More Than Movies: Social Formations in Informal Networks of Media Sharing

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Film and Media Studies and the Graduate
Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date Approved: 5 May 2017

Abstract

This project examines the social structures, formations, and practices of

informal networks of media sharing (INMSs) through both historical and

sociological lenses. INMSs are comprised of individuals who distribute and circulate

media to one another through noncommercial, unauthorized networks. The

networks can be centered around texts, such as the early videophile publication *The

Videophile's Newsletter*, or they can be constituted by disparate groups of people

who come together as a community using digital platforms like BitTorrent. While

nominally concerned with circulating media, INMSs are also sources of social

sustenance for their members and are sites of struggle for social and symbolic

capital and power. They illuminate the complex ways in which community members

utilize media as a starting point to satisfy a variety of needs, including developing

bodies of cultural and technical knowledge, thinking through legal and ethical

concerns, creating social bonds, and engaging in a variety of pedagogical practices.

In short, INMSs are loci of social and cultural meaning-making for their members.

This dissertation catalogs and analyzes the social practices and formations of

three INMSs, the aforementioned *Videophile's Newsletter* and two private,

BitTorrent networks focused on cinema, *Great Cinema* and *FilmDestruction*, showing

there to be diachronic and transplatform similarities between different networks.

Rather than instances of rupture and divergence, this project argues that these

networks are best understood through an evolutionary lens. It contends that INMSs

and other similar formations should be increasingly studied because of their

prevalence throughout the 20th and 21st centuries and their importance to

consumers as unauthorized media distribution spaces whereby network members

have greater latitude to experiment with media and create unique, diverse social

structures and practices that are not contingent upon restrictions imposed by the

media and copyright industries.

Acknowledgements

  This dissertation is the result of numerous people in my life, many of whom have been instrumental in my growth as a scholar. First and foremost, Germaine Halegoua has been an outstanding advisor. She has been patient, insightful, tough, and, above all, supportive. She has pushed me to ask better questions, to improve my writing, and to grow as a scholar. Without her, this dissertation would not have been possible. Michael Baskett has also been a constant source of encouragement and growth for my entire career at the University of Kansas and I owe my growth as an historian to him. Catherine Preston has asked me tough questions about theory and spurred my interest in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Tamara Falicov's classes made me realize how much I enjoyed exploring the political economy of media. Josh Miner's encouragement and research interests showed me that young scholars can survive and thrive in contemporary academia. Bob Hurst, Matt Jacobson, Kevin Willmott, and Dave Lacy all impressed on me the importance of understanding both the studies and production sides of media and have served as valuable models for my own pedagogy. Jay Childers and Bob Antonio broadened my scholarly horizons as to the interdisciplinary potentials of rhetoric and sociology, respectively. I also want to thank the late Chuck Berg, whose vivacity for all things scholarly and pop culture imbued me with a sense of determination to study the things I love.

  I also want to thank my mother Barb, my father John, and my sister Lindsay for supporting what I wanted to do with my career. Finally, I want to thank my partner Julie for putting up with late nights and weekends filled with research and writing. Her

willingness to watch arthouse cinema, Hollywood blockbusters, and direct-to-video

exploitation films fills me with joy. Without her, I am not sure the project would get

finished and I dearly love her.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Despite the copyright industries' best attempts to curtail the practice, consumers continue to share media in ways that circumvent established copyright law. As of February 2017, the web traffic analysis platform Alexa ranks peer-to-peer (p2p)[1] media emporium *The Pirate Bay* (*TPB*) as the 91st most popular website on the Internet and the 87th most popular website amongst US users ("thepiratebay.org"). Other p2p filesharing sites are also very popular among Internet users, including *Extratorrent.cc* (244th), *RARBG* (282nd), and *YTS.AG* (335th), suggesting a wide user base both within the US and across the globe. One unique metric that speaks to the popularity of *TPB* is a survey conducted in 2011 whereby over the course of 72 hours, over 75,000 individual users participated (Svensson, Larsson, and de Kaminski). Online survey specialist *SurveyGizmo* estimates that surveys solicited to external audiences (consumers/users) generally have a response rate of 10-15 percent; taking the high end of their estimate, over 500,000 users accessed the site over a three day period. While legal streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Instant have cut in to BitTorrent traffic,[2] estimations from traffic measurement platforms like Alexa indicate that p2p filesharing remains vibrant.

However, the sites previously mentioned are all publicly accessible platforms, an important factor in their global popularity. The sites are also relatively unfocused in their

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[1] p2p filesharing is a method of filesharing where users connect directly to one another without an intermediary platform.

[2] Market research firm Sandvine estimates that, as a percentage of total Internet data traffic, BitTorrent has fallen from 8% in 2010 to 3% in 2015 while streaming video has risen from 30% to 61% in the same time frame (Hastings and Wells 6). However, it should be noted that Internet traffic is not a zero-sum system; a drastic increase in streaming video as a percentage of total Internet traffic should not be conflated with a cannibalization of other forms of data transfer.

scope; users can find anything from television programming, movies, music, pornography, computer programs, video games, e-books, audiobooks, scans of physical books, and mobile applications. Put another way, sites like *TPB* are clearinghouses for any and all forms of media, serving as sorts of digital bazaars. They may be the most prominent type of BitTorrent site, but there also exist a large number of private, highly specific BitTorrent networks that serve important functions in the unauthorized media distribution landscape, including as grassroots archives, spaces for the fulfillment of social needs, loci of cultural stewardship, classrooms of art and culture, and sites of political resistance. Looked at slightly differently, private filesharing networks are places of community where users can debate, discuss, and learn about a variety of cultural topics while cultivating social relationships. The force that initially binds users together may be exploitation cinema or Classical Hollywood films, but relationships grow to include myriad concerns unrelated to the initial shared media interest.

This phenomenon of community formation around informal networks of media sharing (INMS) was not borne of private BitTorrent networks. With the introduction and popularity of personal media recording technologies like the Compact Cassette tape and the Betamax cassette in the 1970s and 80s, analog networks of media sharing emerged. For example, almost immediately after the introduction of Sony's Betamax in America in 1976 did a hobbyist publication designed to create a network of television and movie aficionados arise— *The Videophile's Newsletter* (*TVN*). The newsletter was an amateur production, but quickly established a body of technical knowledge and community of individuals who developed a range of social practices, many of which continue to this

day in private, p2p networks. In fact, highly engaged consumers such as members of *TVN* played integral roles in shaping the meaning and use of home video technology.

For the most part, the historical narrative surrounding videocassette recorder (VCR) technology[3] is one that examines industrial and legal contexts. Generally, scholars have explored two main issues in discussions of VCR history: legal battles and technological format wars. Looking at these two issues, it becomes apparent how important audience activity was in terms of shaping how the VCR came to be understood as both a technology and cultural artifact.

The issue of legal battles often centers on the *Universal v. Sony* case (more popularly known as the 'Betamax Case'). While the final decision was handed down in 1984, the legal process actually began in 1976, co-emergent with the release of Betamax technology. Universal introduced the lawsuit because Sony marketed its VCR technology as a liberating device, allowing viewers to break free from the scheduling mandated by broadcast networks. Indeed, one early Betamax ad declared, "Now you don't have to miss *Kojak* (1973-78) because you're watching *Columbo* (1968-78) (or vice versa)!" (Decherney 170). Rather than being forced to choose between competing programming, Betamax owners were free to watch both, in addition to the convenience of watching them whenever they wanted. Essentially, rather than be beholden to network programmers, viewers could now set their own schedules. Such an ad is exemplary of the rhetoric used to empower consumers, giving them nominal agency in selecting their television viewing habits.

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[3] Whenever the VCR is discussed, I am referring to the general technology of the VCR (under whose umbrella the Sony Betamax falls) and not to the Philips VCR format.

However, this newfound agency[4] for consumers was problematic for media corporations who were concerned about protecting their intellectual property, particularly from the new capability to easily duplicate and circulate television programming and movies. Thus, Universal (incidentally the same studio which produced *Kojak* and *Columbo*) immediately began legal maneuverings to erase the nascent VCR technology, filing suit against not only Sony, but also a Betamax owner, William Griffiths (Greenberg 3). For his part, Griffiths was actually an accomplice to the studios as he agreed to be included in the suit provided no damages would be levied against him. However, the entire process backfired on the movie studios as consumers grew to feel that the lawsuit was a personal attack against them and their viewing habits; Griffiths actually said he could not understand why, as a private citizen, he should not be allowed to tape anything that is on public airwaves (Harris), lending a moral slant to the arguments. This is particularly relevant because consumers began to acclimate themselves to technologies that allowed them greater choice in their viewing activities and media consumption and any attack against those practices and the technology that made them possible was an attack against their media consumption agency, as well as their constitutional rights (Fantel). In fact, one of the more interesting angles of the Betamax Case was the way in which it imbricated the American value of personal liberty with media consumption. Augmenting television by giving viewers the option to choose when, where, and what to watch, the VCR liberated American media consumption within the home and, ultimately, the Betamax Case explicitly challenged what many saw as fair use or 'the right to tape' (Beekman) and broadcast networks and production companies threatened to significantly

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[4] Keep in mind that networks still controlled what content was available to consumers, an important point of annoyance for *TVN* readers who used this obstacle to develop new social practices of trading tapes with readers in different geographic markets.

increase costs to consumers in the form of increased licensing fees and taxes (Crook).

