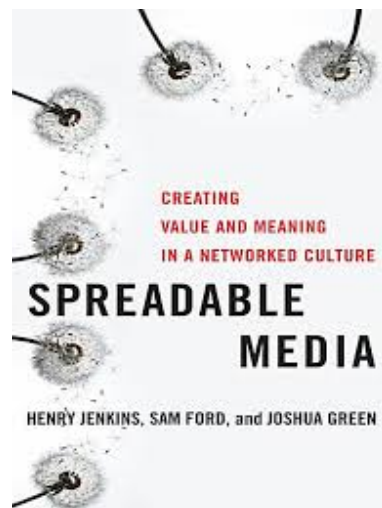


## Reviews

**Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture (Postmillennial Pop)**  
by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. [Kindle edition] NYU Press, 2013. 370 pp., \$14.03,  
ISBN: 0814743501

In their new book, American-based scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green join forces to describe the mechanics of textual spreadability in contemporary media-scape across the globe. They also challenge a number of ways in which we *theorize* the field, most notably, a seemingly unyielding notion of ‘viral’ (and related metaphors) as applied to the information information that gets circulated through various networks, grassroots or otherwise. The authors of the tome are no strangers to ambitious endeavors: all of them are accomplished new media theorists and practitioners in the field, largely pioneered by Henry Jenkins, whose most recent definitive work, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (first published in 2006), has already become a media studies classic. Since the new volume aims to provide us with a comprehensive description of how ‘publics’ engage with texts that are spreadable or drillable, or both (and of what makes texts be that way), the authors had to enlist some serious help from a number of their colleagues. Among those who contributed material to the ‘extended book’, as it is referred to throughout the text, are Nancy Baym, Kevin Driscoll, Jason Mittell, and Stacy Wood, to name just a few (the full list of contributors, as well as their articles, can be found on the book’s website: <http://spreadablemedia.org/contributors/>).



Structurally, the principal argument is broken down into seven chapters, each, in its way, ‘revising the concept of participatory culture to reflect the realities of a dramatically altered and still-evolving mediascape’ (p. 36).

The authors begin with the analysis of ‘the economic and social logics shaping this spreadable media landscape’. In Chapter 1, ‘Where Web 2.0 Went Wrong’, they take a critical look at how entertainment industry, on the one hand, and audiences, on the other, have appropriated and reshaped the idea of participatory culture. Looking back at the optimistic views of Web 2.0 typical of media scholarship of the mid-2000s, the authors choose to concentrate on the phenomenon’s present-day discontents. Technically, they argue, Web 2.0

delivers on its promise to enable content's spreadability. Conceptually, however, there is a gap in understanding of 'fair participation' between media producers and audiences. A discussion of YouTube's video and audio take down strategies exemplifies those tensions, at the center of which lies the concept of moral economy as interpreted by the audiences, who are quite keen to renegotiate the terms of their 'implicit contract' with the industry. Further on in the chapter, the authors make a compelling argument for a revision of current economic models, since they no longer reflect the varieties of value produced by the audiences and do not recognize the conceptual shift from 'exploitation' to 'engagement'. Moreover, the argument continues, a purely economic stance adopted by the media industry makes it impossible to recognize the full scope of motives for media sharing, thus reducing the latter to the notions of 'stealing' and 'piracy'. On the other end of the spectrum are the companies who are trying to monetize on 'free labor' of fans by converting symbolic value into commercial, which is viewed as corrosive to moral economies.

Chapter 2, 'Reappraising the Residual', further investigates value in gift economy and introduces the concept of a new, hybrid type of exchange, which combines commercial gain and social advancement. This notion is exemplified through a detailed analysis of media products of 'residual value', that through the process of fan re-appraisal go from being 'garage sale items' to retro or collectors' items to a fully commercially viable product. The authors conclude: 'At times when the audience's motivation and the company's desire to make a profit align, new business opportunities might result. Often, they will not. The media and marketing industries still have not, as a whole, developed an attuned ear to their audiences and how their intellectual property is circulating between these two logics' (pp. 111-112).

Chapter 3, 'The Value of Media Engagement' takes unapologetic stock of practices currently employed by the industry to 'count' their audiences. The delivery of content, the authors argue, has all but shifted from appointed-based model (when viewers have to be at home at a certain time to watch the show) to engagement-based model (which takes into account the time-shifting technologies and delayed viewing), yet the counting practices remain tied to an old system. As a result, decisions are made on the basis of the view count, and that does not reflect actual the range of audience for a certain product. Eleanor Baird Stribling offers an alternative model for evaluating engagement in the enhanced version of the book – a model based on the amount of time and frequency of interaction with a media property rather than on a number of viewers tuning in during the broadcast (or catching up a few days after). Demographically, the audience is deemed 'unknowable' and thus producers are advised to turn to transmedia, because in this case 'the gradual dispersal of material can sustain these various types of audience conversations, rewarding and building particularly strong ties with a property's most ardent fans while inspiring others to be even more active in seeking and sharing new information' (p. 143). It is unproductive, the authors of the book argue, to cling to old methods of targeting just one segment of the audience, because in a mediated world one needs to be aware of the diversity of both the publics and their terms of engagement with the material.

