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# Watching Television Without Pity

## The Productivity of Online Fans

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Increasingly, online fan sites are providing instant feedback to television writers and scriptwriters, who are starting to pay more attention to the chatter of “the boards.” At the same time, the boards have become a marketing strategy for TV shows that takes advantage of interactivity to create fan communities and build viewer loyalty. Drawing on a case study of the popular web site *TelevisionWithoutPity.com*, this article explores the way in which online viewer activity doubles as a form of value-enhancing labor for television producers in two ways: by allowing fans to take on part of the work of making a show interesting for themselves and by providing instant (if not necessarily statistically representative) feedback to producers. Based on interviews with producers and contributors to a bulletin board they frequent, the article explores both sides of interactivity: the promise of shared control and the ability to off-load some market research labor onto viewers.

**Keywords:** *interactivity; Television Without Pity; fandom; participation; bulletin boards*

**Mediated interactivity, we are told** by its promoters, is a way of recapturing a lost, more participatory past by moving ahead into an era in which viewers can talk back to the TV—and actually be heard. As training wheels for the coming era of interactivity, many television shows have created official web sites, and some incorporate the comments of online fans who are encouraged to e-mail comments and requests while they watch. Similarly, reality game shows invite viewers to vote for their favorite contestants via text messaging and offer online contests to build viewer loyalty between shows. Such developments deploy the umbrella promise of interactivity: that new media will challenge the passive forms of media

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consumption associated with mass society. Consider, for example, the description by J. J. Abrams—creator of the cult spy show *Alias*—of an online fan site as an “integral part” of the production process: “If the Internet is your audience, TV is quite like a play. . . . Movies are a done deal—there’s no give and take—but in a play, you listen to the applause, the missing laughs, the boos. It’s the same with the Internet. If you ignore that sort of response, you probably shouldn’t be working in TV right now” (Sella 2002, 62). In an era in which the mass audience is becoming increasingly visible thanks to a variety of increasingly sophisticated monitoring technologies, viewers are increasingly encouraged to climb out of the couch to embrace a more “active” approach to their viewing experience. Fan culture is at long last being deliberately and openly embraced by producers thanks in part to the ability of the internet not just to unite far-flung viewers but to make the fruits of their labor readily accessible to the mainstream—and to producers themselves.

The digital embrace of viewer activity requires a rethinking of any approach to media audiences that seeks to orient itself through recourse to the opposition between passive and active viewership, where the former is associated with the straw man figure of the manipulated dupe and the latter with the subversive textual poacher (Jenkins 1992; Fiske 1987). Although Jenkins (1992, 287) once noted that fandom proves “not all audiences are passive,” the advent of interactive media highlights what has been true all along: that *all* audiences are active, although perhaps not in the progressive sense the term has come to imply. What is perhaps distinctive about the advent of interactive media is the development of strategies for promoting, harnessing, and exploiting the productivity of this activity. To observe that such strategies are doubtless facilitated by celebratory portrayal of the creative, subversive potential of an active audience (as an antidote to the implied passivity of the mass audience) is not to discount or dismiss this potential. Rather, it is to attempt to understand and elucidate the ways in which creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy. This article draws on a case study of the Television Without Pity (TWP) web site to explore the role of mediated interactivity in facilitating what Terranova (2000, 45) has described as the “simultaneity of labor as something which is voluntarily given and exploited.”

### The Productivity of TWP: An Overview

For producers, fan sites such as TWP can serve as an impromptu focus group, providing instant feedback to plot twists and the introduction of new characters even as they help to imbue the show with the kind of “stickiness” coveted in the online world by creating a virtual community as an added component of the show. As a *New York Times* article about

online fan sites put it, "It is now standard Hollywood practice for executive producers (known in trade argot as 'show runners') to scurry into Web groups moments after an episode is shown on the East Coast. Sure, a good review in the print media is important, but the boards, by definition, are populated by a program's core audience—many thousands of viewers who care deeply about what direction their show takes" (Sella 2002, 62).

As in the case of other forms of consumption, viewer feedback promises to become increasingly integrated into the production process in a cybernetic cycle that offers to reduce uncertainty and, at least according to the marketing industry, increase customer satisfaction (Pine 1993). Indeed, many of those who visit TWoP, which includes forums devoted to some three dozen shows, are convinced that their feedback has had some sort of impact on writers or producers. As one respondent to my online survey of TWoP participants put it, "The decision makers can come and see what specifically the audience liked and disliked about the way they handled various things, and why . . . which, if they choose to pay attention, can help them to improve their work." Although the site, as its name suggests, encourages critical, "snarkastic" commentary, many of those who post do so in the spirit described by the respondent, adopting the viewpoint of assistants who can help producers and writers do their job better by providing detailed commentary not just on plot development but also on technical aspects of the show, including continuity, wardrobe, and makeup. The "recappers"—hired by TWoP to craft lengthy, detailed, and humorous summaries of the shows—often focus on production details including lighting and editing, thereby helping direct the attention to the formal aspects of the shows they describe.

The result is the merging of two forms of audience participation: the effort viewers put into making the show interesting to themselves and the effort they devote to taking on the role of production assistants and attempting to provide feedback to writers and producers. Part of the entertainment value of a site such as TWoP is the implicit promise to erode the boundaries between the sites of ostensibly passive consumption and those of the sequestered power of media producers—what Couldry (2000) has called the "place of media power." If interactive technologies help dedifferentiate sites of consumption and production according to this account, they also pose a challenge to the boundaries that reinforce the concentration of control in the hands of the few. In keeping with the celebratory predictions of those who champion the democratizing potential of new media (Gilder 1994; Kelly 1996), respondents to an online survey I posted to TWoP overwhelmingly agreed with the assertion that online fan sites will make TV producers more accountable to viewers. As one respondent put it, "I think producers/writers etc. would be well served to see what their 'constituents' want. TV should be more viewer driven and I think TWoP is a foundation for a movement toward that."