Put simply, American VCR owners felt their personal freedom to use a technology they

legally purchased to record material on public airwaves was under attack by corporate

interests. If it was 'freely' available on broadcast television networks on a television set

they had legally purchased, consumers felt as if they deserved the right to record

copyrighted material for noncommercial home consumption.

Ultimately, the case reached the Supreme Court, which decided in favor of Sony

and video recording technology. The Court believed that home recording did not violate

intellectual property laws and enshrined personal use under specific conditions as a

component of fair use (Sony Corp. of America). Because the case took eight years to

decide, public opinion shifted heavily against the movie studios, so much so that even the

movie studios themselves were not outraged at the decision (Lardner). Thus, the Betamax

Case is representative of the tension that exists between consumers and media producers,

particularly with regards to intellectual property.

Keeping in mind what Madeline Akrich has written about users 'de-scripting'[5]

what designers have scripted into technology, many consumers will use new technologies

to mold their media consumption practices to meet their personal needs. On the other

hand, media conglomerates are historically slow to adapt to new technocultural

paradigms, a phenomenon that still exists today as can be seen in the reticence of the

music and film industries to embrace digital distribution technologies. One result of the

new digital distribution paradigm was iTunes' emergence as the largest digital distributor

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[5] Akrich believes that, along with actors in a network, technological objects form a sort of framework of action in an attempt to prescribe a way of acting. Put another way, creators of a technology or technical object script a set of expected actions into the object. Akrich argues that users actively 'de-script' the intended uses and outcomes of producers by using the technologies in ways that meet their own personal needs, rather than those needs of the producer's idealized consumer/user.

of music in the 2000s (Covert), not only setting the standard pricing scheme for music online, but also shifting the focus away from albums and toward singles.

The second major historical issue concerning the VCR in which audience activity played a major role was the competition between the Betamax and VHS formats. While there are myriad specific technical details that differentiate the two formats, the main competing aspects of the two concerned image quality and recording time. Betamax had the capacity to record much cleaner images than VHS, but only had a total of one hour of recording time per tape. On the other hand, VHS could hold two hours of recorded video, but the picture quality was noticeably degraded. Two different technologies that each had strong points, yet one ultimately won out over the other. What is important about this historical moment is the role consumers played in the outcome. While the marketing forces of each company are significant, they do not fully explain why VHS emerged as the winner. In constructing a social history of informal networks of media sharing, taking the consumer/user's lived experiences and preferences with new technologies into account is critical in understanding the ways in which technologies develop, as well as their attendant social practices and formations.

So why did VHS triumph over Betamax? It would be easy to suggest that well-marketed mediocrity is more successful with Americans than slightly more expensive yet higher quality items (one need look no further than any subculture based on consumption, craft beer, for example), but that does not tell us enough about the various historical contexts and specificities in which this format war took place. Looking beyond the argument of uninterested American consumers, there are three main opinions that scholars have put forward, each focusing on a different component of the VCR apparatus.

First, Eugene Marlow and Eugene Secunda (1991) suggest that the outcome was based on Sony's failure to understand the preference for longer recording times over image quality. Second, P. Ranganath Nayak and John Ketteringham (1994) believe that it was a simple cost-benefit analysis by consumers: they would rather have slightly worse image quality but longer recording times in exchange for cheaper products. Finally, Frederick Wasser (*Veni*) proclaims that it was the marketing of VHS by the American firm RCA as a blue-collar technology that put it over the top. Some combination of the three is most likely the explanation for the outcome of the Betamax/VHS battle; the important thing to note is that consumer preference, agency, and identity formation are considered integral components of our historical understanding of a technological shift. Above all, the format wars make clear that audience activity is a central component in determining the trajectory of technologies, as Sony's initial obstinacy toward longer recording times and working with American retailers indicate.

Outlining the social history of a new technology like the VCR is important to this dissertation, which focuses on the social practices and formations of informal networks of media sharing based on private, filesharing communities. While the VCR and p2p appear to be very different technologies on their face, looking into the ways in which consumers use them reveals a large number of similarities, particularly in how they allow individuals to both satisfy media consumption desires and forge personal connections with others. More explicitly, VCR and p2p users share similar social practices, including: sharing media with others who are part of the same community; practicing cultural stewardship by developing grassroots archives; generating a shared body of technical and cultural knowledge; debating legal and ethical norms and attitudes towards copyright policy and

jurisprudence; conversing with fellow users about shared media interests in such a way as to satisfy previously unmet social needs; marking one's taste to cultivate social and symbolic capital; and teaching other users and enthusiasts about technology, media, and history. Put another way, both VCR and p2p technologies are used by media enthusiasts to develop distinct communities that share similar social and cultural practices. Thus, this dissertation is concerned with the diachronic relationship between analog and digital informal networks of media sharing social practices at the grassroots level, both in terms of similarities and ruptures. More specifically, this project answers questions of how social needs are met by these informal networks of media sharing, as well as what social practices the networks foster, both structurally and culturally.

Definition of Terms

There are four terms that will be used throughout this dissertation that require further explanation. The first is "informal networks of media sharing," which will be abbreviated as INMS as a singular network or INMSs when referencing multiple. An INMS is a social network that is predicated on the unauthorized sharing of media. Key to this term is that it is a social network rather than a regular network; foundational to the concept of INMSs is sociality and community. At first, members of INMSs are drawn to the network because of their desire to consume media; however, what sustain the network are the social bonds that develop between members—the community. For analog INMSs, this principle is best exemplified by *The Videophile's Newsletter*, a publication that was started with the desire to trade taped television material between members, but grew into something much more socially complex. As for digital INMSs, the social network

distinction is important when separating a publicly accessible digital bazaar like *TPB* from the private, niche sites that I examine in chapters four through six. Where the main purpose of *TPB* for the vast majority of users is media acquisition, private BitTorrent networks serve a multitude of purposes for their members, both acquisitive and social. Thus, sociality is integral to the concept of INMSs.

The second important term to define here is (unauthorized) filesharing. I have made a conscious decision to not utilize the word 'piracy' throughout this dissertation except for when it is explicitly called. Piracy both denotes and connotes illicit and commercial activity; the activity of digital INMSs is decidedly non-commercial and many within the communities consider their activities neither illicit nor illegal. Out of respect for my respondents beliefs as well as my own personal conceptualization of the piracy continuum, I will be using the term 'unauthorized filesharing,' often shortening it to simply 'filesharing.' When discussing *TVN*, I will use the term 'media sharing.' My hope is to provide a more value-neutral lexicon with which to use in discussing topics that concern intellectual property, discourse that has too often been colonized by the copyright industries and their goals of criminalizing the activities of consumers.

Third, when using the term "social" to describe the interactions between users in a network or the affordances offered by digital INMSs, I take it to mean an emphasis on collaboration, communication and communion between network members explicitly within the network. While larger societal forces are accounted for throughout the dissertation, when invoking 'the social,' I am referring to sociality within a member's network. However, as Jose van Dijck has argued, social functions on digital platforms are also inscribed into "automated systems," (12) which means that within digital INMSs,

connectedness is comprised of both human and automated factors. Thus, when discussing

the role of sociality in terms of digital INMSs, I am also including the sociality

envisioned by site administrators, in addition to the 'traditional' understanding of human-

focused communication.

