. I also consider
how a sophisticated text like *The Colbert Report* complicates the notion of participatory culture,
revealing sometimes paradoxical interactions between savvy young viewers who volunteer so
much real time for fake news and corporate producers who are paid to parody their own media
culture.

**The Colbert Report as online participatory parody**

In 2008, the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences named Stephen Colbert
“Webby Person of the Year” for “his pioneering role in utilizing the Internet as a significant tool
for interaction with fans.” Colbert, they wrote, “embodies the true participatory spirit of the
Web,” and to prove it, they listed a number of online pranks, collaborations and events generated
by Colbert and his production team (Stephen Colbert named, 2008). The Award crystallized
what many fans, journalists and critics had already been saying. A year earlier, for example,
journalist Jason Linkins (2007) remarked that Colbert was “harnessing” Web 2.0 concepts
“better than just about anyone else.” Like the Webby award committee, he seemed compelled to
recount a number of these interactions:

User-generated content in the Colbertverse extends out beyond the screen, leaving
pranky, Banksy-esque marks all over the world, in the form of defaced Wiki
pages, hijacked bridge contests, and annual report-strewn hockey arenas. It’s
become a vital part of the show – Colbert Nation ready and willing to be the
puckish id to their host’s ballooning ego.
While the Webby award committee are certainly right to allude to something unique in Colbert’s use of the internet, their remarks about “the true participatory spirit of the Web” remain unproblematised. Similarly, while Linkins’ description captures the range, quantity and downright whimsy of Colbert’s invitations to his audience, his list is far from complete, leaving out, for example, the many forms of participation generated by fans themselves. My aim in these next few pages, then, is to record the Colbert Nation’s participatory activity (itself a daunting and always incomplete task), and to analyze these interactions, asking what they reveal about participatory culture and the digital circulation of power. As in the previous chapter, I begin with an inventory of interactions between users, producers and texts, arising from the belief that the specific material practices that accompany particular texts signify corporate priorities, producers’ interpellation of their audience, and audiences’ own identities and communities. Similar to *Gossip Girl*, these interactions take place on a variety of sites, both fan-run and corporately-owned, and are initiated by fans and producers alike, although given the corporate appropriation of fan content and concepts, the distinctions between these two categories are far from clear. Nonetheless, while acknowledging the complications of origin, attribution and completion on the web, viewers of *The Colbert Report*:

- Create and submit video remixes of the program to “Green Screen Challenges” in the hope that they will be broadcast. Such challenges have included invitations to remix Colbert as a Jedi warrior, to “make John McCain exciting,” and to mash up Colbert’s interview with copyright scholar Lawrence Lessig.

- Make their own video remixes of the program and upload these to *YouTube* or other video-hosting sites such as Daily Motion. These videos may combine content from various sources, including *The Colbert Report, The Daily Show* and *Anderson Cooper 360°*.

- Use “The Colbert Nation Interview Simulator” on the official Colbert Nation website to create videos of themselves being interviewed by Colbert. Finished videos are featured on the website, but not the broadcast itself.
• Vote for Stephen Colbert in online contests. Colbert has requested that fans name a Hungarian bridge, a Canadian hockey mascot and a node on the NASA space station after him.

• Take part in Google-bombing escapades, such as making the Colbert Nation website the first hit for the phrase “Greatest Living American.”

• Change Wikipedia pages at Colbert’s behest. Colbert has suggested changes to the number of elephants in Africa, as well as redefining reality to read “reality has become a commodity.”

• Discuss The Colbert Report on both corporately-owned and fan-run discussion sites that address television, popular culture, fandom, media and/or American politics.

• Create their own sites devoted to the program, such as the widely-read blog “No Fact Zone” or the web comic “Fake News Rumble.”

• Start and join Facebook groups devoted to Stephen Colbert, such as “One Million Strong for Stephen T. Colbert” created by a fan after Colbert announced his run for president.

• Contribute to the fan-run Colbert Report wiki, known as “Wikiality.”

• Receive and comment on Colbert Report Facebook and Twitter updates, provided by both Comedy Central and independent fans.

• Buy Colbert-related merchandise, such as books, comics, DVDs, t-shirts, baseball hats, posters, and comics on the corporate Colbert Nation site.

• Circulate clips from The Colbert Report via email, social networking sites and content aggregation sites.

• Post clips from The Colbert Report on fan, personal and political blogs, with accompanying commentary.

• Photoshop pictures of Stephen Colbert using photographs provided on the Colbert Nation website for this purpose, such as the Stephen Colbert Christmas card (see Figure 8)

• Create and circulate fan art featuring pictures of Stephen Colbert (see Figure 8)
As with the digital interactivity that surrounds *Gossip Girl*, current media theories that emphasize migration and flux are helpful in grasping certain elements of this list. Brooker’s (2001) notion of overflow once again captures the sheer quantity and continuous expansion of such texts, and gestures towards their fluidity, as they move with ease across not only media platforms, but also, as Baym notes, discursive boundaries, mingling political, entertainment and fan discourses. Henry Jenkins’ expanded notion of convergence is also visible in the overlap between television and the internet, and users and producers, while his more recent concept of “spreadability” (2009) – the grassroots distribution of digital content by engaged media users – captures the agency and activity of users as they seek to create meaning and community on the
web. Indeed, much of the scholarly attention given to participation arising from screen satire – and *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* in particular – has focused on the user-generated circulation of popular bite-size comedy clips. In his reflections on fake news’ ability to create real public dialogue, for example, Geoffrey Baym (2010) carefully traces the circulation of Jon Stewart’s interview with CBS foreign correspondent Lara Logan. Following the clip and accompanying commentary on its multiple trajectories through the mainstream press, alternative media, *YouTube* and a host of small blogs, Baym argues for the emergence of a new media landscape characterized by horizontal, networked exchanges and by users for whom “corporate media products are resources to be reappropriated: reedited, recontextualized, and recirculated among an emergent public sphere” (p. 153). In her examination of online reaction to Stewart’s appearance on *Crossfire*, Megan Boler (2006) similarly notes the ways in which users – by circulating, posting and discussing the event – amplify and engage with texts in ways not possible through mass media formats.

But while both these analyses provide excellent examples of “spreadable media” (Jenkins, 2009) that migrate due to users’ sense of urgency, interest and agency, and illustrate one significant form of interactivity, it is no accident that both centre on the circulation of material related to *The Daily Show*. Indeed, although it is the direct offspring of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* creates a distinctively different set of digital interactions, both more orchestrated and more chaotic. This difference results from the intersection of a number of factors: Colbert’s deliberate (even if ironic) attempts to build an enthusiastic fan base as a counterpart to his boisterous persona, the program’s unique use of hyperbole, play and high jinks and its appeal to younger viewers, and parody’s own complicity with the discourses it critiques. Theories which emphasize flow, proliferation and circulation may overlook tensions between
users and producers which arise in such contexts, tensions over issues such as containment, free labour and profit-making. They may also miss the ways in which these issues are themselves complicated (and sometimes rewritten) by parody’s destabilizing mockery and the audience’s correspondingly unpredictable response. It makes sense to trace some of the issues arising from *The Report’s* unique participatory culture by considering the program’s earliest attempts to build an audience and to create interaction through, in Colbert’s words, “the internets.”

In the summer of 2006, less than a year after Colbert first named his audience the heroes of late night television viewing, the parodist called on viewers to do more than just watch TV. In the first of what would become an ongoing series of interactive invitations, Colbert encouraged viewers to change Wikipedia entries in order to demonstrate “Wikiality,” defined as the idea that "together we can create a reality that we all agree on.” Next, Colbert called upon audience members to vote online to name two rather different objects after him: a bridge in Hungary and the mascot for the junior hockey team Saginaw Spirit. Days later, he issued his first “Green Screen Challenge,” an invitation for viewers to remix footage of Colbert jousting with a lightsaber in front of a green screen. All four events – for that was how they were promoted – received an outpouring of audience response. Viewers responded to Colbert’s wiki experiments in such numbers that Wikipedia administrators restricted edits to the targeted pages; the Saginaw Spirit eagle mascot was indeed renamed the “Steagle Colbeagle the Eagle”; the Hungarian Ministry of Transportation received 17 million votes to name their newest bridge after Colbert; and the Green Screen Challenge garnered countless entries from eager fans. The invitations also produced a deluge of critical praise from online commentators. That fall, Mark Glaser (2006), writer for the PBS blog *MediaShift*, enthused in an open letter to Colbert, “you have been a bright and shining star of Internet experimentation, freedom of expression online, and prankster
extraordinaire in the long tradition of online pranksters. In fact, your track record online is awe-inspiring, stunning and a beacon of perfection for any wannabe entertainment outfit trying to find their sea legs on the Internets.”

*The Colbert Report*’s internet experiments did indeed turn out to be influential, not only in solidifying Stephen Colbert’s reputation as “a bright and shining star” in the digital firmament, but also in establishing a set of practices that became a model for other broadcasters and the foundation for the program’s own interactivity. Probing this list of early invitations, we begin to discern significant patterns in the circulation of digital power, just as we did with *Gossip Girl*’s online extensions. Here, I want to explore two related processes that appear particularly relevant to *The Colbert Report* and its fervent young audience: commercial strategies that direct audiences’ participatory desires towards producers’ imperatives, and the exploitation of user labour. As I will argue in Part 2, these processes do not entirely erase the potential for audiences to engage critically and creatively with The Report’s comedy. They do, however, represent significant aspects of the ongoing commercialization of digital space and call into question the widespread rhetoric of democracy that attends even Colbert’s ironic invitations to “be part of the show.”

In his study of fan productivity on *Television without Pity*, Mark Andrejevic (2008) argues that digital interactivity frequently functions as “an invitation to internalize the imperatives of producers,” (p. 34) casting audiences in the role of (unpaid) assistants. While I want to take up the very real questions of employment and labour in a moment, I first want to consider the manner in which Colbert Report producers re-route audience enthusiasm and activity toward the ends of free content, promotion and profit. We can see this, for example, in the development of the Green Screen Challenge. Far from being the innovation of Colbert Report
producers, the Challenge in fact originated in fan practices. According to Peter Gwinn (2006), a writer for the show, the morning after Colbert’s televised performance as a saber-wielding Jedi, several mash-ups of the clip appeared on YouTube, as audience members watching the program on digital platforms saved and then remixed the segment with background images and sounds, independent of any instruction or invitation. Days later, Colbert featured a number of these videos on his program, and announced “The Green Screen Challenge,” in which viewers were encouraged – this time officially – to remix the original footage and submit, in Colbert’s words, “bold depictions of my heroic fight” (see Figure 9).