Interestingly, the promise of accountability seems to cut both ways: if TWoP provides producers with direct and immediate access to the viewpoints of the audience, it also fosters identification on the part of audiences with the viewpoint of producers. Market and production imperatives such as show promotion, mass audience appeal, and technical details are taken up in depth by TWoP posters, who, in elaborate postings directed to producers, suggest ways to more effectively tailor a particular show to its viewers. The promise of virtual participation in the production process, in short, invites viewers to adopt the standpoint of producers, and thereby facilitates the conversion of viewer feedback into potentially productive marketing and demographic information.

TWoP posters, who pride themselves on their savvy, can be quite cynical about the prospect of shared control and the willingness of producers to pay attention to fan feedback. Several respondents suggested that producers view internet fans as mildly obsessed cranks representing the geek fringe of a show's audience. This perception was highlighted by an infamous incident in TWoP lore: the fallout from a visit to the forums by Aaron Sorkin, creator of the popular show *The West Wing*. After a heated exchange with critical fans, Sorkin scripted an episode that, according to a *New York Times* account, portrayed "hard-core Internet users as obese shut-ins who lounge around in muumuus and chain-smoke Parliaments" (Sella 2002, 66). Still, the incident was taken as a sign that the producers were, at the very least, paying attention, and TWoPpers are perpetually on the lookout for other "shout-outs" that directly or indirectly refer to the site and to their activities. The recapper for a show on the WB network called *Popular* noted, for example, that in a backhanded gesture of recognition for his praise of the show, the writers named a character after him: a junkie who was killed in a car accident. He also received e-mail from cast members who reportedly told him that the show's executive producer, in an effort to find something positive written about the show, printed out his recaps and distributed them to the cast and crew. As he put it, "That was weird because all of a sudden we weren't students sitting around snarking on shows anymore. We were a focus group whose comments were heard by the executive brass" (personal correspondence). Other shout-outs included the use of the recapper's name by the writers for NBC's *Ed* and the appearance of the TWoP logo on a bag in an episode of *Once and Again*. A TWoP recapper who goes by the online moniker "Shack," and who repeatedly criticized the producers of *American Idol* for the misleading way in which they reported the number of audience votes (equating the number of votes cast with the number of voters), said that he heard from someone at Fox that they changed their reporting format in part because of his criticism (personal correspondence). However, the line between real and perceived impact is

not always clear. Fans and recappers have a tendency to interpret changes in the show that seem to be direct responses to online criticism as having been prompted, at least in part, by their comments.

The embrace of new media, interactive sites, and online communities by marketers does not go unacknowledged by posters, some of whom expressed concern that fan sites might be reduced to one more marketing strategy. As one poster put it, "The majority of producers/execs either fear the Internet community or feel that if they try hard enough, they can manipulate it right back." However, direct manipulation by producers is not necessary to make even a critical site like TWP an effective form of promotion. Almost one-third of the 1,800 respondents to my online survey indicated that they felt they watched more television because of TWP, and a large majority said that the site made television more entertaining to watch. Indeed, it is the collective effort of viewers to enlist the internet to enhance the entertainment value of their televisions that emerges as a recurring theme in the remarks of respondents. Interactivity, in short, allows the viewers to take on the work of finding ways to make a show more interesting.

The following section considers the productive character of viewer participation as a form of audience labor to suggest the role played by the promise of interactivity as an incitation to participate in the work of being watched. Subsequent sections explore the importance to posters of having a public forum for their comments, a forum in which their savvy responses can be seen and registered by the TWP community. If, for fans, the promise of online forums is to have their voice heard within the confines of the sequestered site of production, the promise to producers is the ability to monitor viewers. The responses referred to throughout the following argument are drawn from two online surveys posted to the TWP web site for one week in May 2003. The first survey, which was largely quantitative, received more than 1,800 responses; the second, composed of open-ended questions, received more than 500 responses. Statistics in the remainder of this article come from the first survey, quotes from the second. About 87 percent of the responses to the first survey were from women, a fact that will be discussed in the following section. Seventy percent of the respondents indicated they were in the eighteen to thirty-four age range, which represents the demographic group most prized by advertisers and marketers. The respondents, of course, were self-selected—they represented visitors to the web site who clicked on a link to the survey—but the large number of responses provided a rich set of observations, and several clear trends, discussed below, that demonstrate the ways in which viewer participation, while providing perceived benefits to viewers, doubled as what I will characterize as a form of free labor for producers.

## Talking Back to the TV

If, as Antonio Gramsci (1971, 286) suggested, the implementation of a new economic regime requires the elaboration of “a new type of man suited to the new type of work and productive process,” the same might be said of the emerging interactive economy, and even for the advent of interactive television: it requires the creation of new, more active—or “interactive”—types of viewer and consumer. The evolution of the television remote control is suggestive of the type of transformations underway: early remotes that facilitated the growing passivity of the couch potato stressed simplicity and ease—the goal was to reduce the amount of effort, such as it was, associated with the viewing experience. Over time, the drive has been toward an increasing range of functions and the convergence of devices, including remote controls for video recorders, sound systems, and cable boxes. Now, mastering a remote control device can require a fair amount of time and effort pouring over lengthy instruction manuals, and some of the more advanced devices come equipped with their own screens: the TV screen has split into one to be watched and one to be interacted with. Remote control has transformed itself from a passive activity to a hyperactive one. Consequently, one of the central problems facing the promoters of interactive television is how to reconfigure the viewer’s relationship to the screen along the lines of the computer user who both watches and interacts.

A site such as TWoP provides a neat transition to this era of interactive viewing. Many of my respondents told me that even if they were not online while watching TV, they often took notes as they watched, writing down choice morsels of dialogue and observations to help them prepare for their posts. The TWoP forums, in short, provide a pool of research expertise available not just to fellow fans but also to producers. The result is both a ready resource for fans and, at times, a resource for writers and producers who learn from attentive viewers that an upcoming script includes a continuity flaw or plot inconsistency.