Finally, I use the term "digital" throughout to mean of or belonging to computer-

based processes. For example, when talking about digital INMSs, the digital refers to the

immaterial base of the various platforms discussed. I do not mean to include theorizations

of digitality based on the production of art, nor do I apply philosophical theorization to

the digital (*e.g.* Manovich). For this project, the digital simply refers to platforms or

modes of communication and media distribution that are computer-based.[6]

Literature Review

Community

Community is a concept that is central to this dissertation. It is also a concept that

has been theorized and critiqued in a variety of ways. German sociologist Ferdinand

Tönnies was one of the first scholars to articulate a definition of community, what he

termed *gemeinschaft*, or groupings of individuals based on a feeling of togetherness and

shared understanding (he contrasted this with *gesellschaft*, or modern society). For

Tönnies, a shared understanding is not consensus, as those with differing opinions

consciously work for consensus. Rather, shared understanding always already exists

within a community and such an understanding is the glue that binds the community

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[6] This includes mobile devices, video game consoles, tablets, and any piece of technology that uses
microprocessors.

together (17-18). Tönnies' understanding of community can be compared with Zygmunt Bauman's colloquial definition that good will can be expected within a community (2). In an urban context, however, the *gemeinschaft* is strained because relationships are now based on individual choice rather than being generational. Whereas in 'traditional' communities, your social relations are largely based on familial and religious ties, in an increasingly urban world dominated by labor with larger numbers of people in smaller areas, ties are based on where one works and what one's interests are.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that Tönnies was writing in a specific historical context, one that was in the midst of drastic social reorganization and urbanization introduced by the maturation of industrialization. Émile Durkheim, a contemporary of Tönnies, also took note of the seeming disintegration of traditional communal ties (mechanical solidarity) in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society. Rather than despair at the new social order (organic solidarity), Durkheim believed that the specialization of labor necessitated new ways of associating with one another. People become interdependent in modern society because it is no longer possible to be self-sufficient, it is no longer possible to rely solely on the family (83-84). Durkheim is not so progressive as to argue that free association now constitutes community in modern society; what he is arguing, though, is that in an economically stratified society such as the one ushered in by capitalism and industrialization, an ideal social organization is one that is integrated. The differences between social groups become the linchpins that connect such a society. Arensberg and Kimball also agree that integration is the key component of community in contemporary society, furthering Durkheim's argument by suggesting that the culture that emerges in this ideal community is one that is held in

common by all members (ix). Instead of being connected by familial ties, members of a community are now connected to one another through a shared culture.

Writing in the 1980s, Anthony P. Cohen suggested a different approach to understanding community: Rather than being integrative, we should look at community as aggregative and defined by differences and borders. In this approach, the commonality that bonds members together does not need to be misconstrued as uniformity. Instead, "it is a commonality of forms (ways of behaving) whose content (meanings) may vary considerably among [a community's] members" (20). While members may perceive differences between one another, they realize they are more alike among themselves than they are with members of a different community. This is because they share a set of symbols and those symbols constitute and give reality to the boundaries of a community (20-21); these shared symbols are analogous to Tönnies' belief that an always already existing shared understanding is the crux of social cohesion in a community. Thus, for Cohen, community is both similarity and difference and expresses a relational idea (12): communities are defined by their opposition to other communities or social formations.

More recently, scholars have tried to understand community as a term integral to a sense of politics. Brian Elliott speaks to the importance of place when considering community, positing that one cannot be fully understood without the other. For Elliott, "community cannot be accounted for in the absence of a genuine place of collective action" (38). Here, Elliott channels Tönnies and argues that community exists without any efforts to reach a consensus through rational deliberation, not least because community must already exist for any such dialogical construction to occur (28-29). Furthermore, community lacks a shared identity and "should be understood as something

more fundamental than any acknowledged commonalities" (27). Here, Elliott seems to be

eschewing free association in favor of a more traditional understanding of community.

Nevertheless, Elliott agrees with Jean-Luc Nancy that we must resist nostalgia for

community because it is imbricated in the nationalism of modernity (Elliott 28). Nancy is

concerned with the idea that community is a project in need of reclamation (9); instead,

Nancy sees community as always already existing. It is the ur-social formation. Other

thinkers like Mary Ann Glendon, Philip Selznick, and Amitai Etzioni believe

contemporary politics must recognize the always-existing nature of communities in order

to implement institutional changes necessary for "increased social stability and personal

fulfillment" (McBride 5).

Communities are personal and social. They consist of a set of symbols that are

shared among members and constitute the boundaries of the community. The term holds

both normative and descriptive valences. Yet community is a concept that is still debated

among scholars, cultural critics, and philosophers. Moreover, community, traditionally

conceived of in material and geographical terms, has been an important concept in studies

of the Internet for the past 20 years. How do digital scholars conceptualize community in

virtual spaces? What changes occur in the shift from physical to digital space? Can

meaningful relationships be established?

Virtual Community

The idea of transposing the social organization of community into virtual spaces

was highly contentious as the Internet and the Web entered the households of many

Americans in the early 1990s. Howard Rheingold was one of the first thinkers to argue in

favor of virtual community with his seminal work *The Virtual Community*. In it, Rheingold outlines an array of social practices that take place in virtual space and parallel similar offline practices, including: interpersonal debates; information sharing; the conduct of trade, both commercial and noncommercial; the establishment of friendships; and the creation of art. Essentially, Rheingold put forth the idea that virtual communities function exactly the same as traditional communities except the interactions are disembodied (xvii). Most importantly, virtual communities are discursively constituted for Rheingold, they are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (xx).

Steven Jones expands on Rheingold's articulation of virtual community by demanding a reconceptualization of community in virtual spaces. He believes that virtual communities should be thought of as a distinct set of complex, social interactions and challenges traditional conceptions of community as being grounded in geographic space, arguing that computer mediated communication creates socially produced space that decenters place (5-6). In effect, virtual communities are pseudo-communities, a concept theorized by James Beniger whereby communities constituted by impersonal associations are constructed through mediating technologies (354) rather than Durkheimian geographical proximity or Tönnies' familial ties. Peter Ludlow echoes Tönnies' belief that modernity has de-stabilized traditional communities; however, Ludlow believes that virtual communities pick up the slack by offering interest-based communities that are not bound by the vicissitudes of geographical space.

At the same time, a number of critics contemporary to Rheingold caution against accepting virtual spaces as amenable to community formation. Langdon Winner writes that authentic community and civic activism is impossible online because of the ease with which digital technology allows people to remove themselves from conversations. Such flexibility, Winner argues, encourages people to dissolve social bonds whenever the prospect of material gain is evident (69). Clifford Stoll agrees, denying the validity of virtual community and believing it to be nothing more than an illusion of community. Rather than uniting people, the Internet isolates them from one another (3-4). Craig Calhoun channels James Beniger and posits that modern relationships are more imagined than real; the reach of mass media creates an illusion of inclusion. For Calhoun, instead of communities, "categorical identities" (108) are created which are based on little more than a feeling of belonging to a group rather than legitimate inclusion.

However, it would seem that virtual communities could aid in, rather than be culpable for this dissolution of community. Barry Wellman notes just this when he writes that support, sociability, information exchange, and communion— hallmarks of (virtual) communities— have been occurring between geographically distant people since at least the 1960s (214-215). Furthermore, Wellman and Gulia find that almost any kind of social support is available online, with the caveat that such support is usually specialized (171). Similarly, they argue that such specialized support is symptomatic of the larger phenomenon of virtual communities being based around shared-interests, a phenomenon they speculate is based on a lack of social or visual identifiers (185). A lack of social or visual signifiers does not mean personal, embodied characteristics are ineffectual online, as research on gendered behavior online (Kramarae & Taylor; Sutton; We) suggests men

and women use different forms of communication and ways of constructing identity in online spaces. Where John Perry Barlow once proclaimed, "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth… Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion" ("A Declaration"), Lori Kendall finds that members of online communities are aware that offline physical characteristics are readily apparent in online spaces (72-73). The utopian visions of Barlow and Rheingold have since been significantly tempered.

Extending research on gendered communication in virtual communities, Felicia Wu Song reminds us that pre-existing cultural and social norms influence the functions of virtual communities and, to a certain extent, condition the social activities performed by members. In other words, "the structural and discursive features of online communities" can help reveal what a culture values (8), particularly with regards to the way community members interact with one another. Furthermore, Song finds that the character of members of virtual communities is remarkably similar to traditional communities and influenced by three factors: the process of joining the community (membership); the benefits of community membership; and the resulting informal culture of the community (49). It is in the informal community culture that larger cultural values can be discerned.

One of the most persistent cultural values in the communities that Song and other researchers study is the belief that regulation should occur from within. In other words, individuals are expected to uphold social order such that the community can avoid exogenous regulation. This belief speaks to the value of individual autonomy that has been associated with the Internet and its early acolytes like Richard M. Stallman, Tim

Berners-Lee, and John Perry Barlow. Relatedly, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman have coined the term "networked individualism" to describe the new, digital social order. Networked individualism is the idea that in an increasingly digital world, people function more as "connected individuals" than as people embedded in specific social groups (12). Importantly, in an era of networked individualism, people meet social needs in progressively more diverse ways and amongst a larger group of acquaintances. One result of a shifting social order is the increase in membership (both casual and committed) of virtual communities. Rainie and Wellman's approach is perhaps most useful because it recognizes the impact that technologies and their attendant affordances have had on contemporary society while still availing adequate agency to people, thus avoiding a technologically deterministic philosophy.