![Figure 9. (Right) Colbert appears as a sabre-wielding Jedi on the August 10, 2006 episode of The Colbert Report (Left) Bonnie Rose’s remix of Colbert as baseball-bat wielding patriot in her video “Freedom Fighter” (Images from http://ccinsider.comedycentral.com and http://www.dvdizzy.com).](image)

As the challenge continued, so too did efforts to channel audience response and productivity towards the interests of Comedy Central and the program’s producers. As suggested in relation to The CW’s remix “lab,” providing viewers with footage to recombine asserts control over the kind of representations that will be created. In the case of The Colbert Report, the green screen footage played perfectly into the program’s mock-heroic tone. Another important aspect
of the challenge was the set of instructions on how to submit remixes. Although fans’ initial videos were uploaded to YouTube, after the official contest was announced, entries could only be uploaded onto The Colbert Nation site, where they were showcased. This containment strategy brought more viewers to the program’s official site, and kept videos from being uploaded to YouTube, where attention – and thus profits – would migrate to YouTube’s owner Google.

Finally, the videos themselves were used as a way of limiting possible interpretations of the footage. During the run of the contest, Colbert featured several of the remixes on the program, as a way, in his words, to “inspire” viewers. While these broadcasts may indeed have encouraged viewers, and were remarked upon by critics like Rachel Sklar (2006) as signs of audience-empowering convergence, they almost certainly directed future videos towards very particular kinds of representation.

We can see this in the submissions themselves. Although they could not avoid representing Colbert as a saber-wielding hero given the clip they were required to work with, most of the remixers whole-heartedly took up the images and narratives preferred by the show’s writers and producers. This is evident in a compilation of videos that Colbert played on the evening the winner was announced. Bears, Nancy Pelosi, Dick Cheney – all the program’s in-jokes that fans revel in – make repeat performances. The final winning entry, in particular, recreates the program’s visual and narrative codes. Entitled “Freedom Fighter” (Bonnie R 2006), the remix replicates the program’s main motifs, including screaming eagles and American flags, while its loose storyline – Colbert vs. the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – reproduces the binary of good and evil the show satirizes. That the remix’s creator, Bonnie R., interprets the Comedy Central logo that appears over her televised video as a marker of success rather than the “reterritorialization” of her text (see Figure 10) confirms Andrejevic’s (2008) observation that
interactivity as it is currently configured “fosters identification…with the viewpoint of producers” (p. 27) and with the power of the brand.

Figure 10. Still taken from Bonnie R’s winning video, appearing at the end of her blog entry “I won the Green Screen Challenge!” Caption on right added by Bonnie R. (Image from http://www.quickstopentertainment.com/2006/10/16/i-won-the-stephen-colbert-green-screen-challenge/)

This process of monitoring and harnessing audience activity is also apparent in later digital experiments, from the “Interview Simulator,” which allowed viewers to produce videos of themselves being interviewed by Colbert, to the collection of photoshoppable images of Colbert meant to be altered and circulated by fans. While we might read these invitations as a sign of producers’ responsiveness to viewers’ increased appetite to interact with the text, and as an indication of “closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 18), we must also recognize the way in which officially-sanctioned and legitimimized forms of interactivity interrupt the impetus towards spontaneous and unstructured creativity, bringing audiences’ diverse efforts into line with producers’ more singular interests. Drawing fans into the production process also creates free programmable content and digital
marketing at a moment when the television industry is experiencing unprecedented financial uncertainty (Lotz, 2007), requiring us to consider questions of labour, compensation and exploitation.

In her ground-breaking essay published in 2000, Tiziana Terranova captures the paradoxes at the heart of free digital labour. She notes that users’ productive activities “are pleasurabley embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (p. 37) and that affective labour is produced not as a response to the needs of capital, but rather as the result of a complex net of desires and associations that take place within capitalism. In the decade since, questions about affect, agency and digital labour have only multiplied, and are answered in a variety of ways. In their study of the fan labour poured into promoting independent music, for example, Nancy Baym and Robert Burnett (2009) argue that fans’ own explanations of the pleasure and social value created by their work cannot be dismissed, and that these complicate and even negate claims of exploitation. Similarly, in their analysis of user labour in game development, John Banks and Sal Humphreys (2008) recognize “the uneven power relations that exist between enterprise and user creators” but maintain that “if there is to be any chance of evening up the power relations, users must be understood as having agency” (p. 415). In a very different vein, Kylie Jarrett (2008) argues that the reflex to view users’ productivity as an expression of counterpower must be rethought in the context of neoliberalism, and she suggests that the subjects created through user labour may be exactly the kinds of flexible and compliant workers required for global capitalism. But while digital theorists’ interpretations of the dilemmas posed by free labour may vary widely, there do appear to be areas of overlap. These include a general turn towards ethnographic studies of user labour, in an effort to grant actors “the ability to make up their own theories”(Latour, 2005, cited in Banks & Deuze, 2009). They
also include widespread agreement about the extraordinarily disruptive potential of user labour – to destabilize conventional binaries between work and recreation, for example, and to call into question industrial era definitions of production, labour and exploitation.

*The Colbert Report’s* participatory experiments are an exemplary site of just such changing production practices, and to overlook questions of labour here would be to turn away from the power relations evident in Comedy Central’s increased solicitation of user-generated content. It would also be to overlook the surprising number of digital traces that mark the program’s experiments as sites of simultaneous labour and play. Indeed, Colbert himself acknowledged the expenditure of time and effort to create Green Screen remixes, teasingly telling his viewers, “If you haven’t even started your Green Screen entry yet, hop to it, time is running out. Better lock yourself in your rec room, pop open a bag of Cheetos and catheterize yourself. You are not leaving that computer.” Fans themselves also describe their efforts on behalf of the “Colbert Nation” in ways that illustrate the evocative title of a recent conference – “The internet as playground and factory” (Scholz, 2009). A typical participant in the Hungarian Bridge vote, for example, admits to the tremendous amount of time she spent in sending multiple votes to the Hungarian website from different computers, a digital task that is unusually repetitive and factory-like but also, she contends, “interesting” and “fun.”

Bonnie R., the winner of the Green Screen Challenge, provides a particularly clear account of user labour in language that moves with ease across the domains of the affective, social and economic. In a special guest entry entitled “I won the Green Screen Challenge!” for the blog Quick Stop Entertainment, Bonnie begins her story by emphasizing the time, skill and education the remix required, and she describes putting every spare minute into the project, estimating that the entire process took 60 to 70 hours. She also gives readers an account of her
production practice, which includes not only technical labour, but also the process of getting copyright permission for all the materials used, including songs, special effects and visuals. But although she doesn’t shy away from describing her own labour and skill, Bonnie also makes clear the important emotional and social dimensions of her experience. Her motivation appears to come from her love of the program, the feedback she received from other fans, and the possibility of having her entry aired to a wide audience. She describes the feelings of anticipation, anxiety and excitement she felt after she submitted the video, and during the exchange of emails with producers. Similarly, after winning the contest, value is ascribed to the text and the experience through notions of belonging and community. Bonnie writes that as she watched her own video being broadcast, she thought to herself “It’s one of The Colbert Report’s longest-running experiments, it’s being played out for the enjoyment of all, and this time I’m not just watching it on TV, I’m participating in it!” She also notes that after the broadcast, “the emails started flooding in, from friends, family, and even a dear old friend.” That Bonnie ends her entry with a joke about not winning a job offer returns us to the beginning of her narrative and gestures, however tentatively, towards questions of employment and professionalization and tensions between the amateur and the expert. Overall, Bonnie’s story – with its description of work and emotion and its undertone of expectation – brings to mind Banks’ and Humphreys’ (2008) observation that user-led production is “contested,” “messy” and “driven by a diverse range of motivations” (p. 415) and that it opens up a new “terrain of negotiation and power relations” (p. 402).

Within this new terrain, exploitation remains a possibility, although as part of the landscape of mandatory social participation it will almost certainly take novel forms that require new kinds of theorizing. But at the same time we recognize emerging corporate strategies of
appropriation, control and use, we must also recognize the possibility for audiences to transform social and political relations and produce new texts. This may be especially true in the case of parody which, as I outlined earlier, has been credited with significant potential to evoke dialogue and create change. Still, as Linda Hutcheon and her postmodern sensibility remind us, the route between ironic intentions and audience reception is never a direct one, and participatory culture makes that path even more slippery. While audiences may indeed use parody to critically re-evaluate dominant discourses, they may also misunderstand, reject or redirect it towards ends that are far from critical. In the second half of this chapter, I explore the youthful audience’s use of *The Colbert Report* discussion boards to create community, content, and forms of argument that both push against and reproduce dominant relations. I also investigate young users’ struggles to assert control within the corporately-owned dialogical spaces they’ve helped to shape, and to make real digital pop’s rhetorical promise of interactivity.

**Part II: Talking Back to Comedy Central: Fans, Corporate Platforms, and the Administration of Dialogue**

For Bakhtin, parody was an essential element of the carnivalesque and the overthrow of official order. As Mikita Hoy (1992) argues, the medieval carnivalesque’s textual and social equivalent can now be located in contemporary popular culture – in shopping malls, style magazines, pop music and dance halls. Certainly parody’s ability to stir up the playful, the performative, the irreverent and the downright indecent is evident in the popular discussion boards that have sprung up around *The Colbert Report*. In this second half of the chapter, I explore the Colbert Nation forums, a space in which we might trace the intersection of parody’s dialogic impulse, young people’s quest for online community, and audiences’ attempts to negotiate with corporate producers over the design and content of official sites. My aims for this
section are three-fold. As I did with vidding, I want to create a detailed picture of one more form of interactivity – in this case, the online dialogue generated by a pop culture text. I also want to provide a sense of young people’s digital activities, and to reiterate once again young people’s desire to create communities and identities through their agentic engagements with popular culture, even when, as Paul Willis (2003) reminds us, these may reproduce rather than reverse oppressive cultural scripts. Finally, I want to illustrate young people’s growing ability to address – and occasionally influence – corporate media producers. In order to accomplish these aims, I begin with a brief look at the discussion board as an interactive platform. I then turn to the Colbert Nation discussion boards themselves, considering their short but turbulent history and their relationship to parody as a lively site of audience dialogue that regularly spills over the boundaries of authorized discourse. Finally, I recount the ongoing tension between discussion board users, moderators and administrators in regard to the issue of corporate control, tensions that reveal the boards as a locus of struggle over the meanings of parody, dialogue and interactivity. Although most of my observations here arise out of time spent reading the boards, my reading itself was informed by interviews with Kevin Smith, one of the long-time fan moderators on the board, and DB Ferguson, webmaster for the popular Colbert blog No Fact Zone, both of whom provided valuable insight into the boards, fan activities and user-producer relations.