TWoP contributors collectively put a significant amount of time and energy into the creation of a detailed and productive online resource. One-fourth of the survey respondents indicated that they spent between five and ten hours a week in the TWoP forums, and 13 percent said they spent more than ten hours a week on the site (much of which, according to several of the comments in the qualitative portion of the survey, takes place at work). In addition, many TWoPpers devoted time not just to watching (and sometimes taking notes on) particular shows but to gathering information about them from other sources. This is precisely the type of effort that Terranova (2000, 33) has described as the “free labor” characteristic of the relationship between the online economy and what,



following the Italian autonomists, she terms "the social factory." She invokes this term to describe the process "whereby 'work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine.'"

The notion of the social factory coincides with the creation of an interactive consumer-viewer, one prepared to devote time and energy to developing the skills necessary to participate in an increasingly interactive media economy. The list of such skills is becoming increasingly long and includes the ability not only to operate a computer and surf the internet but also to master an array of devices including VCR programmers, cell phones, palm pilots, video games, and so on. To the extent that such effort generates useful demographic feedback to producers (as in the case of interactive devices that record, save, and aggregate viewer preferences), it is productive not just in the sense that it facilitates the consumption of an increasingly technologically sophisticated array of media products and services but also insofar as it allows producers to, as one business futurist put it, "save costs by off-loading some of the duties of consumer interactions onto consumers themselves" (Mougayar 1998, 174). Work that used to be the province of producers is being redefined as that of the active consumer, who is increasingly becoming responsible for developing a unique demographic profile and relaying the information it contains to producers.

It is perhaps not insignificant that the work off-loaded onto the consumer is referred to by marketers as a "duty" of interaction. The notion that consumers are increasingly required to take on a broad array of interactive responsibilities neatly ties in with the forms of "governing at a distance" elaborated by the Foucault-inspired literature on governmentality. The interactive consumer is the market analogue of the "active" citizen interpellated by the proponents of the neoliberal postwelfare state. As Rose (2001, 164) puts it, the model of the active citizen is that of the "entrepreneur of him- or herself" who "was to conduct his or her life, and that of his or her family, as a kind of enterprise, seeking to enhance and capitalize on existence itself through calculated acts and investments." It does not seem farfetched to extend this analysis into the realm of consumption, where the consumer is increasingly encouraged to make the investment of time and energy it takes to be an interactive consumer responsible for his or her own viewing and consumption practices and experiences.

Similarly, many TWoPpers suggest that the effort that they put into the shows they watch increases their own viewing pleasure. As one fan put it in a column about her passion for collecting behind-the-scenes and advance information about her favorite show, "At the most basic level, being plugged-in means becoming invested in the creation of the show, rather than simply a passive recipient" (Nussbaum 2002, 1). To the extent that such sites, even those that are ostensibly critical, promote this sense of



investment, they consolidate a multiplatform involvement with the show, the type that producers covet in an era of multitasking and channel surfing. As one respondent put it, "TWoP has definitely made me pay closer attention to the shows I watch (ie script, direction, set decoration, etc.). While at times I can be more critical of a show, for example more aware of continuity errors and obvious audience manipulation, it also makes me more appreciative of the work that goes into creating a show, and insanely, more loyal to a show." This post and several similar ones suggested that the more the boundary between the "offstage" site of production and that of consumption is eroded, the greater the sense of participation-based loyalty.

Although TWoPpers pride themselves on belonging to a knowing and critical subset of viewers, many nonetheless find themselves captivated by those moments when producers, actors, or writers participate in the forums or agree to be interviewed online for the site. One respondent described the experience of hearing from those involved in a favorite show as "unbelievably weird and simultaneously wonderful. Their feedback and insights made my love for the show grow exponentially! If actors and other persons affiliated with shows regularly showed up, I might end up watching much more TV, simply because of the stronger connection I would feel." TV shows attempt to capitalize on such loyalty by creating official web sites, the savviest of which provide interactive interviews and the kind of behind-the-scenes information that gives fans the sense of at least partial entry into an inner circle of producers and writers.

Official sites, however, do not have the luxury of deliberately fostering the critical, sarcastic repartee that has become the staple of TWoP, which provides visitors with not just tightly monitored and witty forums but also lengthy, often sarcastic and savagely funny recaps of selected shows. The combination of enthusiasm and criticism that infuses the site is in part a function of the fact that there are two, not entirely distinct, types of forums: those populated by serious fans who admire the show and those devoted to viewers who love to mock the show being discussed. The former "fan"-oriented forums tend to coalesce around dramatic shows that have included the likes of *24*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Alias*, whereas shows such as *Joe Millionaire* and *The Bachelor* serve as the brunt of the more "snarkastic" forums. The boundary between the two types of forum is far from clear: fans of shows such as *Dawson's Creek* enjoy criticizing it, and snarky viewers become invested in the show that they follow online. In both cases, the goal is not uncritical fannishness but rather for viewers to use the site as a springboard for entertaining one another. The show itself can in some cases become merely a precursor to the real entertainment, which takes the form of its online comeuppance: the gleeful dissection that takes place after it airs.

I first noticed this phenomenon when I was spending a fair amount of time in the official chat rooms for the first U.S. version of the *Big Brother* reality game show. Despite much hype, the show was often mind-numbingly boring, as were the round-the-clock live internet video feeds. The chat rooms became, for at least some viewers, one way to make the show interesting and entertaining. While watching the contestants attempt to entertain themselves in a drab, media-free ranch house on a lot in Studio City, online viewers similarly took on themselves the task of amusing themselves by speculating on plot twists that might make the show more interesting, by sharing information about the various contestants, and by starting online debates. Viewers created their own web pages devoted to the show, including the popular BigBrotherBlows.com. There was, in short, more to host Julie Chen's closing observation to fans that "your participation made this a truly interactive show" than she might have realized. Faced with a show that was routinely dull and contrived, online viewers did the creative work of making the show entertaining to themselves, often by coming up with innovative ways to poke fun at it.