What do social processes of virtual communities look like in an era of networked individualism? Kevin Kelly adapts Clay Shirky's work and has identified four categories of collective behavior among fan communities online: sharing, collaboration, cooperation, and collectivism (118). Sharing media or information online can be anything from tweeting a link to one's followers to sending a file privately through email or Dropbox to a friend. Essentially, the purpose of sharing online is to "express, regulate, and affirm social relationships and build communities" (Li 3). Collaboration refers to coordinated creative practices among users of a community (*e.g.* creating and maintaining a wiki or translating and creating subtitles for a movie); labor and knowledge is pooled collectively to produce a project that draws its strengths from the contributions from disparate community members. Cooperation is the process whereby users contribute individually to build a large body of knowledge or database of information, for example

fans of specific bands or record labels using the music-cataloguing site Discogs to compile a somewhat comprehensive list of all music releases. Collectivism is a "system where self-directed peers take responsibility for critical processes and where difficult decisions, such as sorting out priorities, are decided by all participants" (Kelly 120) and can be differentiated from collaboration by the rigor of the systems of information sharing and decision-making (*e.g.* open source software projects). When looking to fan studies for contributions to theorizations of virtual communities, value is derived from the recognition of new forms of collective practices—what Kelly calls "new social arrangements" (*ibid*)—both in terms of scale and prevalence. These new social arrangements did not emerge fully-formed from the digital aether, however, and when considering media sharing communities, precursors to contemporary fan community practices are readily apparent. In particular, the literature surrounding media sharing communities emphasizes sharing and the collaborative nature of communities of individuals with shared interests.

Media Sharing Communities

The informal circulation of recorded media inside the home is a phenomenon that is nearly a century old. When 16mm cameras were introduced for the amateur market, early adopters would often distribute their home movies to friends, family, and fellow hobbyists because, in addition to the often-personal nature of the movies, a formal distribution system did not exist for them (Zimmerman 137-141). The gatekeeping function of industry is a theme that emerges across studies of INMSs and is quite often pointed to as a motivating factor for the development of the networks themselves. Ramon

Lobato emphasizes the importance of distributors in the media circulation ecosystem

because they decide "who gets to watch films, under what circumstances, and why"

("Subcinema" 113). For Lobato, distributors are the most important link in the cinematic

consumption chain because of their gatekeeping function; if a film cannot find a

distributor, how will it be seen? The Internet certainly makes this less of an issue than

prior eras, but due to the resource-intensive nature of cinema, a producer breaking even

on a project necessarily requires somewhat widespread, formal distribution. Moreover,

distributors help shape public culture by submitting or preventing "texts which have the

potential to become part of shared imaginaries, discourses and dreams" (Lobato *Shadow*,

2). This is also why Virginia Crisp suggests that scholars consider what she calls "pirate"

activities more carefully, because informal distributors play equally important roles,

particularly in the age of the Internet (2). It is the crucial role distributors play in the

media ecosystem that motivates Julia Knight and Peter Thomas' (354) lamentation of the

dearth of scholarship on the figurative middlemen, both formal and informal.

With that said, there is exciting work being done on informal networks of video

distribution. Joshua Greenberg looks at the gaps between media producers and

technology manufacturers to understand what people did with their VCRs, employing a

science and technology studies approach to analyzing how consumers and distributors

came to define the new home movie device (6-7). While Greenberg's approach is

valuable in making sense of the roles of actors in a technological network, it does not

address how consumers viewed their own actions, particularly with regards to the

grassroots communities he writes about. Daniel Herbert has looked at video stores as

important sites for the cultural development of movies, focusing on the commoditization

of movie culture with consumers' newfound ability to physically hold and take home movies on tape. Herbert's work engages in a cultural geography of video stores that helps explain how consumer behavior and attitudes constituted the video store as a cultural space (5-6). Lucas Hilderbrand's work is closest in actually exploring how informal networks of videotape trading functioned as social spaces and communities. In *Inherent Vice*, Hilderbrand devotes a chapter to chronicling the feminist tape chainletter started by Miranda July in 1995, arguing that the chainletter network promoted new friendships and artistic creation; July's Joanie 4 Jackie chainletter "is explicitly interactive, as the project calls on its audience to become its participants" (196-197). Despite its value as discursive analysis of a subaltern artistic network, Hilderbrand's work does not examine how members of the network view themselves in relation to the network. This is a common lacuna throughout media sharing network literature.

Similarly, the fanvidding community utilizes existing media to remix it into new texts that express the fannish interests of the creators, who then circulate the videos to others within the community (Jenkins *Textual Poachers*). As Katharina Freund has found, creators of fanvids engage in the practice in order to more closely align the source texts with the creator's interests, to fill in perceived plot holes, to transform (romantic) relationships between characters, and to experiment with the aesthetic qualities of the original text (1349). Furthermore, the creators of these videos do not want to freely circulate their finished works to just anyone; instead, fanvidders prefer to share their videos only with other fanvidders, or those who intricately understand the practice. Freund's emphasis on allowing community members to enunciate their motivations and desires provides a useful framework for scholars engaging communities of media sharing.

Recent work in p2p filesharing networks has also incorporated contemporary user voices in methodologies. While Crisp notes that many academic and popular writers focus on the economic impact that unauthorized filesharing has on the copyright industry, she emphasizes the role users play in influencing larger social and cultural processes of media distribution. In her study of two filesharing communities that emphasize East Asian cinema, Crisp argues user motivations stem not from cost-avoidance desires, but are actually intended to promote the film industry and film culture (111-150). Similarly, Jonas Andersson Schwarz examines the personal, political and ethical motivations of both public and private BitTorrent community members, employing a cultural studies approach that emphasizes the situatedness of media-consuming audiences in an attempt to understand the "general disposition that follows from the collective experience of such structures" (1-10). In other words, Andersson Schwarz is looking to develop a theoretic lens through which to understand the actions of people who engage in unauthorized filesharing, yet does not intend to understand how these users view their activities in terms of community.

Fan studies scholars, while not explicitly writing about media sharing networks, nonetheless provide important contributions to the field by discussing how value is generated among communities, particularly with regards to non-market exchange values. Zhaochang Li (15) has identified three imbricated forms of value that exist in both market and non-market economies that can be applied to shared media, information, or physical goods: use-value, symbolic-value, and exchange value. Use-value is derived from the intrinsic pragmatic characteristics of an object, for example the use-value of a pair of boots is based on the boots' ability to protect one's feet, as well as their durability and a

variety of other related factors. However, context also plays an important role in determining the use-value of an object (*e.g.* a rare VHS copy of a movie will hold value to someone who has a VCR in which to play the movie, but will most likely be valueless for someone without a VCR). Hence, the value of an object can only be fully realized when it is used under specific consumption conditions. Put another way, use-value is not absolute, instead it should be understood as conditional based on a variety of social, cultural, and idiosyncratic contexts (Li 15-16). Symbolic-value, on the other hand, is exclusively determined by social and cultural contexts and an object can have a multiplicity of symbolic value, like brands for different subcultures (*e.g.* Nike means one thing to the running aficionados and another thing to fans of grime music). As Li puts it, "symbolic value is highly fluid and accretive" (16) and is an important determining factor for the exchange value—the result of the calculus involved in translating a product's use-value and symbolic-value— in INMSs, particularly those based in digital settings where the use-value is relatively circumscribed. In conjunction with symbolic-value, the aforementioned exchange value is the form of value that should most interest scholars of media sharing communities, as it is local, idiosyncratic tastes and preferences that ascribe value to a media object or contribution by a community member.

With recent scholarship in media sharing networks, there has been an increased emphasis on methodologies that incorporate user voices from a grassroots perspective. Such work has provided valuable insights into the ways in which consumers views their own actions in relation to dominant industries; it has also demanded re-evaluations of what questions scholars should be asking (Virginia Crisp, most notably). Still, there has yet to be a study that explores how users see their own activities within their own

communities, where their communities fit in the larger media distribution ecosystem, and how exchange-value is determined within the network. This dissertation fills that void and provides user perspectives that have heretofore been silenced.

Methods

In studying the perspectives of members of INMSs, a number of different sources are used, including: historical documents; press releases; news articles; chat room communication; message board posts; archived webpages; and personal interviews. Collating such a wide variety of source types and for different purposes necessitates a mixed methods approach. Thus, this dissertation employs a number of different methods, including discourse analysis, textual analysis, and grounded theory. Discourse analysis is most prominently used in the first chapter, where original issues of *TVN* are analyzed to uncover themes of social practice and important issues to the community of readers. Furthermore, discourse analysis is employed when studying web forum posts and chat room conversations of the digital communities under study in chapters four and five.

Second, textual analysis will be used in chapters four and five when looking at the visual culture of private BitTorrent communities, as well as the sites' architectural affordances. Textual analysis helps make clear the way each community sees itself and its culture. What does a site's color scheme tell us about the way it sees itself? How does the organization of information on a page influence the ways users understand the community? Who is given visible representation in the form of front-page posts? What movies or television programming are highlighted on the front page and how does that indicate what types of media are valued? Textual analysis also allows scholars to study

the way a web page's architecture inscribes certain social practices into the code of a site itself. What users can and cannot do is quite literally hard-coded into the web site's functionality and employing textual analysis can help reveal such limitations (keeping in mind that users can de-script some functions of the site, using a feature in ways unexpected to the site administrators).