What these terms are exactly is revealed in Chapter 4, 'What Constitutes Meaningful Participation?' In their discussion of meaningful participation, the authors start with addressing the recurrent notion that only a small percentage of Web 2.0 users actually create anything of

value. Whether members of the audience produce any media content is less important, the authors argue, than the fact that they have easy access to means of production. The audiences thus transform into ‘publics’, who demonstrate greater and deeper involvement with the media content (through ‘acts of curation and circulation’ (p.170)). Echoing the arguments made in Chapters 1 and 3, this part of the book also stresses the crucial importance of listening to publics, as opposed to quantitatively acknowledging their presence. The spreadable media mindset, on the other hand, offers an understanding that audience members ‘are more than data, that their collective discussions and deliberations — and their active involvement in appraising and circulating content — are generative’ (p.176). With the transformation of the audiences into publics, the author notes, the nature of content changes. In Chapter 3, these changes were described in terms of transmediality and ‘drillability’, in Chapter 4, these are joined by ‘grabability’ – in other words, a technical possibility to quote the content or the parts of content that a member of the audience deems meaningful. However, the authors remind us that what kinds of content get spread and whose voices get heard in a mediated dialogue is still largely determined by the parameters of access.

Chapter 5, ‘Designing for Spreadability’, further details the general ‘requirements’ for the texts to be spreadable, both technical (such as availability on demand, portability, relevance, etc.) and content-related (such as whether the text is ‘producerly’, or contains enough humor, constitutes a rumor or is otherwise extremely topical, and so on). I am using the word ‘requirements’ in brackets, since the chapter does not attempt to offer a universal recipe for spreadability. Instead of setting hard and fast ‘to do’ rules, the authors analyze successful practices and conclude with the strategies that *generally* seem to work in mediated environments. Another valuable takeaway from this chapter is that content still matters. If I have one criticism towards this volume, it would be this: the idea that *what* is being spread is as important as the mechanics of *how* it is being spread does not appear until page 199.

Two final chapters are dedicated to phenomena directly related to the pluralization of discourse in the context of spreadable media economy. While the first five chapters discussed the changes in the modes of consumption, Chapter 6, ‘Courting Supporters for Independent Media’, concentrates on the shifts in the patterns of media production. In it, the authors present several cases for independent media. Going across platforms, they first introduce the story of indie filmmaker, Nina Paley, whose award-winning animation feature, *Sita Sings the Blues* (2009), has been released under a Creative Commons License. It is a little puzzling, however, that Paley’s copyright battles over the film’s musical score – central to the distribution process in the first years since the film’s production - are only mentioned in the ‘Notes’ section. Breaking the story up like this creates an image of success that is a little too polished, in my opinion. Paley’s story is followed by the account of Cory Doctorow’s publishing experiments. The author reported an increase in sales after he had made his books available for free download. Enhanced access of the publics to the means of production has shifted some balances in the music, game development and comic book industries as well, enabling more independent producers to gain recognition and better assess the popularity of their product. The chapter also discusses emergent ways of involving the public in the production, financing and distribution of indie media content (namely crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, and ‘crowdsurfing’).

Chapter 7, 'Thinking Transnationally', concludes the volume by offering something that is particularly relevant to the audience of this journal: an account of spreadability practices set outside North America. The other chapters have already shown how the networked society facilitates the spread of culturally relevant content previously unavailable to some niche markets and social groups; this chapter focuses on the international outreach of cultural production. The authors choose to focus on community-based sharing and media repurposing practices rather than on industry-facilitated cultural expansion, and offer a colorful arrangement of instances of cross-cultural media recontextualization. To this end, they examine the Kenyan rebirth of an American superhero, transnational (and transformational) journeys of kuduro, piracy-aided expansion of Nollywood's international market, as well as diasporic, immigrant and cosmopolitan media engagement back in the US. Still, cross-cultural exchange of media content may remain horizontal rather than vertical; as the authors note, it may be easier for the digital elites across the world to communicate between each other than it is for them to communicate with their less affluent or less technologically advanced compatriots (p. 287). Another important conclusion from the discussion about the cross-border cultural flow is that the latter is uneven, messy, and yet capable of producing greater cultural understanding and deeper dialogue than a localized product marketed internationally through traditional means.