Similarly, TWoP fans focus their attention on the lengthy recaps written by paid freelancers and on the ongoing discussions of fellow fans and critics in the forums. Within this context, the show is no longer the final product but rather the raw material to which value is added by the labor—some paid, some free—of recappers and forum contributors. Not only did roughly one-third of the respondents indicate that they watched more TV because of TwoP, but a similar number noted that there were shows that they would not have watched without the TWoP recaps. The most frequently mentioned of these shows were the reality shows *Joe Millionaire*, *Married By America*, *Are You Hot*, and *The Bachelor*. Respondents said that, taken on their own, such shows were too contrived and poorly produced to merit watching but that they provided wonderful raw material for the TWoP recaps and forums. As one respondent put it, "I watched parts of *Married by America* simply because Miss Alli [one of the favorite recappers] was recapping it and I wanted to see what she was so hysterically mocking. This week, during *For Love or Money*, I had to visit the site because I knew that people would be hilariously mocking the 'robot' bachelor and I was not disappointed. So, yes, TWoP can get me to watch bad TV, at least for a short period." Another viewer expressed similar enthusiasm for Miss Alli's sardonic prose: "I absolutely *will* watch a show just to be able to keep up—*The Amazing Race!* Miss Alli's recaps were just so damn SMART, I had to know what she was skewering." Others said that they tuned into a show after reading a particularly amusing recap and continued to watch to enjoy future recaps. Interestingly, a few respondents said they followed some shows entirely online because the recaps were entertaining and thorough enough to stand on their own.

Although not the norm, these “viewers” had found a way to consume TV-based entertainment without having to watch, not least because the musings of other viewers may well be more creative and interesting than the story lines produced by the culture industry. As Baym (2000, 216) observed in her study of soap opera fans, “The Internet gives fans a platform on which to perform for one another, and their informal performances might please fans more than the official ones do.” Perhaps out of a desire to encourage the kind of participation that fosters loyalty to a show—even if it is a program that viewers love to hate—producers have publicly said that they find web sites to be useful sources of feedback. The executive producer of *ER*, one of TWoP’s staple shows, said, “I don’t overreact to the boards, but I pay real attention to messages that are thoughtful. If you ignore your customer, you do so at your peril” (Bradberry 2003, 11).

As in the case of other forms of interactive commerce, the information provided by viewers does not just add value to the product; it doubles as audience research. Fan communities have been around for a long time, but the growth of online bulletin boards received a boost with the reality TV boom, perhaps in part because of the way in which such shows foster a sense of participation by proxy (Gardyn 2001). Indeed, several formats incorporate fan participation online or by cell phone to exploit the promise of an ersatz democratization, a promise that is often repeated in the media coverage. As a research article in *American Demographics* explains, “The popularity of this format with youth also has a lot to do with their growing up in a democratized society, where the Internet, web cams and other technologies give the average Joe the ability to personalize his entertainment” (Gardyn 2001, 38).

The ready equation of commodity customization with democratization echoes the marketing rhetoric of the interactive revolution. If the implicit message of reality TV is one of increasingly shared control, it is not surprising that CBS spokesman Chris Ender said the power of the web-based fan groups first caught his attention during the airing of the smash hit reality series *Survivor*: “In the first season there was a groundswell of attention in there. . . . We started monitoring the message boards to actually help guide us in what would resonate in our marketing. It’s just the best market research you can get” (Sella 2002, 68). TWoPpers may be working for free, but that does not mean they are not producing value. The work they do—the work of making their preferences transparent, of allowing themselves to be watched as they do their watching—is an increasingly important component of the emerging interactive economy.

One of the ancillary effects of the promise of shared control mobilized by producers who publicize the impact that their online fans have on a show is that of an implicit bridging of the production–consumption divide. If

viewers are, to some limited extent, allowed to participate in the production process, then the notion that a new set of duties has devolved on them becomes much more palatable. Furthermore, the promise of shared control, the invitation to participate in the production process, doubles as an invitation to internalize the imperatives of producers. There are entire threads on TWoP devoted, for example, to the marketing of a favored show. Posters frequently bemoan the ineffectiveness of promotional ads for the shows they follow and offer suggestions as to which characters and images ought to be included to increase audience appeal and viewership. Even in the face of a still relatively nonresponsive industry, the formal introduction of an interactive element helps foster a sense of identification with producers. While there are instances in which the feedback seems to have had an impact, for the most part the impact from the boards is limited and indirect. The fun comes not so much from watching the implementation of viewer suggestions—since very few of these have any directly discernable impact—as from embracing the modicum of interactivity that makes it possible to identify with the position of the producer.

The work that viewers do for producers emerges as a necessary corollary to their entrepreneurial activity: the work that they do for and on themselves. If, in other words, the advent of advanced neoliberalism is associated with the constellation of practices that promote the “responsibilization” of the citizen, a similar logic emerges in the realm of consumption, wherein viewers are invited to take on some of the “duties” associated with their media consumption. If reality TV provides a representative version of this process by allowing selected members of the audience to stand in for the viewer, web sites such as TWoP broaden the potential scope of participation via interactivity. Viewed within this context, the recurring refrain that TWoP promotes critical and intelligent viewing on the part of its participants appears as a form of self-optimization. If, as Rose (2001, 164) suggests, the emergent society of control operates on the assumption that “one is always in continuous training, lifelong learning, perpetual assessment, continual incitement to buy [and] to improve oneself,” the imperative for consumers is to become not only more efficient but also more informed and even more critical viewers. To borrow some loaded terms from the political sphere, if the passive viewer is associated with the welfare “culture of dependency,” the active viewer is associated with the postwelfare culture of individual responsibility and self-activation. If TV is low quality, unentertaining, or unintelligent, the viewer can take on the duty of making it more interesting, entertaining, and intelligent. As one respondent put it, “I would like my TV to be smarter, better written, more intellectually stimulating, and more emotionally engaging. With TWoP, at least my watching of TV can be those things.”