Finally, grounded theory is used in chapter six when coding and analyzing personal interviews conducted with community members in order to develop a theory about the development of social practices and structures of digital INMSs. Developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their study of terminally ill hospital patients, grounded theory is a method that focuses on developing a theoretical construct rather than confirming an already existing theory. Through open coding of interviews, themes emerge that are grounded in the data supplied by interviewees. In particular, grounded theory is flexible and allows me to continually update my project while also making clear new connections between concepts that emerge from coding the interviews. Furthermore, grounded theory allows me to test my hypothesis that social practices and formations of INMSs are both diachronic and transtechnological, ultimately resulting in a new theory on the relationships between disparate media sharing communities.

Because this dissertation takes a grassroots approach to studying the social and cultural practices and formations of informal networks of media sharing, I take a number of such communities, both historical and contemporary, as my subjects. When selecting the historical INMS (*TVN*), I took two factors into consideration: access and eminence. The first six issues of *TVN* are easily available in scanned versions of their originals, allowing me to easily access and read the 1970s newsletters. More importantly, however,

is the stature of *TVN* among video hobbyist publications. *TVN* was the first and most prominent of the hobbyist publications and is an invaluable resource when looking at the social practices and values of an important INMS. Moreover, it provides a strong point of historical reference for the digital INMSs I study. To choose these communities, I selected three of the most prominent invite-only BitTorrent networks that emphasize movies and music: *Great Cinema* (*GC*), *Film Destruction* (*FD*), and *Music Choice* (*MC*).[7] Using these three sites provided me with similar user bases that had enough variance to give me different perspectives from the users.

Using *GC* and *FD* as case studies for chapter six, I posted a call for interview volunteers on the sites' web forums and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels. I received 13 respondents, 12 of which took part in verbal interviews over Skype and one of which took place over email. The interviews lasted from 25 to 90 minutes and interviewees were asked the same general questions with deviation when appropriate. Participants were not told of the purpose of the study except that it was to understand the social nature of their communities. Of the 13 respondents, 12 were male and one was female, with all of them speaking English as their native language. Following grounded theory protocol, after the interviews were conducted they were transcribed by hand, read through initially in search of general themes, and then read through again to mark relevant passages and code them. As a result, a number of latent social processes emerged from the answers such that a general disposition of private, movie sharing communities can be theorized.

Chapter Outline

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[7] All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Chapter one of this study begins with an historical contextualization of informal networks of media sharing. *The Videophile's Newsletter* is used as a case study to illustrate a variety of social practices developed by an analog community of media sharing in order to provide a point of comparison for the digital networks emphasized throughout the rest of the dissertation. The chapter also argues for a consumer/user-focused perspective with regards to the use of new technologies; in particular, I show that early adopters and hobbyists will often repurpose new consumer technology in ways unexpected to the manufacturer and ancillary industries. This chapter is crucial to one of this dissertation's main arguments, that informal networks of media sharing can be understood diachronically and social practices and formations of historical sharing networks should be taken into account when attempting to understand contemporary ones.

Chapters two and three continue the historical contextualization of informal networks of media sharing by tracing the development of digital media sharing networks, both formal and informal. Beginning authorized music distribution platforms in the 1990s, I outline the various cultural, technological, juridical, legislative, and economic paradigms in which digital networks of media sharing emerged. These myriad contexts influence the type of services expected by users, including authorized services like video-on-demand, licensed music streaming platforms, and digital media stores like iTunes that increasingly grant users greater agency over what and how they consume media. However, into these contexts also emerge unauthorized media distribution platforms, most notably Napster and BitTorrent, which chapter three takes up. Such platforms only increased user expectations for control over their media consumption and this chapter

argues the 1990s and early 2000s were pivotal eras in the popularization and evolution of informal networks of media sharing. Now consumers were not limited to personal acquaintances and physical networks to circulate media; instead, users could use digital networks and platforms to connect with other users, build community (but not always), and share media with one another. It is this era where old practices were taken and adjusted for new technological platforms by users.

Chapters four and five examine the ways that users establish INMSs in virtual spaces and how they (re)produce unique social structures and certain types of knowledge while using the three case study sites of *Great Cinema*, *FilmDestruction*, and *Music Choice* as examples. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field are applied to users and social practices in order to understand the social processes that structure the larger communities, particularly to theorize the ways in which social and symbolic capital and power are developed and deployed by those in positions of authority. Chapter four explores the ways in which social hierarchies and practices are created and sustained through the technical features and affordances of the case study networks, including IRC channels, web forums, and front-page information dissemination features chapter five extends the work of chapter four and focuses on how the social affordances of private filesharing communities structure social relations and norms, with particular attention paid to how users in positions of authority exercise symbolic violence to regulate and police actions from other users. Far from being horizontal fields of power, each site is a locus of struggle where individuals discursively position themselves to develop power to shape the ethos and social realities of the community. What emerges is a shared ethos among

the community where the sharing of media is effectively minimized in favor of the struggle to reproduce specific social hierarchies and knowledge.

Chapter six takes a microscope to the social processes examined in chapter five in order to understand the social needs met by digital INMSs. Specific social practices are cataloged to illuminate the ways these needs are met and evidence is drawn from the personal interviews conducted with members of two communities, *Great Cinema* and *FilmDestruction*. The chapter takes a grassroots approach in exploring how community members view their actions and relationships with one another with regards to their community and the larger field of BitTorrent networks. Moreover, this chapter directly draws from the work done in chapter one to compare temporally distinct networks of media sharing and argue for the persistence of specific social practices across time and media.

As might be apparent, there are a number of limitations to this dissertation. Although I speak generally about informal networks of media sharing and although the web communities I examine are nominally global, the fact remains that my focus is largely on Anglophone culture. This is a matter of practicality and the vicissitudes of research, as I am an English-speaker and all of my interview respondents are English speakers. In other words, my dissertation should not automatically be assumed to be applicable to non-English networks of media sharing. In fact, there is fertile ground for scholars to till for African, Middle Eastern, and Asian networks of sharing that exist outside the purview of the copyright industries. Nevertheless, I believe that kernels of my research can be applicable and, indeed, useful to cross-cultural studies of informal networks of media sharing.

My project is to create a framework that better understands the social processes and formations of informal networks of media sharing and how they are (re)produced historically, discursively, and materially. People are people. They want to share the media they consume. They want to talk about it with like-minded individuals. They want to preserve the culture they deem of value for future generations. They want to learn about media and culture from their peers. Informal networks of media sharing are where all of these social processes and more take place.

Chapter One – Historical Contexts of Informal Networks of Media Sharing: Early Videophile Communities

Movies have been watched in the home for nearly a century. While expensive, some early motion picture cameras were marketed to amateur filmmakers, especially those interested in an alternative to Hollywood cinema. In particular, the standardization of 16mm in 1923 unleashed a wave of cheap new technologies and formats. This technological condition, combined with the increased emphasis on leisure time during the 1920s (prior to the Great Depression), encouraged many middle and upper class Americans to try their hand at amateur filmmaking (Zimmerman "Startling Angles," 140-141). Most of these amateur films received no audience outside of close friends and families, serving as ephemeral memories and an outlet for personal artistic expression. Importantly, amateur filmmaking offered consumers the opportunity to engage with cinema in a non-industrial context, allowing regular people the chance to create their own images and stories. The freedom to create rather than merely consume gelled with the spirit of amateurism of early American home filmmaking and was characterized by a non-commercial philosophy[8] and social and artistic self-improvement (Leadbeater, 22). Relatedly, such amateur filmmaking led to the growth of informal networks of distribution whereby friends and acquaintances would share movies with one another rather than relying on the newly-established studios to screen their material. Scholars like Richard Fung ("Remaking Home Movies") and Patricia R. Zimmerman ("The Home

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[8] It should be noted that amateurism at this time was mainly for those well-off enough to purchase the necessary filmic materials, as well as enough time to pursue their artistic endeavors.

Movie Movement") have pointed out the historiographic value in studying such amateur media practices because they provide a bottom-up perspective on social practices and symbolic meanings given to technology and media by individuals, a contrast to the (important) revisionist industrial media histories that began in the 1980s. In looking at media history from the ground level, binaries such as competent, professional studio productions and untrained amateur filmmaking are opened up to more pluralistic historical understandings. Taking a similar approach towards such disparate mediated practices as early home video recording communities and private media filesharing sites will provide analogous perspectives on social practices and formations that enhance the discourse surrounding home media consumption.