Discussion boards and interactivity

Online discussion represents a significant form of interactivity, and discussion boards an equally significant site of sociability. While we might be tempted to place discussion boards within a narrative of technological progress, reading their asynchronous online interaction as the precursor to current social networking sites that have ultimately surpassed them, such a view
would be mistaken. In fact, perhaps because they lack the restrictive “participatory templates” (Mejias, 2010) of social networking platforms like Twitter, the popularity of message boards has not been diminished. Many newer platforms like Facebook actually incorporate discussion board-like features into their design, reminding us that residual, dominant and emerging technologies co-exist and commingle. Discussion boards also capture much of the “immediacy, responsiveness and social presence” (Livingstone & Lievrow, 2006, p. 7) that are associated with digital technologies, and for many reasons make an apt place to explore a politics of interactivity. To begin, they provide a site through which to consider issues of relationship on the internet. Nancy Baym (2006) writes that online groups have long been associated with community, and as her own studies of Usenet groups and fan sites demonstrate, discussion forums offer a contained and concrete medium through which to pose critical questions about practices of community-building on the web. Discussion boards also provide a space in which to examine current configurations of media convergence. At its simplest level, we might note the number of discussion boards dedicated to dialogue about other forms of media, such as television, film, computers and gaming. More complex is the growing multimodality of discussion boards, as they shift to encompass embedded video, art work, flash images and sound clips, transformations that are often generated by users themselves. Finally, the recent sale of a number of independent discussion boards to large corporations, as well as the shift of users from vibrant online forums to shopping destinations and “light virtual communities,” (McCourt & Burkart, 2007, p. 269) exemplifies broader trends in the commodification of participation. Far from being an anachronism, discussion boards are in fact an ideal space to investigate the current politics of participatory culture.
Amongst the countless topics addressed on discussion boards, sites devoted to fandom and organized around responses to pop culture texts are both popular and widely researched. Some scholars have taken up the fan discussion board as a topic of inquiry in itself, probing its participatory possibilities and limitations. Mark Andrejevic (2007), for example, argues that the promise of media democratization extended by fan forums is seriously eroded by the presence of data mining and the exploitation of fan labour. June Deery (2003), on the other hand, examining online discussion of television on both network and unofficial fan sites, locates a “deep interactivity” within participants’ practices (p. 171). This interactivity, she writes, occurs when discussion board users influence a show or broadcaster, and she cites WB’s decision to extend the run of teen favourite *Roswell* after widespread online fan-lobbying as an example. Jenkins (2006) finds similar examples of participatory communities in his observations of the online spoiler community on *Survivor Sucks*. Within these forums, Jenkins argues, fans work together to solve problems and riddles posed by the reality program, and he theorizes that new forms of political organizing and knowledge production might arise out of such collective exercises. Finally, in his examination of online discussion around the controversial satire *The Boondocks*, Santo (2009) argues that popular entertainment sites like online forums need to be taken seriously as sites of political engagement. To demonstrate, he applies critical discourse analysis to the content of fan posts, uncovering the presence of a Black American cultural citizenship that attempts to reign in difference through recourse to nostalgia and populist rhetoric. Santo’s detailed readings of online threads reveal message boards to be rich repositories of public dialogue around a host of social issues, including citizenship, identity, history, race and racism. In my discussion of the Colbert Nation boards, I bring a concern for both the online forum as a specific form of interactivity, and the content of the forums as it reflects and constitutes young
people’s understanding of politics and parody. In the brief history that follows, I attempt to capture some of the changes to the boards’ technology, content and community over the past four years, before delving more deeply into the struggles between the boards as sites of community-building and corporate profit-making.

“We did our own thing”: A history of the Colbert Nation message boards

The official forums for *The Colbert Report* are located on the program’s corporate website, *The Colbert Nation*. When it first appeared in October 2005, *The Colbert Nation* was a deceptively simple – and somewhat deceptive – site. In its banner, it declared itself “The #1 and #2 Colbert Report fan site.” In its appearance, it was oddly amateur, very different from the slick corporate websites that accompany most television programs. Its apparent webmaster was “Avery Gordon,” a young, accident-prone, overweight fan who reportedly lived in his mother’s basement, and who updated the blog infrequently and entertained visitors with his artistic ineptitude, captured in his fondness for Microsoft Paint graphics. The following two posts from the Colbert Nation’s first year are typical of Avery’s youthful character, awkward tone and adoring fannishness:

What a great show last night! My viewing experience was a little different because I watched at my friend Seth’s house, and Seth has TiVo! I’ve wanted this sooo bad for the longest time, but of course my mom won’t let us get one because she thinks pausing TV is unnatural and refuses to pay for something that isn’t live. Whatever, that hasn’t stopped her from snapping up every Dynasty VHS tape on eBay. (October 19, 2005)

Last night, as I munched on some White Castle and watched Stephen do a perfect show, I got to thinking about what makes the perfect hamburger. Would it have two medium-well patties, smothered in bacon, cheddar, and bleu cheese dressing?
Or would it be a half-pound ground Angus steakburger smothered in fried onions, pickles, and extra virgin olive oil? And what if I’m eating with Stephen — wouldn’t that make any hamburger the perfect hamburger?! I liked that answer, until I considered that maybe he’s offering me a choice of hamburgers. I’d probably just want whatever he ordered! (November 4, 2005)

Avery’s posts, and the accompanying low-tech graphics and web design have multiple and sometimes contradictory effects. In the context of The Colbert Report, they can only be interpreted as parody – in this case, not a parody of right-wing American newscasters, but an audience of geeky and inept fanboys who idolize celebrity and pop culture. And yet it is a somewhat puzzling parody – is the target of its satire the imagined audience of Stephen Colbert’s persona, the actual audience, or perhaps fandom itself? Because of its ambiguity, Avery’s fanboy persona has the effect of interpellating his – and Colbert’s audience more generally – as nebbish fans, despite the element of parody, evident, for example, in Avery’s frequent references to shared experiences and his reinforcement of Colbert’s address to his audience as a unified “nation” of “it-getters.” Another result of producers’ decision to employ a satirical fan persona is the potential slippage from parody to appropriation and even deception. In a contemporary media environment in which the cooption of fan practices is increasingly common, and many seeming fan sites are actually corporately-owned, Comedy Central’s decision to employ a fan voice, however exaggerated, cannot be read as separate from profit-making and commodification. This is amplified by the fact that Comedy Central’s ownership of the site in these early days was somewhat difficult to detect on a casual visit to the site – an experience I have had confirmed by others – and pushes the satire towards the edge of deception. As Wired blogger Scott Thill (2008) succinctly put it, the early Colbert Nation website, with Avery as webmaster, suffered
from a “a befuddling separation from the show,” that made many fans feel, as one reader commented, that they were “being talked down to” (No Fact Zone, 2007).

In July 2006, a message board known as the Colboard was added to the Colbert Nation website. After Colbert mentioned the new board on the program, more than 1500 viewers registered. The Colboards were administered by Avery who was also a moderator, although within a few months, other moderators would be chosen from amongst the most frequent users of the site. The site was set up with 12 forums, listed below with the brief descriptions provided by the developers. Also included are the number of posts in each forum in July 2007, one year after the Colboards appeared:

*The Colbert Report*: Talk about the show in here! (81,194 posts)

*Stephen, The Books*: This is the place to talk about books you like, recommend books to somebody else, and also learn to read books. Check it out! (1,359 posts)

*Conventional Wisdom*: This is the place where fans go to discuss the possibility of discussing the Colbert show--but on the messageboard of real life! (1,915 posts)

*Stephen, The Man*: Here's where you talk about Stephen Colbert! Why you like him, pictures you have of him, stuff like that! (16,482 posts)

*Stephen, The Work*: Talk about Stephen's other work in here! The stuff that also changed the world, just to a lesser extent. (4,041 posts)

*Political Discussion*: Talk about politics in here. How about this two-party system?! (32, 440 posts)

*Conspiracy Theories*: It turns out there are kind of a lot of these! (20,921 posts)

*Fan Fiction/Art/Games*: This is the place to post all your Stephen Fan Fiction, Fan Art, and Fan Games! Pretty self-explanatory! (3,980 posts)

*Off Topic*: Here's where you can talk about stuff not related to the Report or politics. Like prom! (73,195 posts)

*Spam*: Whether you've got something to sell or just want to bother people, this the forum for you! (88,570 posts)
Suggestions: Feel free to leave helpful suggestions and constructive criticism in here. (2,907 posts)

Religion: This is the place to discuss issues of religion, whenever you feel like that's something you have to do! (10, 308 posts)

As with any discussion board, the assigned forums channel dialogue. While users can shift the focus of forums by starting new threads and derailing established ones – as users of the Colboards most certainly did – the forums nonetheless play a role in conveying appropriate topics for conversation. Here, for example, we see that the forums interpellate users as fans who not only want to talk about the program, but also want to discuss Stephen Colbert himself, as well as create art, fan fiction and games dedicated to him. Colbert’s critique of American politics and media – the very core of the program’s parody – are represented through the political forum, but an official space for discussion of media is noticeably absent, as is a place to address satire and parody. By looking at the number of posts, we might also begin to get a sense of what users themselves wanted from the Colboards. Besides the spam forum, the most popular boards at this time were “The Colbert Report” forum with 81,194 posts and the “Off Topic” forum, with 73,195 posts. These numbers reveal what would be an on-going pattern on the board – a desire to talk about the program itself but also to talk about anything other than the program. Indeed, as I shall demonstrate in the next section, the users of the Colboards created a dialogic space they saw as a continuation of Stephen Colbert’s satire – a playful, sociable, critical, carnivalesque and occasionally obscene dialogue that overflowed the boundaries of authorized conduct. And as will also become apparent, this is not quite the dialogue Comedy Central producers had in mind.

The Colboards operated for more than two years, and amassed a sizeable following. According to the Colboard archive, the number of registered users reached 56,630. While this figure hardly represents the number of people who used the site regularly, it does point towards
the board’s popularity in its early days. It is also clear from both the site itself and from interviews that a community was created on the boards, one in which there was a shared language, declarations of friendship and a common appreciation for satire and *The Colbert Report*. The off-topic forum, in particular, became a place where regular users met up to chat about a variety of topics, and exchange banter that included in-jokes, frequent teasing and occasional flaming. Community members also met outside of the Colboards. In 2008, for example, a group of regular users set up their own discussion board using open source software. *Rogue Nation*, as it was known, was used as a back-up whenever the Colboards went down, and also became a way to communicate with those members who were banned from the official site. Many Colboard users also met up face to face, often to attend tapings of the show together in New York City (Smith, personal communication, November 24 2009). Because the administration of the boards was light, and even at times non-existent, users largely “did [their] own thing, made fan content, all the stuff the show is now famous for” (Smith, personal communication, November 24 2009). Along with their creativity, the boards also gained a reputation for their “Lord of the Flies” (Ferguson, personal communication, March 5 2007) atmosphere, in which newcomers were sometimes made to feel unwelcome, or even insulted if they didn’t “get” the boards’ unspoken rules, Colbert’s parody or the regular members’ energetically ribald tone.

In 2008, however, things began to change, as Comedy Central realized that it “had a resource they weren’t exploiting enough” (K. Smith, personal communication, November 24 2009). Along with a number of other changes that included the addition of 2,800 videos to the Colbert Nation site (part of the centralization of Colbert Report and Daily Show clips on Viacom-owned sites), plans to relaunch the Colboards were made. The new discussion boards
would be linked to the “Colbert Community” pages, where fans had to register and begin a home page before posting to the forums. In a review of the site prepared prior to the changes, fan moderators aegisknight and jray noted that “the membership had grown very ‘rowdy’ in the absence of an administrator and lenient moderation policies, which over time began to alienate current members, prompting them to leave.” Their proposed reforms to address this problem included creating separate spaces for fan girls, tougher moderation politics, and the addition of a “Flame Club” and a “Veterans Lounge” for regular users who liked to “push the line” (Policy Recommendations for the Colbert Nation, aegisknight, 2009). As I will discuss later, many regular users of the Colboards were reluctant to move to the new forums, where they would have to re-register, supply more personal information and, they worried, abide by stricter rules.