In contrast to the image of television as a mind-numbing addiction that promotes a culture of passivity, that of TWoP-enhanced TV is one of active participation, self-improvement, and actualization, even creativity, the benefits of which, it might be added, redound on the producers by increasing the value of TV content without in any way realigning the relations of production. As the deployment of the promise of interaction suggests, shared production does not necessarily entail shared control. Respondents repeatedly reiterated their assertion that TWoP allowed them to develop and hone their critical skills, the very skills that were ostensibly threatened and eroded by the “plug-in drug.” One respondent summed up this recurring refrain as follows: “My inner critic was always apparent, now it is a better, more intelligent form.” Or, as another respondent put it, TWoP has “certainly made me more snarky/critical of television. However, it’s also made me more critical of my own writing in that it’s highlighted some clichés and contrivances that we systematically use without thinking about them. All in all it’s made me more creative.”

The portrayal of interactivity as a means for revitalizing a self-actualizing form of participation parallels the marketing of the digital economy as one that counters the stultification and homogenization of mass society. Indeed, one of the recurring marketing strategies of the new economy is the suggestion that with the addition of the interactivity prefix—the telltale lower case *i*—forms of media that were once passive and mind numbing are transformed into means of creative self-expression and empowerment. Thus, as one survey respondent put it, a site such as TWoP “changes TV from a brain-dead pastime to an art and a science.” Or, similarly, “bad TV becomes good TV when combined with TWoP.” The element of reflexivity, combined with a “snarkastic” savvy, inoculates the viewer against the ostensible depredations of passivity.

The intriguing result is that, thanks to the inclusion of the formal element of interactivity, the character of a particular show changes from that of a mass-produced product of the culture industry into a tool to hone and develop one’s critical thinking and viewing skills. As one response put it, “Being able to see through the stereotypes and clichés bad shows propagate is a useful skill, much like being able to deconstruct and analyze advertising. At least if you are able to hone your critical thinking skill during a tasteless show, it’s not a total waste.” Another TWoPper invoked the terms of the famous indictment of the mass media for fostering a form of “narcotizing dysfunction” (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948), suggesting that the ostensibly stultifying effects of the mass media can be overcome by reflexive, critical humor: “Applying such a smart, dark sense of humor to the thing that pervades our lives takes away some of it’s hypnotic power. When you look at it critically it is something you are experiencing and participating in, rather than something that is narcotizing you.”

Several respondents suggested that the development of critical viewing skills, combined with the feedback supplied by increasingly sophisticated viewers, might result in improved programming. However, even if such a result is not forthcoming, savvy reflexivity serves as a kind of coping mechanism, a strategy for salvaging the very same advertisements and programming that, viewed uncritically or nonreflexively, are relegated to the category of the shallow manipulations of the culture industry. In other words, it is not the content itself but the attitude taken by the viewers, the way in which they watch—or, more precisely, the way in which they are *seen* to watch (or see themselves watching)—that makes the difference. TWoPpers esteem savvy, critical posts highly, and those who are active contributors to the site say that while they like the idea that producers may be paying attention, they post mainly for the benefit of fellow posters and the moderator. The goal is not so much to influence the group of producers and production assistants referred to in posts as TPTB (the powers that be) as it is to entertain and impress the TWoP community with wit, insight, and, above all, “snark.”

#### “Thanks for Listening (Or Not)!”

Despite the stories of shout-outs and other examples of the impact of the online community on producers and writers, the savvy attitude of TWoPpers includes a marked skepticism toward the notion that they might actually be making a difference. As one poster put it, “The producers are such prostitutes to advertisers and whatever other show may be popular that giving advice would be pointless. It is all about the Benjamins.” Indeed, most of the respondents took pains to suggest that they did not have any illusions about transforming or improving the culture industry. The recurring theme in the responses was that contributors post primarily for one another and that if producers feel like paying attention, so much the better. Some respondents cautioned against the dangers of TWoPpers believing the intermittent media hype about the influence of the boards: “Although the artistic personnel of some shows probably read TWOP, I think the posters on the forums think they have more influence than they probably do. If they write posts for the series creators, they are deluded as to their influence.” The more cynical posters note that there is a certain amount of public relations value to be gained from suggesting that online fans influence the production process: it helps foster the multiplatform (internet plus TV) marketing of the show and thus build loyalty.

For those who claim to have few illusions about the impact they’re having on the industry, the appeal of online critique is not just its entertainment value but also the recognition that they receive online. Respondents repeatedly emphasized the satisfaction they received from



having their posts noticed and responded to in the online forums. A typical example was the observation by one regular poster that “when posting, my main goal is to make the other posters laugh, to be witty. If I get a ‘word’ out of the deal, my day’s pretty much made.” Another respondent, highlighting the work done by viewers in making the viewing experience more entertaining, wrote, “My ‘job’ on TWoP is the class clown—almost all of my posts are humorous in nature and I love it when posters respond to them in their posts. I guess I enjoy the validation that I can indeed be funny.” A premium was placed on the ability to get some kind of shout-out, not from the producers or writers but from fellow viewers: “The pleasure kicks in when I’ve helped to expand someone’s knowledge or world-view and when I’m quoted or declared funny. (I like making other people laugh).” The high expectations that posters have for the level of wit, sarcasm, and snark in some of the forums apparently has the unintended result of keeping some readers from posting, in part because they are worried their own posts will not live up to the standard set by the regulars. As one avid TWoP fan put it in a parenthetical aside to an effusive description of the quality of the discussion on the boards, “I should note that I’m a lurker—too afraid to post!”