To be able to contextualize and understand the social practices and needs of contemporary users of private movie filesharing sites, we need first map out historical practices and developments of home movie distribution and consumption because they are the direct antecedents—both technologically and culturally—to the filesharing networks that operate below the surface of today's Internet. In this chapter, I outline the rapid adoption of movie consumption inside the home beginning in the 1950s, the industrial and social conditions and practices that facilitate this cinematic cultural shift, and the ways in which this environment helped create informal networks of distribution and circulation. Moreover, this chapter examines how informal networks of media sharing foster the growth of communities. To help illustrate how emergent social and cultural practices can form around new technologies, I take early adopters of VCR technology and one of their publications, *The Videophile's Newsletter,* as a case study. Understanding how movies came to be circulated among audiences at both retail and

personal levels is important for analyzing contemporary practices of informal digital distribution and consumption because it provides localized insight into the pluralistic, idiosyncratic practices that get lost when focusing on the global, industrial level. In other words, by looking at the microscopic level of one INMS, a range of social and discursive practices that may otherwise remain invisible are available to scholars to consider when looking at a variety of media-based communities. For example, such an approach can be applied to virtual cinephile communities and a better understanding of the myriad social practices and hierarchies native to the sites can be developed.

How are technological, media, and social histories intertwined? How does examining the history of a technological object from below help the project of providing countervailing arguments to a grand narrative of technological development? Disambiguating localized, heterogeneous practices from larger, deterministic narratives of sociotechnological history gives voice to the ways in which individuals interacted with, understood, and shaped home video technology. By taking into account the experiences of early VCR owners, this chapter contributes to the project of understanding how visual and technological culture both collaborates with and struggles against dominant organizations (*e.g.* film studios, broadcasters, and VCR manufacturers), while at the same time connecting temporally and technologically disparate cultures, from early videophiles of the 1970s and 80s to private movie filesharing sites of the new millennium. Moreover, through an exploration of the early hobbyist publication *The Videophile's Newsletter*, this chapter examines how INMSs foster community development through the emergence of shared social practices and the sating of social needs.

Films on Television and Home Movie Culture

Perhaps unexpectedly, television played an important role in the evolution of early home viewing culture. While the new technology is argued to have played a role in the relative decline of the film industry following World War II (Schatz 5), looking at the historical development of the film industry it becomes clear that television was an incredible boon to both audiences (in terms of access and cost) and the film industry. In fact, as Derek Kompare notes, by the late 1950s, licensed films on television became more popular than live programming (59). However, it took the television industry nearly two decades and plenty of experimentation to definitively arrive at that conclusion. A brief examination of why film-on-television was not immediately embraced from both the production and consumption ends will help sharpen an understanding of the conditions under which home movie culture accelerated and, ultimately, provide a better context for examining the social and cultural practices of private, movie filesharing sites.

During television's nascent years, networks were reluctant to license and schedule films for their broadcasts. For example, at the 1939 New York World's Fair, NBC's exhibition surveyed attendees and found that movies were fifth among audience programming preferences, lagging behind stage plays, musicals, sports, and news (Gordon). For their part, executives in the 1940s were worried that the age of the films that studios were willing to license would be readily apparent to viewers and stop them from tuning in. Most notably, executives fretted that the clothing and hairstyles of actors in films from the 1930s would be obvious to viewers who would be looking for contemporary programming and immediately turn them off from the emergent medium (Kompare 41). Moreover, the networks wanted viewers to embrace the unique 'live'

aspect of television, which also put movies at a disadvantage (*ibid*). However, this is not to say that films on television were unheard of; rather, scheduling films was a matter of necessity for network programmers. Because the medium was in its infancy, networks needed material to fill airtime; this need was met reluctantly by the use of primarily B-film product from minor studios (Boddy). From their perspective, movie studios were also not convinced that distributing film via television was an approach that would improve their bottom line. William Lafferty argues that, at the beginning of the 1950s, studios were not sure that television was a more lucrative platform than theatrically re-releasing the films (238). Studios were also reluctant to license their product to television networks because they were developing their own alternatives to television at the time (Hilmes).

Interestingly, the B-movies that were shown on television regularly were quite popular with audiences, especially the westerns. In fact, as Michael Kackman writes, early television celebrity brand Hopalong Cassidy[9] was so popular and shrewdly managed by William Boyd, that it was at the vanguard of international television distribution and merchandising practices ("Nothing On"). There are myriad factors that help explain why B-movie fare was so well received; most pertinent, however, is the repeated scheduling of these movies, particularly because the majority of non-network air time would be filled with reruns. Derek Kompare believes this represented a paradigm shift among viewing habits among consumers, quashing the dominant mode of thinking that television's appeal was its liveness (52-53). Instead, as repeats of B-movies show, viewers were amenable to repeated airings of the same programming.

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[9] The Hopalong Cassidy brand included both the existing films and the television series (1952-1954).

Relevant to this project is the way the scheduling of these programs trained viewers to accept movies on television as standard televisual practice, as ritualized. During television's formative years, Americans did not indicate a large interest in watching cinema on television (Gordon). This is not to say they did not want to watch movies at home; rather, most Americans lacked any context for viewing movies outside of the theater. However, by 1948 movies (largely programmers and independent features) were a somewhat regular occurrence in some television markets. For instance, in April of 1948, the New York City market aired 229 hours of programming, of which 47.5 were older movies from independent studios (Segrave 5). When movies began to regularly appear on network television across the nation in the early 1950s, the ways in which Americans thought about movie consumption changed. Thus, in addition to helping create the modern television programming practice of reruns, B-movies on television also played an important role in the development of home viewing culture, particularly in the way they trained viewers to accept watching feature films at home, in addition to movie theaters, building off the practices of home moviemaking and early independent film broadcasts. Moreover, by effectively "re-running" extant films, American viewers became accustomed to having the ability, however tenuous, to not only watch commercial films in the home, but to watch them multiple times. Television becomes more than a medium through which people watched live broadcasts of original material and repetition becomes a social norm.

By the mid-1950s both networks and studios understood that scheduling theatrical releases for presentation on television was lucrative and Hollywood began licensing a vast quantity of its back catalogue to the networks (Kompare 45). In particular, 1956 was

a watershed year for film on television, as William Lafferty succinctly puts it: "in 1956 alone, as a direct result of the major studios finally releasing product to television, almost 3000 features entered television distribution" (242). Included in the cinematic deluge were soon-to-be television staples like Warner Bros' *Looney Tunes* and *Merry Melodies* animated films, as well as horror films from Universal (Heffernan). However, the films that were released for broadcast were pre-1948 due to royalty issues with the Screen Actors Guild, preventing the studios from releasing more contemporary fare until 1954 when a court ruled that studios held the TV rights to their films (Segrave 12). Furthermore, studios resisted licensing prestige pictures because networks could not pay the studios' licensing fees, as MGM producer Dore Schary argued re-releasing older films into theaters would net greater profit than selling film rights for television ("Schary"). The studios also supported limiting the television appearances of stars "because the public will tire of seeing them and thus their pictures will suffer at the box office" (Pryor). Thus, while television played an integral role in priming the pump for audiences to watch movies in their home, there was still a large gap between the types of movies being shown at home compared to theatrical exhibition, most notably in the lack of prestige and contemporary films being licensed.

Why was watching movies at home such an important social and cultural development? For most of cinema's existence, 'going to the movies' has been an important "symbolic social act" (Corbett 19). Larry May's study of the historical development of movie theaters in the United States reminds us that with the introduction of movie palaces, American citizens—particularly the working class—were granted a sense of individualism and fleeting leisure (157-58). During the Great Depression, movie

theaters had an added dimension of luxury by functioning as an "oasis in a desert of economic depression," (Corbett 22) complete with concession stands and air conditioning. After the outbreak of World War II, movie theaters offered respite for weary workers at all hours of the day and a form of escapism for those concerned about friends and family overseas (Schatz). As Thomas Doherty (*Teenagers*) and many others have noted, in post-War America, movie theaters and drive-ins became loci of teenage social development. Theaters represented spaces of freedom from family where one could strengthen the bonds of friendship, experiment in identity formation, and engage in courtship. Movie-going, therefore, was a special social activity for most Americans and for movies to radically move to a new viewing context required normalizing the idea of film consumption at home and television was integral (but not decisive) in this process.

One important moment in television history that signaled film studio acceptance of the inevitability of home movie consumption was the 1961 debut of *NBC Saturday Night at the Movies*. *Saturday Night at the Movies* was the first instance of post-1948 cinema broadcast on television, as 20th Century Fox licensed 30 films to NBC, including prestige pictures like *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) and *The Seven Year Itch (1955)* ("Saturday Night"). The initial broadcast did well, drawing over 30% of the American television market; moreover, *Variety* speculated that there was no direct threat to the theatrical market by scheduling these films on television (*Ibid.*). After its initial success, the other two networks copied *NBC Saturday Night at the Movies* and soon there was a cinematic programming block for almost every night of the week on network TV (*Ibid.*). However, viewers were still reliant on the programming schedules of TV networks and had to tailor their viewing patterns accordingly. The industrial logic of television

dominated the ways that people thought about watching movies at home, most apparent

of which was the inclusion of commercials. Watching movies that are interspersed with

commercials is a markedly different experience than watching a feature uninterrupted in a

theater; movies on television are textually disjointed as viewers consume other texts

(commercials) while still following the narrative trajectory of the main text (the film).