Overall, the book represents a comprehensive, well-informed and amply-referenced study of today's spreadable media environment, its logics and practices. For a tome that claims to be a collection of snapshots, it is surprisingly coherent as far as the flow of argumentation goes, and if, at times, one can feel a little overwhelmed by the sheer number of case studies, they can always refer to either Introduction or Conclusion for a more 'boiled down' set of ideas about present-day culture. To make their point, the authors have chosen an array of examples both from contemporary media environment across the globe (the latter appear throughout the book, not only in the last chapter) and, where appropriate, from the past, thus drawing not only synchronic, but also diachronic connections. If the volume's Conclusion may sound a little manifesto-like (but such is the nature of a final note), the rest of the book is very carefully balanced in its account. It is neither an optimistic forecast typical of the first participatory culture studies nor a dystopian prediction. Where possible, the authors steer clear of evaluations and personalized accounts. Instead, they give the floor to others, and let a myriad other voices be heard – either through case studies, or the extended volume (where, at least for a short period of time, Henry Jenkins and Sam Ford are allowed to resume their identities) or in the discussion on related platforms. The discussion, I should add, is ongoing and particularly relevant to the readers of this journal: as I am typing this, for example, a group of Polish scholars are publishing their snapshots of Polish participatory culture practices in the official weblog of Henry Jenkins<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There are seven installments altogether, covering topics from manga fandom in Poland to the community for advancement of proper bra fitting. Here's a link to the first part of 'Participatory Poland': <http://henryjenkins.org/2013/11/participatory-poland-part-one-participatory-poland-an-introduction.html> (accessed 2 January 2014)

I would like to conclude this review with two notes on structure. First, the book's central aim, taking stock of spreadable media environment, could not be achieved without re-negotiating the terms in which contemporary media are described. The volume kicks off by challenging the traditional 'viral' metaphor applied to user-circulated content, and much of the 'Introduction' is dedicated to the explanation of the logic behind the term 'spreadable'. At first, it is easy to dismiss these linguistic exercises as unnecessary wordplay, but the authors vocally stress the importance of proper nomination:

Our focus on terminology is more than mere semantics. We believe that language matters deeply and that the metaphors we all use to describe the patterns we see shape how we understand our world. We become blind to some phenomena and biased toward others. (p. 3).

...Further, if companies set out thinking they will make media texts that do something to audiences (infect them) rather than for audiences to do something with (spread it), they may delude themselves into thinking they control people. Conversely, understanding spreadability will allow audiences and activists to form new connections and communities through their active role in shaping the circulation of media content. The concept of spreadability also gives these groups new means to mobilize and respond to decisions made by companies and governments in ways that challenge decisions that adversely affect them and to exploit gaps in the system which may allow them to serve their own needs. (p. 23)

Replacing metaphors is a difficult task, but *Spreadable Media* strikes while the proverbial iron is hot, and by the end of the book I was ready to embrace *spreadable* instead of *viral*, *transnational* instead of *global*, *publics* instead of *audiences* (or, even worse, *consumers*). It will be interesting to see, however, how some of new coinages stand the test of translation and/or international cultural and academic appropriation, since not all languages live by the same metaphors.

Secondly, given the scope of both the effort and the resulting text, it is, perhaps, not surprising that *Spreadable Media* comes with a user manual, detailing the story of the book's creation and its research connections – most notably, to the very substantial output of the Convergence Culture Consortium. I would, therefore, further expand the extended version by referring the reader to the Consortium's website (<http://www.convergenceculture.org/>) and to the official weblog of Henry Jenkins (<http://henryjenkins.org/>), since many of the arguments put forward in *Spreadable Media* were first introduced on those two principal platforms, and inform much of what is being distilled in the paper version of the book.

As befits truly transmedia content, the book *requires* its readers to be 'forensic' about it: seek out additional information and go beyond the cover. In a typical textbook scenario, most examples and side discussions, provided that they can be taken out, are run in boxes alongside the main text. Placing them on an external website allows to extend the case studies, pull other voices into the dialogue, and enhance the main flow of ideas with additional reasoning.

For the purposes of this review, I was reading the Kindle version of the book, and at times had to do my reading across platforms (Amazon Kindle e-book itself, a smartphone and a laptop). Considering the number of times I was referred to the extended version (or

simply had to look for more information on one matter or the other), I found it best to use my laptop for reading. I assume the text will also read well on various tablets, but my 2010 issue Kindle e-book was just not cut out for the job. The paper version, I suspect, would be a little inconvenient if one wants enhanced experience and extended grabability. And they should; after all, the content, to borrow its own terms, is highly drillable and very grabable, and I, for one, am happy to spread the word.

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