Despite some users’ protestations, however, the Colboards became read-only in January 2009, replaced by the Colbert Nation boards (see Figure 11). Forums were now divided into three sections – Everything Colbert, Off-Topic and Site Issues. The Everything Colbert forums were set up for discussing the program, as well as Stephen Colbert himself; the Off-topic forums included spaces devoted to “Politics in General,” “Op Ed” and “Chit chat”; and the Site Issues forum addressed user concerns and technical problems. In May 2010, the most popular of these forums was the Chit Chat forum with 36,753 posts, suggesting that many regular members continued to use the boards as a place to socialize. Regular users were also able to participate in the private Fangirls Lair and Veterans Lounge forums, which could only be entered by requesting and receiving access from the administrator. Another new feature included rankings, in which levels of involvement were recognized through the addition of titles that appeared after a user’s name, such as “Alphadog” for a member with more than 250 posts or “Formidable Opponent” for more than 1000 posts.
The new Colbert Nation message boards operated uneventfully for many months. While there continued to be grumbling about fangirl and off-topic forums excluding newcomers, little changed, and the site appeared to hold on to many regular members and attract new ones. In November 2009, however, a new administrator was hired, sending the boards into crisis. More heavy-handed than earlier administrators, the new administrator banned a number of long-time members, locked threads and deleted posts that contained criticism of his decisions or of Comedy Central policies (Smith, personal communication, November 24 2009). One user, describing the situation to a new member a few months later, explained:

They [the exiled users] were banned from questioning the previous administrator about everything, the previous administrator would delete any post that questioned his bizarre running of the place, the previous administrator would post abusive and inflammatory posts about other members, the previous administrator would misquote and misrepresent what people would post.
In the face of these expulsions, deletions and lock-downs, regular users took action, contacting Comedy Central to complain and ask for remediation. While I will discuss these requests in more detail later, it is important to note here that the users’ attempts were successful, and that the administrator was soon replaced.

Currently, some months after the crisis, it appears that several regular users remain banned, or have simply chosen not to return. Many members lament the absence of their friends, and write about a sense of lost community. The feeling that users have increasingly less control over their space was exacerbated by a note from administrators in May 2010, declaring that the boards would once again change, with all threads prior to June 20 becoming read only, and the introduction of a new platform on July 1. Before turning to look more closely at the interactions that have taken place between users and producers concerning these changes, I want to survey the threads themselves, in order to give a more vivid sense of the kinds of conversations that took place there, and their relation to *The Report* and the genre of parody.

“*Y’all got any?*” Enacting satire on the Colboards

Robert Hariman (2008), reflecting on parody’s public, writes that parody is “offered to anyone who might be played for a laugh, that is, anyone in the most wide-open, mixed-up, unfettered public audience” (p. 255). Certainly the users of the Colbert forums can be seen as that unfettered crowd, ready to be played for a laugh, but also, with Colbert’s prompting, ready to take part in creating their own laughter. Like Colbert’s comedy, the boards’ humour is by turns silly and satirical. It is also less political, more profane, more bawdy and more bodily than Colbert’s brand of irony. Indeed, to read the Colbert forums, particularly in their first iteration as the Colboards, is to see Colbert’s parody exuberantly received – and just as exuberantly redirected.
We can see the way fans both replicate and reroute Colbert’s humour by examining the content and interactional style of specific threads and posts. The “Offbeat opening lines” thread on the original Colboards, for example, demonstrates how users adopted elements of the television program to create their own parodies, reminding us of Hariman’s suggestion that parodic texts invite – or perhaps challenge – audiences to join in the displacement of official texts. The thread began when a regular poster, riffing off of Colbert’s typical opening line, wrote a series of alternate introductions. These included “Whether you smoke the grass or take it up the ass, there's truth for all who attend this class. It's The Colbert Report!” and “If wishes were fishes, we'd all cast nets. And if truth was a shark's tooth, you're a dead motherfucker. It's The Colbert Report!” At the end of the list, the poster includes a succinct invitation to follow suit: “Y'all got any?” Over the next three weeks, twenty-eight other users would respond, either as writers of opening lines or commentators, in a thread that includes 141 posts. Some posters took up the themes and language of the program itself, for example in this poster’s take on “truthiness”: “Sometimes the truth is best served cold. Tonight, it’s freeeezing. This is The Colbert Report!” In most cases, though, the posters use the original poster’s example of “offbeat” lines to reflect many of the community’s favourite topics - sexuality, drugs, and race, as well as its penchant for profanity and bodily humour. “I’m the nation’s Viagara and tonight you’re gonna get a Colbert-rection. This is The Colbert Report!” writes one poster, while another offers up “Put down the colbong and pick up some brownies, this is the Colbert Report!”

Although the target of Colbert’s humour is most often right-wing politics and media, the target of these lines is far more diffuse. In fact, rather than providing a critique of contemporary conditions, the effect of these parodies is more simply to level all forms of authority, official order and respectability through profanity, ridicule and reference to taboo subjects. As is also
quite clear, in many cases, the boards’ humour reinscribes misogyny, racism and homophobia, as in one poster’s offering of “Bitches get stitches when I drop my britches. This is *The Colbert Report*, NIGGA!” Here and throughout the boards, we are reminded not only of Hutcheon’s argument that one of the dangers of parody is that it may reproduce those discourses it sets out to ridicule, but also her observation that ironic meanings are never guaranteed, and in the hands of the audience, may be altogether reconceived.

The thread also demonstrates the combination of camaradie, encouragement and insult that characterizes users’ interactions across the site. Many of the twenty-eight users who posted to the thread praise the contributions of individuals and the group as a whole. “Those are hilarious! (shocked smiley graphic) Hot stuff, quicktrigga” writes the second poster in the thread, praising the first poster’s openings. Referring to Colbert, another poster writes “LMFAO! Oh my God, if he said that I would die laughing (laughing smiley).” Midway through the thread, the original poster sums up the success of the challenge by posting simply “Such a talented nation.” While the thread exhibits less name-calling than is found elsewhere on the site, it still harbours a number of familiar jests and put-downs. An exchange between two posters, one who identifies as a gay male and the other as straight, for example, courts homophobia:

A - GO GO GADGET TRUTH

B – LOL Damn I wish you were a homo!

A- WHY? SO YOU CAN GO GO GADGET SUCK MY DICK? AHAHHAHA

B - Oh, that’s so cute! No. That was my off-beat opening line. "Damn I wish you were a homo! This is *The Colbert Report!*" But, yeah, I guess, if you want me to, I'll suck your dick.
In another exchange, a poster who contributes a parody of a Keats’ poem for the opening lines is responded to with “fuckin poetry” and “poetry is for pussies,” although other members praise the contribution and suggest that it be cross-posted to an ongoing parodic poetry thread.

While ideas in this opening lines thread are mostly expressed verbally, with occasional smiley graphics to help convey the poster’s emotion, other threads employ a wider variety of communication tools, taking advantage of the digital platform to post pictures, links and videos. Indeed, the use of multiple media – whether to build arguments, create friendship, demonstrate prowess or enhance dialogue – is one of the most distinctive features of the board. The “Fan fiction, art and games” forum on the newer Colbert Nation discussion board, for example, contains embedded fan videos, photoshopped images, screen shots, original art, illustrated fan fiction, word art and more. In a Colbert-inspired art contest hosted by one of the regular users of the fan girl forums, contestants not only posted their art work but also – if they were winners – photos of their prizes. Many of these fan girl creations are given and received as gifts. After scrolling through a post that contains 30 screen shots, for example, one poster replies “Your message was a gift that kept on giving” (smiley graphic). And in a thread that not only exhibits users’ fondness for images but also the unpredictable and transgressive character of parody’s audience generally and Colbert’s fans more specifically, the “Crotch Shot” thread hosts more than 1,000 posts, most of them featuring photographs that highlight Stephen Colbert’s (clothed) groin. Here, the images are used to create hilarity, entertain other members and to prove one’s own technological skill in producing screen captures from video clips. In many cases on this thread and others, fan girls work collaboratively, with one fan girl locating a video or image, and others creating a screen shot or photoshopped image from it.
While fan girls use the forums to share media as a means of creating social and affective ties, posters to the political threads use the affordances of the digital platform to exchange information and views. In a thread dedicated to discussing the 2010 BP oil spill, posters provide links, quotations, images and full articles from a wide variety of digital sources, including the New York Times, USA Today, Huffington Post, Think Progress, PBS News Hour, and Hearings of the US House of Representatives. Participants engage in discussion about how the spill occurred, who is to blame, when it might be cleaned up, and how the Democrats and Republicans are responding. In doing so, they use the articles and images to help them understand the issues, to bring new facts and viewpoints into the discussion, and to bolster their own arguments.

Like the fan girl contestants and even the crotch shot contributors, the posters to the political forums constitute not only interpretive communities but also “communities of practice,” (Wenger, 1998) in which a group consolidates around engagement in a particular project, whether that be understanding an ecological disaster more fully, or participating in a fan contest as a contestant, judge or spectator. Within such communities of practice, participants draw on the structural resources of the board (the ability to quote, embed, link, smile and interact), on a wide range of digital texts (written, graphic and audio-visual) and on an array of voices (encouraging, inquiring, satiric, silly, mocking, crude, derogatory) to create a space that, like the text which brings members together, is unpredictable, brash and polyvocal. Unlike the television program, however, which emanates from a centre outwards, the discussion forums represent a multidirectional and horizontal medium. Taking up Rafaeli’s (1988) suggestion that interactivity is best understood as communication that leads to engagement and sociability, we might see the Colbert discussion boards as a significant site of participation. At the same time, the fact that
many users (particularly new users) felt excluded, that many older members felt censored, and that oppressive discourses could be expressed (often in the name of parody), should keep us from idealizing notions of interactivity, participation and community. These circumstances also remind us that participatory culture is not, as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) write, a “comfortable arrangement” but rather as “disruptive and uncomfortable as...potentially liberating” (p. 10).