Viewers voiced their displeasure to the networks with this new form of cinematic

consumption through unstable ratings, particularly when faced with popular television

programming on competing channels (Rapping 22). Before viewers could completely

reconceptualize their relationship with cinema inside the home, they needed greater

agency; not only did viewers want relative variety for television programming (*e.g.* news,

movies, and sitcoms), but they would soon come to demonstrate a desire to choose when,

where, and how to watch television as well with the introduction of the VCR in 1975.

Fast Forward: The Emergence of the VCR

In 1975, Sony released its Betamax videocassette recording technology in both

Japan and America, forever altering the ways in which consumers interacted with

recorded visual media in their homes; JVC released a competing format known as Video

Home System (VHS) worldwide shortly thereafter (in October 1976 in Japan and August

1977 in the US) (McDonald 33). While audience activity is central to any investigation of

how a technology comes to acquire cultural and social meaning, most studies either only

nominally explore consumer practices and needs or exclude them altogether. There are

works that do incorporate the consumer's experience into their research on the historical

development of video technology, such as Daniel Herbert's *Videoland*, Joshua

Greenberg's *From Betamax to Blockbuster,* and Frederick Wasser's *Veni, Vidi, Video*

(2001) and this project builds off of their work, specifically focusing on consumer

practices that shaped the technological meaning of the VCR and influenced how VCR

owners interacted with one another as part of a larger network of media sharing.

Defining the VCR

Before examining the ways in which consumers established informal networks of

media sharing with recorded media, we must first understand how the industrial and

technological frameworks were created, as these would be the entry points for many

consumers into the new technology. By examining the marketing practices and business

strategies devised by both the home electronics and film industries, the historical and

cultural conditions under which consumers would have first encountered VCR

technology emerge, providing greater illumination of the horizon of possibilities

available to VCR owners in the mid-1970s.

When Sony introduced the Betamax in 1975, the new technology was exclusively

sold as a time-shifting device for television programs and not as a movie-playback

machine. Throughout the 1970s, Sony placed ads in prominent media publications such

as *TV Guide* that proclaimed the benefits of their Betamax technology. One

advertisement tells readers that owning a Betamax will improve their health by virtue of

normalizing sleep schedules (*Figure 1.1*) with the 1977 ad featuring a man smiling in his

sleep, presumably because he is content in the knowledge that his Sony Betamax is

dutifully recording *The Late Show with Johnny Carson* (1962-92), allowing him to watch

it the following day. Such an advertisement tells consumers not only will they be able to

watch programming when they want, but they will also feel healthier and improve their happiness. In a sense, the Betamax is imbued with a power that allows owners greater control over their physiology.

Another 1977 ad suggests that the Betamax will help owners with career advancement, describing a situation where an owner has been watching the *Wall Street* miniseries for six weeks with the climax happening the same night of an important business dinner (*Figure 1.2*). By emphasizing its mediating ability in the context of a white collar career, Sony positions the Betamax as a device that is invaluable to business professionals as a means of balancing career and domestic life. Such an ad also suggests Sony viewed the Betamax as a consumer electronics technology targeted at high-earning individuals as opposed to the general population (at least during the product's infancy). The copy also highlights the ephemeral nature of VCRs as envisioned by Sony at the time, pointing out that the cassettes are "of course" reusable. By emphasizing the ability to record over existing material, Sony further defined their VCR as a device meant to be used with disposable television programming and not pre-recorded movies.

The repeated emphasis on self-improvement by virtue of the ability to record television programming makes clear Sony's understanding of their technology as one related to time-shifting. By using the Betamax, owners can more effectively manage their professional and personal lives by organizing their schedules around events and appointments (*e.g.* sleep or business meetings) without missing their favorite television shows. Moreover, the ubiquitous references to the ability to re-record new material on cassettes, as well as the versatility of the Betamax in interfacing with different brands of televisions highlights the agency this new technology supposedly offered viewers.

Instead of only being able to record on a videocassette once, VCR owners could re-record

television programming at their own whims. Rather than be at the mercy of network

programmers or cassette manufacturers, consumers were given greater autonomy in how

they consumed their content and what they were able to do with the technology they

owned. Furthermore, Sony's marketing imagined users as viewing their recorded material

as impermanent, ephemeral television programming that would never be built into a

library.

      While advertising consumer products as able to improve one's life in myriad ways

is not unique to the Betamax, what is interesting is what is not mentioned: In the 15

advertisements included in this study between 1976 and 1978, not once is the ability to

watch movies at home mentioned in early VCR advertisements. This is because for

manufacturers during the technology's formative years, the VCR was solely the

provenance of television, meaning they viewed the VCR's sole purpose as a recorder of

television programming. The trajectory of the VCR as a movie-playing machine as

opposed to a device which records television shows to watch at a more convenient time

was not particularly long. In the span of roughly 5 years, both manufacturers and film

studios recognized the major selling point of VCRs in the United States as a device that

plays pre-recorded movies. However, during this time period, VCR owners developed

their own uses for the technology, many of which were responses to unique social desires

and contexts. How did these early adopters incorporate the technology into their life to

meet social and cultural needs? How did the VCR help facilitate the growth and

evolution of informal networks of sharing? To answer these questions, it is necessary to

look at the ways in which audiences used the technology and how informal networks of

sharing and distribution developed in response to deficiencies in the market with regard to consumer needs and practices.

Early Adopters—A Case Study

Ten months after being introduced to the American market, the Sony Betamax had sold roughly 25,000 units (Lowe 1976c). The number of homes containing a Betamax was not overwhelming; however, market penetration was significant enough to warrant further examination of those who would be considered early adopters. I define early adopters here as those consumers who purchase a product upon hearing of its retail availability and view price as a minimal concern. Early adopters also purchase retail products before a critical mass of consumers exists (Watts & Dodds), thus presenting the early adopters with a technology in the process of being socially and culturally defined. As a case study, I will be examining six issues of *The Videophile's Newsletter (TVN)*, a VCR-enthusiast newsletter that ran from 1976 until 1981, to better gauge what issues related to home video were important to the some of the most engaged consumers at the beginning of home video history. The first six issues of *TVN* are available online through Archive.org's WayBackMachine while late issues are available via private holdings of subscribers. I focus on *TVN* because it was the first grassroots publication of its time, providing an alternative voice to industry and retail publications. *TVN* also aligns with the introduction of VCR technology to the American consumer market through its nascent period until the technology became domesticated (Silverstone *et al*) in the early 1980s. Moreover, it was the only hobbyist publication during the VCR's formative years. With that in mind, it should be noted *TVN* does not speak for the entirety of VCR owners

in the late 1970s; rather, *TVN* is a window into a group of highly motivated consumer electronics aficionados, television and cinema fans, and the social and cultural practices that they developed, particularly with regards to informal networks of sharing. Furthermore, as a grassroots, consumer-focused publication, *TVN* is an excellent cultural artifact for examining how informal networks of media sharing can facilitate community growth.

Started in 1976 by Florida-based attorney Jim Lowe, *TVN* began as a small, amateur newsletter circulated to VCR contacts Lowe had made after purchasing his Betamax that same year (Lowe "September 1976"). In the newsletter's first issue, Lowe states that his sole intention in creating *TVN* was to trade tapes and local television programming schedules with fellow Betamax owners. While the publication went on to perform a variety of services for subscribers, including technical fixes, suggestions of best practices, and republication of pertinent VCR news, from the outset it was clearly envisioned to be a forum for interested parties to exchange media. In certain ways, the first issue resembled a classified section of a newspaper. The newsletter itself was created by Lowe using a typewriter to produce the original written content and then mimeographed with the inclusion of news articles cut out from other publications, advertisements, and rudimentary illustrations. As a point of comparison, *TVN* looked much like any other amateur newsletter produced before the introduction of professional grade design programs to the consumer market, eschewing the look of newspapers in favor of a magazine-style aesthetic.