But for those who do post, the goal is not just to be heard—but to be seen in a particular way: as savvy viewers who are not taken in by the transparent forms of manipulation practiced by producers. The ability of the viewers to make themselves seen is perhaps the characteristic attribute of the impending era of interactivity, and its implications are worth exploring in a bit more detail. The celebratory promise of the interactive era is that transparency will result in greater democratization, in both the political and the economic spheres (although the latter is often conflated with the former). This promise is underwritten by the unexamined equation of participation with shared control: that any medium that promotes interaction is politically progressive and empowering.

However, the exploitation of participation as a form of audience labor—and even as a source of demographic information that can be appropriated and commodified—suggests that this equation needs to be approached with a bit more caution. Jodi Dean (2002, 173) argues that the interactivity fostered by new media promotes a form of publicity without publics: a drive to advertise one’s own opinion that falls short of the political commitments of the public sphere. For her, the characteristic mode of subjectivity associated with new media is that of universalized celebrity: “The subject is driven to make itself visible over and over again. It has to understand itself as a celebrity precisely because the excesses of cyberia make it uncertain as to its place in the symbolic order.” Dean is here following Žižek’s (1999) diagnosis of the pathologies associated with the ostensible decline of the symbolic order (“Big Other”) in postmodernity,



understood as an era in which the grand narratives that underwrote and guaranteed a shared sense of meaning and values have been debunked, or, perhaps more precisely, an era in which such narratives have debunked themselves. The result is a generalized skepticism, a universal savvy that places a premium on irony, detached cynicism, sarcasm, and, of course, snark.

Furthermore, as Dean (2002) suggests, this skepticism translates into the self-contradictory (and self-stimulating) logic of the attempt to make some kind of impression on a symbolic register whose very existence is in doubt. The savvy subject, wary of metanarratives, repeatedly attempts to assert this wariness as a sign that he or she is no dupe. The paradox lies in the attempt to register the fact of one's own nonduped status—a process that, of course, implicitly smuggles back in the efficacy of the symbolic register. The impasse of the desire to be seen as savvy results in the properly perverse logic of celebrity described by Dean, one in which the subject gets off on the very failure of the attempt to make an impression on a debunked symbolic order. Savvy contemporary subjects know better than to imagine that interactivity would actually allow them to make an impression on TPTB of the entertainment industry, one whose claims to represent the demands of consumers is little more than a ruse of the marketing process. As one respondent put it, "TV producers are kind of like politicians, I think, in that no matter what they do some people will complain, so they just do what they want and/or follow the advertising dollars." Or, as another post put it, "Producers of TV (and here I include the entire range from network execs through creators, writers, actors down to the grips) firmly and completely believe that they are the Gods who know 'how to tell the story' and that we the viewers are the idiots watching the shadows on the cave wall."

In the face of this uncanny autonomy—uncanny because of the persistence of the functioning of the market and political system in the wake of the debunking of their ostensibly foundational ideologies—it is perhaps not quite enough to observe, with Dean (2002), that viewers are compelled to continually attempt to publicize themselves because they are unsure of whether their presence has been registered. Rather, the failure of these attempts has become, in some sense, the goal in itself. Translated into the terms of TWoP, the savvy, snarkastic response is not incidental to the prevailing skeptical attitude toward the promise that the boards will democratize the viewing process. Rather, one of the apparent goals of posters is to be seen by others as not being duped, to make it clear to one another that they have not been caught up in the illusory, breathless promise of a kind of immaculate revolution, painlessly effected by technological developments.

Surely, there are those on TWoP who imagine a world in which producers will pay more attention to viewers and in which viewers may play an

active and creative role in producing the culture they then turn around and consume. However, the characteristic attitude encouraged by the site and its posters is much more skeptical. Even if feedback is taken into account, would this not just be one more form of market rationalization, the use of “just-in-time” focus groups to fine tune a show or the exploitation of online communities as a form of viral marketing, a way to spread buzz by word of mouth rather than solely relying on advertising promotions?

In a world in which the half-life of the co-optation of ostensibly subversive cultural forms seems to have shrunk almost to zero, in which revolution itself has become a marketing slogan, the savvy subject looks askance at the promise of power sharing. Rather than buying into the promise that interactive technology will fundamentally alter the power relations between consumer and producer, the interactive viewer enlists the proffered technologies to, if nothing else, let others know that he or she has not been taken in by the ruse. The minimalist, defensive pleasure that remains for the savvy subject is, at the very least, that of ensuring he or she is seen to not be a dupe. This might be described, in the Lacanian terms enlisted by Dean, as a strategy for “getting off” on the very failure of the promise of power sharing.

The consequence is a sense of political inertness—only the dupes imagine that things could be otherwise; the nonduped may well crave social change, but they are not so naïve as to be fooled by their desire into believing that it is actually possible. Rather, they are invited to perform (and exhibit) their own voyeurism as a form of participation. The promise of interactive television is to take this equation literally; in the digital future, watching will really be a form of participation precisely because we will be able to “talk back” to the tube. The savvy subject will be realized in the form of the active viewer. If the viewers cannot be insiders, at least they can make it clear that they are not being fooled by the insiders, and this is the closest that the interactive technologies can bring them to the inner sanctum.

As Gitlin (1990) notes, savvy encourages viewers to identify with insiders by defining the issues as they define them, which is an apt description of much of what goes on in the production-oriented strands of the TWoP boards. Posters who identify problems in continuity, in plot and character development, in makeup and lighting, and even in publicity and promotional material are using the interactive forum as one in which to imagine themselves in the position of the producer so as to understand the imperatives that shape the programming they consume. In this respect, they adopt a standard critical procedure, an attempt to demystify and explain the behind-the-scenes functioning of the media. And it is in this very dynamic that a consideration of the TWoP web site reflects back on the process of criticism itself. The danger, in a savvy era, is that the goal of self-reflexive knowledge is not so much to reshape the media—to imagine how things

might be done differently—as it is to take pleasure in identifying with the insiders. The next best thing to having power, on this account, is identifying with those who do rather than naively imagining that power can (or should) be redistributed or realigned. In this respect, the snarkest and most critical of the fan sites runs the danger of partaking in what Gitlin describes as “the postmodern fascination with surfaces and the machinery that cranks them out, a fascination indistinguishable from surrender—as if once we understand that all images are concocted we are enlightened” (21).