“Vive la resistance!” Young fans address media power

“Making sense of the media,” Nancy Baym (2000) writes, is “the defining quality” of audience communities (p. 24). Certainly we can see this attempt at “making sense” in the messages and interactions (both online and offline) of the Colbert Nation discursive community. While fans use the boards as a space for play, they also take part in significant discussions of media power, particularly the policies of Comedy Central and its notoriously heavy-handed parent company, Viacom. Indeed, these two activities are not unconnected, as members often engage in discussion of media power out of fear that their spaces for sociability may be taken away or altered without their consent. In this final section, I consider the ways in which members actively use the boards as a place to discuss media, despite the absence of an official space for such dialogue. I also trace fans’ feelings of ownership over the boards, and their belief in their ability to “talk back” to Comedy Central. The belief amongst young fans that they can influence industry decision-making is an important one, and must be addressed with care. While still acknowledging the breadth of corporate power and its appropriation of youth culture, we must also be ready to recognize the various strategies – some quite apparent, others only faintly perceptible – through which young people express agency and power in relation to popular culture. Although these strategies – which include collective responses, withdrawal of
participation and direct confrontation – are not always successful, they nonetheless represent young people’s attempts to enter their own interests into the public realm, and to garner “more control over what is expressed and how” (Willis, 2003, p. 412).

Conversations about digital media – and copyright in particular – are evident even in the boards’ earliest days. In the summer of 2007, Viacom was undertaking its massive efforts to sweep the internet clear of Daily Show and Colbert Report video clips. In what became known to fans of the two programs as “The YouTube purges,” “The Daily Motion purges” and so on, Viacom systematically had clips and fanvids removed from popular video-sharing sites. Users of the Colboards perceived these unannounced removals as unjust. Like many legal scholars (Trombley, 2007; Tushnet, 2008), they believed that their fanvids were new productions protected by fair use, and like many media scholars (Baym, 2010; Jenkins, 2006), that their storage, use and distribution of clips helped more than hindered the popularity of the program. In addition, there was also widespread frustration about the instability, slowness and limited selection on Comedy Central’s video site, known as “Motherload.” Young fans preferred to create their own archive of favourite clips and fanvids and to store and share these on sites such as YouTube or Daily Motion, demonstrating a sense of control over the texts of mass culture, texts that young fans themselves helped to make popular and culturally relevant (Trombley, 2007).

In June 2007, a thread entitled “Dailymotion Purge” was started on the Colboards, a thread that reveals fans’ anger towards Viacom, their loyalty to the text of The Colbert Report, and their collective strategies to search out spaces on the web where they could hide from Viacom’s retraction of cultural property they felt was theirs. In the first message, the poster informed other users that “those Viacom Bastards” had begun to take down all Viacom-owned
material from the Dailymotion site. In the 49 replies that follow, posted by 24 different participants, users lament the loss of their videos and curse Viacom, resurrecting a favourite GIF graphic created by one of the participants for an earlier purge, which features Colbert’s trademark opening along with the words “Suck It Viacom.” As this is one in a long history of purges, many participants express weariness and frustration. One poster writes “Dammit, I can't do this again... I just can't... (sad smiley) and another “My mom just walked by and I told her about this horrible, horrible purge and she said, ‘Well, why don't you write some sort of plea to them?’ and I said, ‘Mom, we've done that already.’” Rather than communicating with Viacom, posters provide one another with detailed instructions on ways to download and save their videos elsewhere on the net. Throughout the thread, there is an awareness that their conversations about Viacom, and about downloading copyrighted material, are taking place on what is ultimately a Viacom-owned site. One poster, for example, warns others that the site’s paid administrators have access not only to public discussions but to private messages, and that if members want to exchange details of video-sharing sites, they might be best to do it over email. Another poster, worried about the material shared on the Colboards themselves asks “Speaking of purges, it raises a question I’ve had for a while. Could Viacom's minions patrol the boards and make us clean out all the stuff in Stephen, The Work and the fanfic forum?” Such comments suggest a growing feeling of opposition to Viacom amongst users of the board, affirming R.M. Milner’s (2009) observation that media fans are, in many cases, “more loyal to the text than to the organization producing it” (p. 491).

While posters in the Dailymotion thread focus on working collaboratively in order to, in the words of one user, “avoid the clutches of Viacom,” posters to other threads approach the asymmetries between audiences and corporations in more direct ways. We can see this, for
example, in a thread dedicated to discussing Viacom’s threatened withdrawal of programming from Time Warner Cable concerning a dispute over carriage fees. The discussion, which includes 33 posts in a two-day period, begins when a member reposts a Reuters article explaining the dispute and the potential blackout. While this leads to a lengthy exchange about who has what cable provider, it also leads to a discussion of the disagreement between the two media giants and a critical assessment of each company’s position. In addition to worrying about their own access to the program, some contributors also worry about the impact of the black-out on The Colbert Report itself, leading them to a sense that fans must – and can – do something.

“What can we do as colbert's Nation to stop this from happening?” asks one poster, and another exclaims “We have to fight back as a Nation! Fuck You Viacom. I always hated them anyway and Time warner.” In terms of exactly how to fight back, participants discuss calling Viacom and the cable company, as well as picketing. In fact, two days later, Viacom and Time Warner Cable announce a deal, posted to the thread, which trails off soon after, but not before a number of posters report that they have made calls to both Viacom and their local cable companies.

It is doubtful that fans’ communication with either Time Warner or Viacom had any influence in the dispute; nor would I want to argue that such actions point towards the “deep interactivity” and “viewer leverage” that Deery (2003, p. 171) locates on some TV-related discussion boards. But what is perhaps noteworthy is the role dialogue and information-sharing played in the decision to take some kind of action. We can see this same pattern played out more distinctly in relation to the forums themselves, where meta-level discussion about the boards as spaces of power struggle lead to a variety of individual and collective responses. After Comedy Central announced the closing of the Colboards and the launch of the new Colbert Nation “community,” which required that members provide considerably more personal information
than before, conversations about the boards exploded. For a period of three months both platforms operated simultaneously, and on the old Colboards many long-time participants debated whether or not to continue on the new boards. In a thread entitled “Are you going to join the new Colbert Nation community?” members discuss exactly that. The messages reveal some fans’ ambiguous feelings about their ability to create change. One poster, for example writes “I signed up. Reluctantly. I do feel as though I've sold my soul to Viacom, but I do enjoy this message board. I'm really going to miss those of you who aren't going to be there. I understand your feelings though.” Another poster adds:

I don't really care about them getting my information or anything. I mean, I'm already on Neopets like 24/7 so Viacom knows like everything about me already. I don't like how it seems so personal, though. I like it here how you can just make an account and start talking while still keeping a sort of anonymity. But hopefully whatever boards they add will be similar to these in that respect.

In fact, it is those posters who decide not to join the new community who appear to be the most certain about their decision, and who reveal withdrawal as a possible mode of resistance in a contemporary moment that makes online social participation – particularly on corporate websites – seem almost mandatory for the young. As one poster with more than 16,000 posts to the old Colboards writes, “It looks pretty, but I'm not interested in giving Viacom my demographic info. And I don't want to end up at another site....unmoderated and un-administrated.” She finishes the post by declaring “When this sited is closed and replaced by it, I'll be done with the entire experience,” suggesting that one way of exercising power vis-à-vis media corporations is through not only a refusal to provide valuable personal information, but also a refusal to be counted among the registered, those legitimized through corporate recognition.
Kevin Smith, for many years a fan moderator on the site, also highlights refusal to provide content as a mode of exercising power and agency. Although many of Colbert’s invitations to participate have proven popular, there are nonetheless a number of requests that are simply ignored by fans. Smith cites the example of the Coke-sponsored “Interview Simulator,” which produced very little user-generated content during its featured run on the Colbert Nation website. But even as members refused to participate in this officially-sanctioned production activity, they continued to participate in all sorts of unofficial interactions they had initiated themselves, such as fan fiction contests and the crotch shot thread. Although Viacom has a “worldwide, perpetual license to host, reproduce, publicly display, publicly perform, distribute, broadcast, modify, reformat, translate or use” (Terms of Use, 2009) all user content submitted to the site, it is nonetheless clear that some kinds of content – those that fit within the brand – are much more valued than others. Refusing to supply this kind of content, users insist on following their own interests and the social values created by the community.

One of the final messages in the “Are you going to join?” thread points towards a similar mode of exercising power and agency – migration and decentralization. “Are we going to defect and start our own colboard? Can we add one to no fact zone?” one poster asks other discussants. Although the blogger of the most popular fan-site No Fact Zone DB Ferguson replies by saying that she won’t be setting up a discussion board on her site, the question is nonetheless an important one, and gestures towards a strategy already used by the Colboard community – the creation of alternate, fan-run sites. As mentioned in the previous history, the Rogue Nation site was created as a space for Colboard users to congregate when the official boards go down, which is a frequent occurrence during breaks in the broadcast of the program. But it is also a space where members banned from the official Comedy Central site, and those simply frustrated with
its continual changes and in-fighting, could continue to communicate with their friends. In fact, as Kevin Smith notes in his interview, many members may use more than one site, making the community far more decentralized than the centralizing forces of Viacom would like. And as the site’s slogans convey – “Anti-establishment since September 22 2008” and “Vive la Resistance!” – the creators, administrators and members of Rogue Nation see it as a form of resistance to media power and Comedy Central (see Figure 12). Smith insists that official board users have what Comedy Central wants – they are loyal, creative fans of the show who through their discussion create content and interest around the program. By claiming the right to move their discussion to other spaces, they retain control over their labour. They also remind us – and Comedy Central – of the ease with which alternative, non-corporate spaces can be created. Even though Rogue Nation continues to be dedicated – at least in part – to the text of the corporately-owned Colbert Report, it nonetheless removes people (registrants) and conversation (content) from Comedy Central’s monetizing grasp.

Figure 12. Banner for Rogue Nation. (Image from http://roguenation.freephpbb3.com/)

One final mode of negotiating power and asserting user agency lies in members’ attempts to communicate with board administrators and program producers. This occurs both on and off the boards. In an extensive report prepared by Kevin Smith late in 2009 and posted to the boards
in the “Forum Support” section, we can see the attempt to use the boards themselves as a place to address not only other members but administrators and producers. The 1,400 word report is based on conversations with current, former and potential board users, and focuses on moderation practices, ways to retain new members, and the relevance of the current rules and procedures. In it, Smith makes a number of recommendations. These include removing the “Flame Club” because it scares off new members, making the fan girl community more public in order to increase user activity, and reforming the moderation procedures and elections. While Smith’s recommendations are followed by 137 replies and a serious conversation about how the members want the boards to be organized, moderated and administered, perhaps even more important is the fact that the recommendations are not only addressed to members. Although the report includes changes that can be implemented by members and unpaid moderators, they also include changes that can only be introduced by administrators. Clearly there is a hope that Comedy Central staff will read and respond to the report. “You are truly a model citizen of the Colbert Nation,” writes one contributor to Smith, “and we'd be a lot worse off without you around. I hope the admin listens to you (smiley happy face).” The fact that no administrator comments on the discussion thread, and that most of the proposals had not been applied at the time of writing suggest that the research, report and ensuing conversations had little impact on board administrators, lending it an air of futility.

In fact, it is users’ attempts to communicate with Comedy Central executives outside of the boards that have proven to be more influential. We can see this, for example, in the most recent conflict between users and management described earlier. Angered by the way in which the new administrator censored messages, deleted criticism and banned users, regular members made the decision to respond not just on the boards, but through more direct means of
communication. Starting from the belief that the new administrator was not simply acting of his own accord but was following the wishes of Comedy Central executives to “clean up” the boards and make them a “a happier place,” (Smith, personal communication, 2009), members decided to address Comedy Central executives themselves. In their correspondence with Comedy Central, they highlighted the growing importance of fan culture in promotion and profit-making, as well as the personal role that many of them had played in helping to build the community and content of the boards. Rather than creating positive change, they argued, Comedy Central was in fact “harming the community they were trying to foster” (Kevin Smith, personal communication, November 24 2009). Although the group expected a long battle, Comedy Central reacted quickly, first by removing the offending administrator from the boards, and then by issuing an apology - of sorts. In a letter posted to the boards, the “staff” of the Colbertnation.com acknowledge that “while our Administrator's intent was correct, the manner he employed was wrong, and for that we apologize.” At the same time, the letter reminds users that “the intent of these boards is to provide a fun and friendly forum for all fans of Stephen Colbert and The Colbert Report” pointing towards Smith’s speculation that Comedy Central was hoping to create a “happier,” less “rowdy” community.

Colbert’s calls for “the Nation to join me” – whether it be in renaming, remixing, voting, discussing, creating video or marching in Washington – may be tongue in cheek, but they nonetheless hold out the promise of more democratic media participation. This is a promise that many media observers have taken at face value, celebrating Colbert’s efforts to include his audience. But Colbert’s digital invitations and the responses they elicit must be considered more carefully, both by examining specific corporate and fan practices, and by contextualizing them within current configurations of participatory and youth culture. In doing so, we see that Comedy
Central’s invitations, while generating a high degree of involvement, are equally successful in generating free content, harnessing audience labour and managing digital participation. This closer analysis also reveals that young people use *The Colbert Report* and the popular Colboards as a starting place for a huge number of diverse and sometimes unruly interactions, interactions that, in the name of satire, may reproduce homophobic, sexist and racist discourses that marginalize or exclude some members. Their conversations sound a cautionary note, reminding us of parody’s complicity with the very objects it aims to ridicule, as well as Willis’ (2003) injunction that youth culture may amplify regressive discourses and negate subordinate interests.

Just as significantly, such interactions – prone to migration to other sites, bordering on the obscene, and often wildly divergent from the show itself – challenge Comedy Central’s attempts to centralize and monetize online participation, creating tensions between board users and Comedy Central executives. Young fans are increasingly aware of these tensions, and attempt to address them through a variety of strategies that reveal a belief in their own right to cultural expression and ownership, and their own ability to influence corporate decision-making. That such strategies are noted by producers and commented on by users, yet have to date produced little more than tokenistic apologies, points towards both the fragility of young people’s emerging efforts to directly address digital imbalances and the tightening walls of the digital enclosure. As I want to argue next, such conditions might also point towards the need for a media education that addresses young people’s current struggles with digital media, as well as their recent achievements and emerging desires.
Chapter Four

Conclusion:

Pedagogies of Digital Participation

As I have tried to gesture towards in the preceding two chapters, the interactions between users, producers and texts – with youth practices at their centre – are considerably more contradictory and uneven than celebratory discourses of media democratization might suggest. Processes such as centralization, commodification, and the exploitation of free labor co-exist and intersect with the appropriation of dominant narratives, the organization of alternative economies and the imagination of alternative worlds. Such intersections complicate the popular rhetoric about online participation, demonstrating that opportunities to participate are variously seized, taken, created, managed, constrained, controlled, sold and profited from. They also complicate one-dimensional representations of youth as either empowered or exploited by digital technology, instead suggesting that young people’s creative responses to popular culture are neither solely resistant nor simply reproductive. Instead, they may be both simultaneously, and more than that, are always transformative in some way, creating new cultural ground which must constantly be renegotiated (Willis, 2003). In a context in which digital texts and discourses like those found on internet television play an increasingly important role in daily life as forms of exchange and capital, “who gets access to them, who can manipulate and construct them, who can critique, refute, second guess them” is, as Allan Luke (2000, p. 449) has written about texts in the 21st century more generally, a key pedagogical issue. Gunther Kress, speaking directly to the intersection of changing social conditions and proliferating digital technologies observes a new responsibility – requirement even – to shape meaning within one’s social environment, and notes the ways in which young people are already responding to this requirement, producing new
representations (and correspondingly, new identities and knowledge) through new processes of composition (selection, reframing, juxtaposition, bricolage) that bring them into direct confrontation with the conventional modes of signification valued within schools. It is to questions of media education and its potential response to this shifting and sometimes bumpy terrain of media use that I turn now. In doing so, I take up work from the fields of media literacy education and multiliteracies pedagogy, in order to sketch out some of possible paths towards curriculum and pedagogies that both respond to young people’s current media practices and open up doors to more equitable futures.

**Theoretical Frameworks: The Ground of Media Education and Multiliteracies**

A number of recent reflections on media education have considered the ways in which rapid digitization may require new ways of thinking about that field. In her essay “Debates and challenges facing new literacies in the 21st century,” for example, Renee Hobbs (2008) writes that “[e]ducators are just beginning to explore what it means to build critical thinking and communication skills around ... new online genres and digital media forms, like instant messaging, social networking software, blogs, podcasts and user-modified videogames, where user-generated content and participation are central” (p. 440). As Hobbs’ description suggests, participation and user activity are now key concerns for media educators. Indeed, a number of scholars agree that interactivity is at the centre of new forms of literacy. David Buckingham (2003), for example, writes that digital media “undoubtedly raise new questions, particularly in relation to interactivity” (p. 177), and he advocates the development of new educational research to address such changes. Henry Jenkins (2006a) envisions the rise of participatory cultures in which users learn to create, share and interact in new ways. Yet as we have seen, such participatory cultures are marked by contradiction and contestation, and are located within
changing social, economic and cultural contexts. But rather than viewing such conflicts and contexts as intractable complications to media education, we might see them as crucial starting places for critical inquiry and imaginative production practices.

Just as the meanings of participation form contested ground, so too do the meanings and purposes of media education. Kari Dehli (2009) has helpfully conceptualized media education as a set of discourses made up from a variety of sources both formal and informal, including curriculum documents, scholarly works, teachers’ classroom practices, workshops, conferences and conversations. She traces some of the competing claims that have been made “to establish what counts as media education” (p. 57) and provides a genealogical analysis of the major themes and tensions within its 30-year history. These include the role of the teacher in media education (as facilitating learning or “empowering” students), the view of young people’s relationship to media (as passive recipients or active shapers of meaning), and the aim of media education (as a form of intervention that questions relations of power, or the provision of skills for survival in a globalizing economy). Hobbs (2008) similarly outlines debates within contemporary media education scholarship. She identifies four distinct approaches currently used to conceptualize new literacies – media literacy, information literacy, critical literacy and media management – and notes their differing positions in regard to the role of the teacher, the degree of focus on socio-historical and political contexts, the media’s impact on young people’s well-being, and the relative emphasis on the author, reader or the text. Each of these two accounts makes amply clear not only the debates around how media literacy should be conceived, but also the range and depth of discourses and conceptualizations – arising from theory, curriculum and classroom practices – on which current educators can and do draw.
The field of multiliteracies has also provided educators with important intellectual and pedagogical resources. Where media education arose out of varied concerns that included a recognition of young people’s active and dynamic relationship with the products of mass media and popular culture (Delhi, p. 58), the concept of multiliteracies arose out of the New London Group’s concerns over literacy pedagogy, expressed in its 1996 manifesto “A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures” (Cazden, et al.). Participants were interested in the significance and intersection of two “multi” dimensions of literacy – multilingualism and multimodality. Using a social semiotics framework, they connected semiotic production – or meaning-making – with agency, identity formation, learning, and design, ultimately including the design of students’ own social futures. Theories of multiliteracy include a recognition of power and a vision of equity in which access to semiotic, cultural, social and economic resources and to “participation in the design and production of representations” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 18) leads to more fulfilling social participation in citizenship and work and more equitable social relations. The relationship of such processes to schools and curriculum is made explicit through a series of suggestions for “what schools can do” (Cazden, 1996, p. 71), which includes an emphasis on the process of design, on critical framing, and on overt instruction of metalanguages. More recent theories of multimodality, which arise out of the multiliteracies approach and which I engage with in detail in the next sections, are particularly salient to media education for their recognition of the convergence between representation, production and communication, and of the increasing complexity of meaning-making within digital environments. Not only, claim multimodal theorists, has message-making become a more complex process, it has also become more urgent, as the production of messages and texts becomes increasingly linked to processes of agency, identity formation and learning, placing new
responsibilities on schools and schooling. In the final two sections, I draw on the ground of both media literacy education and a pedagogy of multiliteracies in order to address the role of schools in responding to digital participation, focusing in particular on media education’s long and well-established emphases on critical inquiry and media production, and multiliteracy’s focus on design. My aim is not so much to recommend specific activities as to suggest ways of framing media education that might 1) assist us in developing “an explicit pedagogy of critical vocabularies” (Luke, 2000, p. 453) for talking and thinking about digital interactivity, and 2) lead to an imaginative and experimental stance in the creation of new cultural texts and production practices. Before describing these critical and creative endeavours, however, I begin with a short personal reflection on schools as complex media environments, in which messages about technology, learning and power are decidedly contradictory, producing a space of anxiety that media education must address.

**Schools as Sites of Competing Technological Discourses**

In September 2006, after two years away for graduate studies, I returned to teach in the Toronto secondary school I had been affiliated with for several years. A number of changes had taken place during that time, many of them related to electronic media. The most noticeable of these was the installation of video cameras in every hallway. This constant observation was the result of both a general move towards increased surveillance of young people over the past decade (Ruck et al., 2008) and a specific incident at the school, in which a student was stabbed (non-fatally) on the school grounds. When I first returned, it wasn’t so much the cameras that struck me, as the large TV monitor located directly outside the principal’s office, grainy images of the corridors flickering across its surface. When I asked my colleagues about their feelings towards the cameras, they were mostly nonplussed. While none of them thought electronic
surveillance would help prevent violent incidents, neither did they worry about its effect on the relationships between students, teachers and administration. Students I spoke with had somewhat stronger opinions, though these varied greatly. For some, the cameras created feelings of security; for others, particularly the young men of colour most likely to be surveilled, they presented an intrusive assertion of power and control; and for still others, they created a vague sense of alienation and discomfort. I myself felt torn. I understood that the stabbing, during which the school was locked down for more than four hours and surrounded by police and media, left many students and teachers feeling unsafe. But I also believed (and continue to believe) that the cameras interpellate those who truly inhabit the school – namely the students – as potential wrongdoers, an address that has the effect of criminalizing youth and severely compromising the idea of public ownership and belonging so vital to public schools.