The stance of the savvy viewer is twofold: an insider’s skepticism toward the notion that real insiders are paying any attention to the boards combined with a sense that understanding the insider’s perspective sets the savvy viewer apart from the rest of the viewing audience. Thus, one respondent described the pleasure of TWP as follows: “It is hard to explain, but I feel like an ‘insider’ when I read TWP. Like we are a community of those in the know, not a bunch of clueless losers.” Another poster observed that “reading and participating in the forums makes me feel that all hope for humanity is not lost. If there are so many people watching reality TV, at least not all of us are taking it seriously. At least the folks at TWP are looking at it mostly as a theater of the absurd. TWP makes it easier for us to convince ourselves that we are smart, while watching DUMB television.”

Such is the fate of the savvy viewer: to search for the redeeming value of the media not in the content—over which their newly enhanced, interactive participation has little influence—but in understanding why their participation *must be* ineffective, in their insider knowledge of how the system works. Within this context, the lure of interactivity loses some of its luster. Rather than a progressive challenge to a nonparticipatory medium, it offers to divert the threat of activism into the productive activity of marketing and market research. Interactivity turns out to be rather more passive than advertised. The drive of savvy viewers to make themselves seen (as nondupes) overlaps with the invitation proffered by interactive media: for audiences to reveal themselves in increasing detail to producers. The logic of a savvy site such as TWP, which allows viewers to take pleasure in critiquing the programming within which they are immersed, seems to stage Žižek’s (1999, 284) formulation of the drive as the ability to derive “libidinal satisfaction from actively sustaining the scene of one’s own passive submission.” This Lacanian formula applies to the savvy stance in general—and perhaps more generally to the version of interactivity being prepared for the viewing public by the promoters of the digital economy.

## Conclusion: Refeudalization and the Publicity Sphere

If, as Habermas (1991) has argued, the political public sphere can trace its origins to the literary public sphere, perhaps we can discern its definitive

decline in the form of participation modeled by the interactive, televisual publicity sphere anticipated by sites such as TWoP. Such sites exhibit many of the attributes of the public sphere: open admission, discussion of topics of communal interest, and, at least on TWoP, a relatively scrupulous adherence to norms of noncoercive speech. TWoP moderators, for example, ban anyone who directly insults another poster and generally ban offensive, sexist, and other forms of inflammatory or insulting commentary. Many posters described the site as a variant of public sphere that allowed them to intelligently discuss topics with strangers and thereby to develop their own critical and analytical skills and to learn from one another. Moreover, the internet is, at least in some respects, more open than the literary societies and secret societies described by Habermas. One poster suggested that it remains more open than other venues of social interaction "in which men still tend to dominate conversations, meetings, and classrooms, and women's opinions are often ignored or marginalized, even if they have something valuable to contribute. Online forums give us the chance to be heard, and the reader can choose to ignore it or pay attention—but the point is, WE GET THE CHANCE TO BE HEARD. It isn't any wonder that the majority of posters in most chatrooms are female?" Such sentiments may help explain the high number of female respondents to the survey even as they echo cyberfeminist Sadie Plant's (1997, 144) suggestion that the medium lends itself to a dismantling of gendered power relations in part because of the decentralized forms of communication it facilitates: "The roundabout, circuitous connections with which women have always been associated and the informal networking at which they have excelled now become protocols for everyone."

Removed from traditionally male-dominated public spaces and accessible not just from home but from the privacy of one's workspace, bulletin boards such as TWoP make it hard to differentiate posters based on gender. Perhaps not insignificantly, the form of unpaid labor that goes into a site such as TWoP bears a certain similarity to the unpaid labor of the homemaker. The ability of the new media to dedifferentiate sites of production, domesticity, and leisure has been portrayed by the promoters of the new economy as a form of liberation from spatial constraints: the telecommuter will be able to live wherever he or she wants, skip the traffic, and work from home (or the beach, corner coffee shop, or any other "wired" location). At the same time, as Darin Barney (2000, 147) points out, dedifferentiation makes it possible for employers to off-load the costs of the workplace onto workers and encourages the transformation of the home into a workplace in which domestic labor and paid labor simultaneously take place: "When performed at the same site where cooking, cleaning, and diaper-changing waits to be done, network-mediated telework enables women to exceed even Aristotle's designation of their utility: they can be,

simultaneously, unpaid domestic managers as well as poorly paid . . . wage slaves." The flip side of the fact that online discussion forums facilitate the forms of audience activity that Bacon-Smith (1992) describes as fostering "a women's art/communication system" is that it simultaneously makes possible the exploitation of forms of dedifferentiated and networked labor that have historically characterized the sites of women's work.

The forms of interactivity enabled by networked media also allow formerly nonproductive activities to generate valuable information commodities to the extent that they take place within the monitoring capacity of an interactive digital enclosure. The work of being watched doubles as yet another form of unpaid labor. In this respect, it is tempting to read Plant's (1997) techno-utopianism in the opposite direction: if the traditional gender hierarchy is challenged online, the result is not necessarily an emancipatory privileging of decentralized networking but the universalization of forms of exploitation associated with unpaid labor. As Witheford (2004, 14) suggests, the invisibility of free labor in the "social factory"—the fact that an increasing variety of activities double as value-generating labor thanks to the information-gathering capacity of interactive media—echoes the invisibility of forms of "female domestic drudgery" that are functional to capital "which profited by avoiding the full costs of recreating the successive generations of the labor force."