But it was not simply the use of surveillance technology that was at issue that year. Intersecting with the use of video cameras, and in many ways upholding the same hierarchy, was the school’s policy on students’ use of cell phones – or, more accurately, their ban on students’ use of cell phones. While the use of phones had been an issue in past years, by the time I returned, it had become considerably more prominent. This became apparent during an in-school professional development session I attended in the fall of 2006, in which a planned role play activity on classroom management strategies turned into a one-hour discussion of cell phones. In line with current moral panics over young people’s use of mobile devices in schools and elsewhere (Selwyn, 2003), the most commonly expressed theme during this heated discussion of approximately 15 teachers was students’ potential misuse of phones, which included the possibility of setting up drug deals, cheating on tests, and taking pictures in class, and even included the spectre of students taking covert pictures under female teachers’ skirts or dresses.
Not far from the surface of the discussion was teachers’ individual anxiety about losing control of classrooms and hallways, and a more generalized sense that students’ unchecked use of personal technologies threatened established educational values and procedures, and even posed a threat to teachers’ bodily privacy.

Perhaps one final scenario can help to paint the picture of discursive complexity I want to convey. This discussion occurred in January 2007 at a staff meeting in which departments were seated together and asked to generate a “wish list” of material resources, policies, and/or supports that would help them over the year to come, and then to choose one priority from this list to present to the whole group. In the English department we generated a long list of books and software, but in the end, the item we all agreed was most important, and that we made public, was the need for more professional development in media production skills, such as video-editing, blogging, and podcast production. The request was formulated through a dialogue that mixed elements of interest and insecurity: interest in integrating new media technologies and production practices into the English curriculum, but also insecurity about students’ increasingly sophisticated uses of technology, and the fear that English teachers were being left behind, unable to guide and assess students in their use of new media.

Of course, there were – and still are – many other notable features within the school’s employment of technology. These include the uneven designation of computer labs across the school’s academic streams, the in-school filtering of the internet (including sites such as YouTube and Facebook), the use of online plagiarism sites such as TurnIt.com to monitor student writing, and the administration’s promotion of social media like wikis and blogs as pedagogical tools. But what I hope to communicate in this small sketch is the complex and paradoxical nature of discourse about digital media and technology within educational settings, and how struggles
over power are imbricated within these competing discourses. At the same time that young people are discouraged – in fact banned – from using social media for their own purposes within the school setting, they are forced to use it in officially-sanctioned ways; as the degree of electronic surveillance over students’ bodies, movement and academic output increases, so do teachers’ worries about a kind of counter-surveillance in which their own classrooms and bodies become public; and at a moment when teachers hope to guide students in their exploration of new media, they are also mandated by the administration to confiscate students’ own technologies whenever they appear in the classroom. The school is, to put it mildly, the site of a very mixed set of discourses about learning, youth and media.

In many ways, these struggles over the management of young people’s creative and communicative desires and capabilities parallel those described in the last 100 pages, and so it is that I believe a study like mine might be able to shed some small light on the use of new media within schools. In her article “Why bother theorizing adolescents’ online literacies for classroom practice and research,” Donna Alvermann (2008) argues that examining young people’s emotional and intellectual investments in producing and sharing digital media is crucial to a better understanding of new media literacies within schools. However, what might be learned from theorizing young people’s digital participation can in no way be simply translated into classroom practices. Willis (2003) insists that “accepting popular culture does not mean a lazy throwing open of the school doors to the latest fad, but rather committing to a principled understanding of the complexity of contemporary cultural experience” (p. 411). While we might hope that practices such as remixing or blogging could be dropped wholesale into classrooms to engage students and update curriculum, the very point of my study is to convey the shifting, contingent and multiple meanings of such practices. The questions of power, appropriation,
commodification, imagination, and dialogue that animate my investigation cannot fall away here, but need to remain forefront in an inquiry into classroom practices.

**Uses in Context: Critical Discussion of Media Practices**

Critical analysis of media *texts* has long been at the center of thinking about media literacy (Hobbs, 2006a). Yet recently, this well-established practice has come under some scrutiny by theorists such as Gunther Kress (2010), who, for example, writes that “critique can work only in relation to stable structures and environments” (p. 133). For Kress, the work of critique is to bring fixed texts and meanings “into crisis,” uncovering their hegemonic and canonized readings (p. 133). But where meanings are everywhere in flux, and texts routinely reused and reframed, particularly by the young, critique becomes “retrospective,” fixated on originary texts that have long since changed, and overlooking the increasing convergence of consumption and production. It is *design*, Kress argues, that holds the greatest promise for young people in shaping individual and social worlds – and indeed design that already characterizes their most significant communication practices.

While I will return to questions of design in my following discussions of creative production, it is worth noting that Kress himself recognizes critique as a crucial aspect of design, and not entirely to be dismissed. Indeed, to neglect critique would be to overlook important opportunities for discussions about the shape of mediated power. As I have tried to suggest through my case studies, while the dynamics of power may have changed within digital environments, so that young people *do* play a larger role than before in media production and distribution, such shifts certainly do not mean an end to power differentials. If we glance at but one example, that of intellectual property, we can see that processes of use, conflict and negotiation that were once largely played out between corporate entities have now made their
way into young people’s everyday communicational activities and concerns. Indeed, we might return to Manuel Castell’s argument, cited in the introduction, that power relations in the current moment are largely dependent on processes of communication. What this means, then, is that some of our critical attention needs to be redirected from media texts and representations towards mediated interactions. This is a shift that has taken place within communications and cultural studies theory and research, and now needs to be enacted within classrooms and curriculum, where, as I explore below, it might take a number of different paths, with a variety of results.

To begin with, such an investigation of practices (whether those of audiences, users or producers) allows for a number of important ideas to be introduced and questions asked. It opens up discussion of theoretically rich concepts such as agency, community, appropriation, intellectual property and commodification, which, as I have tried to show, are not only at the center of current debates over the future configuration of new media, but also at the center of young people’s media practices. As Allan Luke (2000) writes, the development of critical vocabularies is a significant element in building a curriculum that takes into account literacy’s embeddedness within fields of power, value and exchange. Both Renee Hobbs (2006a) and David Buckingham (2003) also argue that a curriculum geared to the study of new media must pose questions about the construction of interactivity. For Buckingham (2003), it is central to acknowledge the commercialism that structures young people’s media experiences, and he lists a series of inquiries that would help teachers and students investigate this relationship. These include questions about the processes of interpellation, surveillance and convergence, and about the kinds of interactivity on offer, including the degree of control and feedback that interactive technologies afford to the user. For Hobbs (2006b), concerned less with commercialism than
new modes of interpersonal communication, inquiries into participatory practices might incorporate comparisons of face-to-face and online communication, and their respective influence on notions of belonging, affection, self-disclosure and control.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of a discussion of mediated practices is the possibility for students to critically analyze their everyday, lived media experiences, an important undertaking in a context in which young people’s identities and world views are increasingly shaped through digital interaction. Beginning from their own media use, students and teachers can analyze the emerging relationships between audiences and media industries, posing questions about how users are positioned and constructed by digital texts, sites and producers, and how young users position themselves. This study of “uses in context,” as Willis (2003) calls it, opens up a curricular space for young people to recognize and consider their own practices of consumption, appropriation and acculturation, sidestepping teacher-led deconstructions of pop culture texts, and instead taking up young people’s urgent uses of media and popular culture to fashion their own identities and carve out public spaces for themselves (boyd, 2007; Willis, 2003). This kind of inquiry also has the advantage of bridging the divide between young people’s experiences of media and technology inside and outside of school contexts. As numerous media and education scholars have argued (Alvermann, 2008; Buckingham, 2003; Gee, 2004a; Hobbs, 2006a; Jenkins, 2006a; Kress, 2010), the gap between students’ digital media experiences in school and out of school is significant. Some scholars (Gee, 2004a; Jenkins, 2006a) make the case for incorporating the learning skills acquired through recreational digital play into schooling, while others advocate an emphasis on design and production within classroom curriculum that more closely mirrors young people’s interests and identities (Kress, 2010). These are important and worthy considerations that I take up more fully in the next section.
Nonetheless, I want to argue that it remains important for young people to discuss, describe and critically reflect on their interactive play experiences, experiences such as gaming, social networking, producing content, and participating in discussion boards and chatrooms. As schools continue to overlook or even ban the use of interactive sites and technologies like cell phones, Facebook and YouTube, young people require a place to critically reflect on their understanding and use of these platforms. Indeed, the growing gap between young people’s experiences of new media in and out of school may heighten the perception, as Hobbs (2006a) writes, that adults are disconnected, unavailable and largely uninterested in the complex role that digital media play in the lives of young people.

Even where classroom teachers endeavour to create lessons and assessments that replicate young people’s communicative modes, the possibilities for critical dialogue may be missing. A popular assessment in the department where I teach, for example, has students in the junior grades create poster-paper versions of Facebook pages for literary characters, an individual activity that takes place with little discussion of Facebook either as a site or a set of practices. While such an activity nods towards young people’s knowledge and interest, and takes into account the practical reality of students’ and teachers’ limited access to computer technology within the school, it does little to help students probe the grounded complexities of social networking and identity formation in the way that a rather simple discussion prompt – such as “What kinds of pictures do you post to Facebook? Why? – might do. As Kress (2010) writes, many young people come to school already seeing themselves “as authors of the knowledge they want and need, authors of the kinds of texts that meet their social, personal and affective needs” (p. 210). That this sense of authorship is largely created in and through a market-dominated economy only increases the importance of critical conversations that take
seriously the agency and disposition of learners. As my research on the youth-oriented Alloy Media and Comedy Central sites showed me, such corporate sites have few (or no) spaces for young people to reflect thoughtfully on their experiences as media users, consumers and producers. This does not mean young people are not interested in such dialogues. As we saw, users of both the YouTube comments section and the Colbert Nation’s discussion board did attempt to reflect on – and occasionally critique – conditions of production, distribution and dialogue on their chosen sites. Overall, though, few provisions were made for such dialogues, suggesting that, as Kress argues, the school must “be aware of and prepared to take the initiative to fill gaps of what is not afforded, or what is backgrounded” (p. 196) including reflection on the use resources in relations to aims and purposes and the ability to engage in self-reflection as the creator of mediated messages.

This brings us to another possible path for critical discussion of media practices: open dialogue about schools’ own decisions in addressing media, digital technology and students’ interests. This is what Kent den Heyer (2008) has called “the curriculum as the curriculum” – that is, the study of subject-based content and the conditions of schooling as a historically-constituted artefact. In the case of media, this might lie in a consideration of the ways in which digital technologies are employed, ignored, talked about, taken up and taken away within schools and classrooms. Discussions with students about the marginalization of popular culture in most classes, about the filtering of social networks in school libraries and labs, and about arrangements that allow authorities to videotape students and yet ban cellphone use, might all be interesting starting places. Such inquiries denaturalize (and de-neutralize) both educational and technological discourses, and instead open up schools, media practices and their intersections as sites in which power is constituted and struggled over. Such conversations about schooling as
places of power, produced at least in part through the deployment of technologies and media, seem particularly important within media education, which, as Dehli (2009) has demonstrated, has long figured itself as a primary vehicle for the promotion of critical thinking.

Finally, classroom-based inquiries into both “uses in context” and “the curriculum as the curriculum” make clear that young people’s “everyday cultural practices are not disconnected from pressing economic and political issues... in an increasingly privatized, globalized world” (Dolby, 2003, p. 272). Educators can help youth make connections between their own media practices and issues of globalization, democracy, nation-building, inclusion, exclusion and difference, placing their everyday lives and cultural practices within the context of larger social relations of power. Helping young people to see how their media practices – their productions, exchanges, dialogues – are a significant “force in shaping and reshaping the world” (Dolby, p. 272) affirms agency and the possibility for collective action and change. In this regard, Kenway and Bullen (2008) introduce the idea of the young “cyberflaneur,” who makes use of digital media to “look at and beyond the surface gloss of global consumer culture” and to discover the complexities of contemporary global relations. (p. 27). Rather than denying or criticizing young people’s pleasure in digital pop culture, such a process allows for both affective association and critical distance. The concept of cyberflanerie also resonates with Jenkins’ argument for the increasingly significant connections between youth media fandom and civic engagement, evident, for example, in the well-documented global activism of the Harry Potter Alliance, a fan group that has raised awareness and funds for causes such as ending conflict in Darfur and supporting same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. Indeed, my own small case studies suggest the importance and prevalence of fan identities and communities for young people, and demonstrate that at their best, online fan communities are highly collaborative, emotionally engaging,
technologically savvy and knowledge-producing, characteristics that also mark emerging forms of civic engagement. Where fans and their practices were once peripheral to the public sphere, they have now moved to center stage, a shift that is most certainly generationally-inflected. These notions of flanerie and of the engaged and active fan suggest that one role of media educators might be to create dialogical spaces where young people can explore the real and potential connections between their own wide range of media practices – from fan collaboration to the fast consumption of technological hardware – to global issues and inequities.

**Uncontrollable Opportunities: Creative Production and Design in the Classroom**

In addition to critical analysis, production has also played a significant role in both media education and multiliteracies pedagogy, and many educators argue not only for its continued importance but for an expansion of the kinds of technical and creative production skills taught in classrooms (Jenkins 2006a; Kress, 2010). But including production as a key curricular component is not simply about skills acquisition; it is about a commitment to social analyses and change. “Agency,” Lawrence Grossberg writes “involves relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power, and of belonging to them in such a way as to be able to enact their powers” (1996, 100, cited in Dolby 2003, 268). In an age in which the ability to participate in creating, critiquing and manipulating digital texts is indeed a means of belonging and social power, and in which participation and access are routinely proclaimed and yet rarely realized, media education needs to educate students not only in the theory but also the practicalities of symbolic meaning-making. In this final section, I consider the ways in which we might frame a renewed emphasis on production, focusing on how production and design open up spaces for creative experimentation that hold the potential for both self- and world-making.
For some educators, such media production has the potential to promote greater conditions of educational equality. Buckingham (2003), for example, argues that schools must create access not simply to digital technology, but to digital cultural capital – “the cultural skills and competencies that are needed to use technology creatively and productively” (p. 18). Similarly, James Gee (2004a) argues that the standardized academic skills currently taught in US public schools are not enough for success within the “new capitalism,” and that if public schools are to be recuperated as institutions that disrupt rather than advance neoliberal philosophies, they must incorporate the kinds of rich digital learning and production that many young people already participate in. For other educators, like feminist scholar Marnina Gonick (2007), cultural production is a means not only of creating cultural capital, but of resisting and redirecting limiting modes of address. Working with a group of secondary school girls to create a fictional video, Gonick notes the potential of imaginative production both to circumvent those discourses which call upon young women to speak as neoliberalism’s ideal citizen-consumers and to interrupt the current rationality and instrumentalism of educational discourse and curriculum. And because, as Dehli (2010) has argued, such rationality is hardly absent from media education, particularly within its most deconstructive practices, Gonick’s call for the place of fantasy, world-making and the imaginary hold a particular promise for a media education that begins from the experiences, energies and passions of the young.

Perhaps another way to frame media education’s commitment to creative digital production might lie in a return to Raymond Williams’ (1974) hopeful observation about the gap between the intentions and uses of technology, what he calls technology’s “uncontrollable opportunities” (p. 134). Willis recognizes this same fissure within the commodity, arguing that the commodity’s “built-in desperation to find use at any price incites and provokes certain kinds
of appropriation. This appropriation is also not necessarily along standard lines” (p. 403). Indeed, many of the practices of appropriation described in these pages – like vidding, remixing, rewriting and customizing – suggest that young people are in fact mining the gap between the intentions and uses of pop culture texts and technologies, even as commercial interests seek to manage and profit from such efforts. Young women’s fanvids that reuse pop culture texts to proliferate the range of available sexual representations, or online dialogues that co-opt corporate platforms to produce unauthorized forms of parody and hilarity, demonstrate how young people actively and creatively remake the symbols, texts and technologies that surround them in most non-standard kinds of ways. These innovative acts of acculturation are neither unthinking consumption nor mere diversion, as mainstream narratives are wont to represent young people’s online activities. Instead they are, as Willis argues, an expression of “the strong urge of young people to make and maintain a viable cultural identity acknowledged by others in shared social space” (p. 407).

The potential of experimentation can also be found in theories of multiliteracy, expressed as an emphasis on design. Design as a pedagogical concept first appeared in the New London Group’s 1996 manifesto, and pointed in two directions: towards the discernible patterns or conventions of representation (found in modes, genres and discourses, for example) and towards the act of constructing meaning. As an act or process, design produces not only representations, but also selves and social worlds (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). More recently, design has become a key component in thinking about multimodalities. For Kress (2010), design has now become a necessary disposition:

Even those with lesser means or few, are subject to the requirement to assume responsibility for the shaping of meaning in their social environments. The convergence of social conditions, changing semiotic means and affordances in production and dissemination come together to make design the usual, normal,
taken-for-granted, the necessary and essential semiotic disposition and practice.
(p. 134)

Like the work of multiliteracy theorists, Kress’ s thinking about design is multidimensional, and worth unpacking. To begin, with design is always prospective. That is, unlike critique, which focuses on the already-made text, design is forward-looking. It produces new representations, but also new versions of identity, new kinds of learning, and new knowledge. Within contemporary semiotic conditions, design is increasingly complex, as representation, now thoroughly multimodal, is no longer “dependably canonical” (p. 193). Varied and important choices must be made in the process of design: “What genre to use; how to reshape it; what modes to use for what purpose and for which audience; all are questions which – in principle at least – need to be dealt with newly in any act of communication” (p. 193). In this way, design necessarily incorporates elements of critique, as designers survey, reflect on and ultimately select from a range of genres, modes and audiences, as they simultaneously refine their message and purpose.

As Kress (2010) indicates, design can no longer be the realm of specialists. Within a contemporary moment that demands neoliberal self-making, most often through representational and communicational means, all are required to shape meaning. For educators, this sets up a rather clear mandate: the responsibility to recognize, understand and teach design, both as sets of skills and strategic sensibilities or dispositions. In this regard, Kress lays out a number of projects for the contemporary school. Amongst his detailed lists, he suggests that educators must consider the place of the following skills and abilities (p. 194):

1. The skills and required disposition towards production with contemporary media in the creation of semiotic artefacts

2. The ability and skill to act flexibly in representation, communication, text-making and knowledge creation with a disposition to adaptability

3. Full understanding and creative and transformative use of templates
4. A willingness to challenge boundaries of what is provided; for instance in the ‘personalization’ of templates provided in convergent (and other) technologies

These points suggest not only the necessity of being able to produce digital artefacts, but also a willingness to go beyond what is given – that is, to design. That Kress calls upon schools to help all students build such abilities and dispositions towards production and design speaks to the school’s continuing potential both as an institution that promotes equity and as a space in which the current shape and limits of digital culture can be questioned – and ultimately pushed. It is, once again, an attitude of creativity and experimentation that best characterizes a media education responsive to contemporary social and technological conditions.

Perhaps one final aspect of Kress’ (2010) insight into production and design is relevant before ending. As hinted at earlier, Kress suggests that contemporary forms of semiotic action are increasingly experienced as processes of selection. That is, the choosing, reframing, and juxtaposition of already existing material is fast becoming a primary mode of composition, while the text itself becomes a sort of multimodal bricolage (p. 188) Certainly my own research bears out this assertion, for example in the way Gossip Girl fans rewrite popular culture narratives through fan fiction and vids and Colbert Report fans produce a multimodal, multivocal text on the Colbert Nation discussion boards through their selection and placement of photos, videos, emoticons, links, quotations and personal messages. Especially in the case of Gossip Girl vids, choices around selection and recontextualization must be seen as sustained, serious and transformative, productive not only of new texts and identities, but also new visual styles. Indeed, Kress writes about aesthetic choices as “the politics of style,” and in many of the Gossip Girl vids, we can locate an aesthetics – created through selection and reframing – that does indeed embody a politics of the gendered body, of desire, of affect. Such acts of representation-as-reframing impact young people’s sense of agency and identity in such a way that they are
disposed to experience agency through selection. As Kress writes, “young people bring the values of the market, in which agency is experienced through choice and selection, into the school, resulting in a clash over values, knowledge, and semiotic action in representation and communication” (p. 185). This clash, he writes, is “an extremely serious matter,” (p. 134) implying that schools must not only incorporate production and design into their curriculum, but must also challenge their own sense of authority around what counts as communication in the contemporary moment.

As youthful identities and shared social spaces become increasingly digitized, acts of digital production and design take on added importance. One aim of educators, then, might lie in facilitating young people’s efforts in this direction, working with them to explore ways that cultural production and participation might operate more experimentally and less exploitatively at the same time that educators themselves examine and expand their own boundaries around meaning-making. While an invitation to such experimentation and reflection might be seen as an unrealistic proposition within schools whose curriculum is increasingly standardized and whose relationship to digital technology appears to be daily more fraught, it is precisely within such spaces – where youth cultures go largely unexplored while youthful bodies and activities are constantly monitored – that a spirit of experimentation might make real both media education’s and multiliteracy’s claims to social transformation.

Feminist political theorist Carole Pateman (1970) observes that participation must always be approached as a contested and contingent notion whose conceptual instability is tied to societal struggle over the distribution of power. The current terrain of new media participation is not excluded from such insights. Current discourses of media democratization suggest that the internet is rapidly replacing the one-to-many communication model of broadcasting with a
horizontal and interactive model that flattens the hierarchy between users and producers. But as I have tried to argue throughout this thesis, close analysis of participatory environments and practices demonstrate that the emerging relations between users and producers are messy, uneven, multiple and contested. Through their prolific uses of popular culture’s texts and technologies – whether imitative or imaginative, invited or seized upon – young people play an active role in shaping participatory culture and the relationships between users and producers.

Educators do indeed need to respond to the emerging digital culture, but need to do so in a way that recognizes both the tensions swirling around issues of control, creativity, and profit, and the varied roles young people play within these struggles, as users attempting to engage popular culture in meaningful ways that enter their own interests and identities into the public realm.
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