Viewed in this light, the exploitation of free labor represents the obverse of fan participation as the potentially subversive form of textual "poaching" described by Jenkins (1988, 1992). Jenkins's (1988, 86) formulation relies on and compounds a potentially misleading appropriation of a production-oriented metaphor suggested by de Certeau: "Readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves." The metaphor breaks down in the transition from fields to texts: the consumption of crops is exclusive (or, as economists, put it, "rival"), the productive consumption of texts is not. Far from "despoiling" the television texts through their practices, TWoPpers enrich them, not just for themselves but for those who economically benefit from the "added value" produced by the labor of viewers. This is one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary deployment of interactivity: the ability to enfold forms of effort and creativity previously relegated to relatively unproductive (economically speaking) realms within the digital embrace of the social factory.

This is not to dismiss the claims that fan or viewer groups may be engaged in creative activity, nor is it to write off the notion that such groups serve as "communities of practice" (Baym 2000) or sources of enjoyment, culture building, and relationship building (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). Nevertheless, the point of exploring the ways in which the

interactivity of viewers *doubles* as a form of labor is to point out that, in the interactive era, the binary opposition between complicit passivity and subversive participation needs to be revisited and revised. It is one thing to note that viewers derive pleasure and fulfillment from their online activities and quite another to suggest that pleasure is necessarily either empowering for viewers or destabilizing for entrenched forms of corporate control over popular culture. If, as Jenkins (1992, 278) observes, "fandom constitutes the base for consumer activism," it would be misguided to regard all viewer participation as activist. Activity and interactivity need to be clearly distinguished from activism. This becomes a particularly important distinction in an era when the simple equation of participation with empowerment serves to reinforce the marketing strategies of corporate culture. It is precisely the creative character of viewer activity that makes it more valuable to producers: the better the contributions to TWoP, the more likely viewers are to continue to tune in to a particular show; the more work viewers put into researching a program, the more likely they are to form an affective attachment to it. Thus, to note with Baym (2000, 16), following Radway, noting that audience practices have the "potential" for empowerment is not to valorize audience practice "as is." Rather, Radway (1986, 116), in reflecting on her own work on women's romance novels, makes a clear distinction between the potential invoked by the contradictions in audience response and what would count as progressive action: not just transformations in romance narratives themselves but transformation of "real social and material relations as well as the way they are conceived within symbolic forms." By the same logic, fan activity that—even in the form of a communal activity with all of its attendant benefits—ends up reinforcing social and material relations might be considered a form of active participation in the constitution of those relations rather than a challenge to them. The workplace can be a site of community and personal satisfaction and one of economic exploitation. Thinking of these characteristics together is crucial to any critical approach to the current deployment of the promise of interactivity. The internet helping to promote the formation of communities of practice around TV shows in the era of relationship marketing community is, as Fernback (2002, 11) notes, an increasingly valuable marketing apparatus. The advantage to marketers of online communities is that they help build allegiance to particular products, serving as forums for practices of self-disclosure that generate detailed information about consumers. As one company quoted by Fernback puts it, the systematic development of product-related sites represents "a trend toward the transformation of ad hoc e-communities into established forums that drive product innovation and contribute to profits."

TWoP, which remained an independent site for several years, was purchased by Bravo (whose parent company is NBC Universal) in early 2007,



but its posters continue to make the most of its largely critical approach to the TV shows it recaps. The site may have the potential to serve as an instant focus group, as one respondent put it, but perhaps even more importantly, it helps draw viewers to particular shows and allows them to build up social and information capital that increases their commitment to viewing. Several posters noted that they continued to watch shows that they once enjoyed but no longer really liked because they wanted to participate in the ongoing online dissection of the program, its characters, and its writers. As a public sphere, the site also retains certain pathologies of online community, including the passion for a friction-free form of community, what Kevin Robins (1999, 166) has described as "the desire to be free from the challenge of difference and otherness" and a "a culture of retreat from the world." As one respondent put it, echoing Robins, "The site . . . provides a sense of community, without the tangles of actually knowing the people."

TWoP also provides a form of publicity without—as Dean (2002) suggests—a public, or, put in slightly different terms, a public that has dispersed its activity into a savvy but domesticated interactivity. Publicity as a counterhegemonic principle enacts not the drive toward self-exposure associated with the celebrity subject of cyberia but the exposure of the secret of power. The challenge was not directed toward those private secrets associated with the personal lives of public figures but toward the principle of secrecy governing public affairs. The contemporary Habermasian diagnosis of refeudalization suggests a return to the principle of the secrecy of power accompanied by the pomp of public display. What the diagnosis of refeudalization misses—and what is highlighted by the form of savvy critique associated with sites such as TWoP—is the way in which the emerging (interactive) constellation of voyeurism and self-disclosure facilitates identification with the "insiders" on the part of outsiders. One of the aspects of the reverse form of the scopic drive—the exhibitionistic obverse of voyeurism in an increasingly voyeuristic culture—is the impulse to show what one knows. A savvy identification with producers and insiders facilitated by interactive media fosters an acceptance of the rules of the game. In an era of interactive reflexivity, the media turn back on themselves: new media mock the old while tellingly failing to deliver on the promised transformative shift in power relations. It is perhaps possible to discern in the criticism of the commercial mass media a certain resentment over a failed promise, that information would double as a form of power sharing, that once the secret of power were exposed it would be shared. The perceived dissolution of the democratic promise of publicity, in an era in which information is increasingly available and in which power and wealth (and the media) are simultaneously becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few, feeds a savvy attitude toward



the media itself. The critical impetus shifts away from political leaders—witness a Pew poll that indicated almost half of the population felt the media were becoming too critical (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003)—and toward the media themselves. The result, however, is not a transformed media but participatory submission. As in the online world of TWoP, spectators take their pleasure in knowing—with the insiders—just why things are as bad as they are and why they could not be any different.

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