One of the first things noticeable from the newsletters is that the demographics of early VCR owners are relatively circumscribed. For the most part, everyone mentioned

is male, though there is an occasional exception. Second, there are repeated references to the relatively high-income level of most subscribers to the newsletter. This should not be particularly surprising considering the first Betamax units cost $2,300 (roughly $9,700 in 2015), limiting the potential audience to those with hefty bank accounts. Indeed, an article in *Videonews*, a similar publication to *TVN* but aimed at retailers, described Washington state area Betamax owners as "neither very young nor very old, but affluent professionals, often men with families, in the 30 to 50 age group" (Reprinted in Lowe 1976d). Even into 1978 the VCR community was still "usually male, 21 to 39 years old, often single (because they spend so much time with their machines they have little time left to be sociable), rarely look the way they sound on the phone, rarely sound the way they write…are hospitable, trustworthy, generally reliable, and all have enormous telephone bills" (Vuolo). The imagery of videophiles recalls that of early computer geeks—young and middle-aged men obsessed with machines that are amiable, if not a little socially awkward (Buhs 68-69). Throughout the early issues of the newsletter, there are numerous ads and guest columns from readers, yet only a handful of them appear to be from women. Furthermore, an advertisement from MPCS Video Industries offered Betamax purchasers five minutes of studio time to record whatever they would like, telling owners they could "put yourself, your wife, your children, or your mother-in-law" on a tape to view at home ("Buy A Betamax"). Taking this and Vuolo's description of the VCR scene into account, it appears most of the active *TVN* readership was male, which echoes the disproportionate amount of boys compared to girls who were interested in computers, video games, and hacking (Klawe *et al*; Margolis, Fisher, & Miller; Upitis). Of note for the homosociality of *TVN* is that the voices of women are nonexistent, an

important absence when considering the community of VCR enthusiasts from a bottom-up perspective.

The relatively monolithic demographic of *TVN* readers suggests that users would be coming to the new technology with relatively similar worldviews and expectations. Indeed, when looking at *The Videophile's Newsletter* as a whole, six topics that were of concern for early adopters of the VCR continually re-appear: the sharing and trading of tapes; face-to-face gatherings; technical discussion and tips and tricks for using the Betamax; pre-recorded material; archival issues with the preservation of culture; and legal concerns. Each of these provides different insights into the ways in which subscribers of *TVN* (as well as non-subscribers as many readers discuss their VCR-based interactions with family, friends, co-workers, and VCR owners they have met) view their relationship to both *TVN* and the VCR as one based around community.

Trading Tapes

First, the most common topic that ran throughout the early issues of *TVN* was tape sharing and trading. In fact, most of the first newsletter is devoted explicitly towards outlining acceptable practices for trading and sharing tapes. *TVN* founder Jim Lowe explains in the first issue of the newsletter:

> What I would most like to do is trade tapes with those of you who are willing to keep an eye out for my wants, while I will, of course, do the same for you. At present I have neither the time nor the inclination to be a taping service…As much as possible I would like to keep things on a strict hobby-type nonprofit basis…What seems the best idea to me right now (pending your feedback) is to trade wantlists and if you want to, trade *TV Guide*s…Having enough tape on hand would of course be a factor which would have to be worked out. But I feel sure that I could tape a show or two for you each week or so in return for a similar effort on your part.

From the outset, early VCR adopters appear to be interested in expanding their

media horizons and the most efficacious way to do so was to establish a nationwide

network of VCR-enthusiasts who could circulate personally recorded material. What

particularly stands out is the acknowledgement—from the outset—that these are to be

informal, ad-hoc networks where requests are filed and subsequently filled. One of the

major catalysts for the establishment of informal tape-trading networks was viewer

dissatisfaction with TV programming schedules. Lowe outlines the dissatisfaction that

many viewers had with the schedules, going so far as to suggest trading *TV Guide*s to see

what other regions of the country were programming that was unavailable to a Betamax

owner in his or her home area. In fact, Lowe queried *TV Guide* about subscribing to the

publication in other markets in a later issue, receiving a response from the Readers'

Service department that regional editions could be purchased for $12 per year

("December 1976"). What Lowe and his readers were upset with was not television

programming, but the choices made by external actors about what television content was

available for local viewers to consume. This issue in particular is exemplary of the local

yet universal (at least in American terms) grievances felt by VCR owners. The lack of

programming choice available to VCR owners was made clear by the marketing promises

of the VCR: Television audiences would now theoretically be able to watch all the

programming they desired, yet were still operating within the strictures of network

programmers. More than just apprising fellow VCR-enthusiasts of what TV content is

programmed around the country, the practice of trading *TV Guides* highlights the

importance of sharing as a social workaround for external factors for this particular

group, a fact made more apparent when one takes into account the cost of shipping the publications.

As *TVN* and the VCR matured, technical and administrative standards and social norms for trading and sharing began to develop. For example, in the October issue, Lowe suggests that a 1:1 ratio of time of material taped be adopted between traders (*i.e.* for every hour recorded by the sender, the receiver should send back a tape with an equal amount of material on it, whether that be one hour of a show or two half hours of programming).[10] Lowe also suggests that the person receiving the recorded material pay for shipping both ways ("October 1976" 4). The standards and best practices proposed by Lowe did two things. First, the establishment of standard practices such as the 1:1 ratio of time of material taped on traded cassettes served to mollify any potential disputes over the uneven value of traded tapes that might arise. Maintaining social harmony appears to have been a priority for *TVN* and a number of columns were devoted to devising best practices and exhorting readers to treat one another with respect. Second, the formation of community standards and norms served to legitimate the *TVN* community. Similar to creating a sense of social harmony, legitimating the community meant strengthening social cohesion in order to present the group as respectable and worth having ingroup opinions and desires taken seriously by outsiders, including manufacturers, law enforcement, and the media industries. Of particular interest appears to be distinguishing VCR owners from criminal pirating enterprises. Louie Bohl, an early videophile, pleads that the guidelines put forward by Lowe be followed in order to maintain the integrity of the technology and community:

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[10] This protocol presages the ratio requirements of private BitTorrent sites by nearly 30 years.

> At long last, a hobby interest we can all enjoy on a personal basis. No FBI or legal harassment. No more rip-offs through the mail. We can finally trade video cassettes as one collector to another simply to help each other out…If we stick together, (and this newsletter is one way to do it), we can keep prices down, keep the criminal element out and make this hobby respectable…Let us help each other out and do some trading. We don't need the criminals and profit makers to ruin everything. We can obtain what we want by ourselves.
>
> (Lowe "November 1976", 12)

Lowe's clarion call marks out the *TVN* readership as one that is driven by pure passion, not by profit and not by a general sense of rebelliousness. With MCA-Universal's initial lawsuit to sue Sony introduced in 1976, VCR owners who followed industry trades were well aware of the tenuous nature of the nascent technology and it behooved them to define their activities as purely amateur, recreational pursuits. They were also not criminals engaging in video piracy, a problem that continued to grow from the VCR's introduction to the public. For example, by 1979, master copy of feature films in the US were selling for $1000 with subsequent duplicates going for anywhere between $50 and $500, numbers which certainly grabbed the attention of an already litigious film industry (Fallon). For their part, the film industry stoked fears of video piracy with Columbia Pictures introducing the Video Gard, a system implemented into master cassettes duplicated at Columbia facilities that turn copied tapes into blanks, in 1978 because of "increasing illegal practice" ("Columbia Guards"). Furthermore, FBI seizures of pirated videocassettes increased from 1,159 tapes in 1975 to 16,635 in 1980 ("FBI Nails"). Consequently, piratical activity was viewed as a major stain on the new technology and VCR acolytes took it upon themselves to counter the perception that the VCR was a conduit for criminal activity. By establishing a loose code of ethics, Jim

Lowe and *TVN* readers developed social and cultural practices predicated upon informal networks of sharing rather than adhere to those of the establishment or criminals.

The second issue of *TVN* also created a taxonomy of nine types of material that would be traded and shared: regular current network shows; syndicated reruns; syndicated shows; syndicated movies; pay-cable material; 16mm film or tape from television that is currently available; 16mm film or tape from television that is not currently available; 16mm film or tape of a movie that is available; 16mm film or tape of a movie that is not available[11]; off the air material (talk shows or news broadcasts); and prerecorded material[12] (Lowe "October 1976", 4-5). Essentially, *TVN*'s taxonomy sought to differentiate between material that was readily available to VCR owners like programming that was currently airing; material which may only be available to a select few, such as locally broadcast films on 16mm; and miscellaneous categories of programming that would be hard to find, like news broadcasts or pre-recorded cassettes (likely pornography or educational material). Categorizing home media to such an extent was not inherent to the introduction of the VCR; rather, taxonomizing available media was a social practice enacted by a group of people whose desires intersected in such a way as to promote an articulation of how they grouped together media, essentially creating a heuristic through which they understood the types of material they would be exchanging with one another. From almost its inception, home video can be seen to

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[11] The 16mm categories refer to material that is available on 16mm film stock. 16mm was a relatively popular format for pre-existing filmic or televisual material for two reasons: First, 16mm was the standard for home cinema for those that could afford both the projector and film, as well as libraries, universities, and other public institutions that had an interest in screening both popular and educational material. Second, 16mm was the format used for local television broadcast of theatrical films and national television shows.

[12] At the time of publication, there were no prerecorded cassettes. This inclusion was anticipating future releases.

foster informal networks of sharing and trading, as well as a desire for categorization of

material to help aid those engaging in the swapping of recorded programming.

In the second issue of *TVN*, Jim Lowe expresses his desire to establish a stable

community of VCR owners who are interested in sharing recorded material, but also

bringing pleasure to one another through social interactions and the shared experience of

watching material they enjoyed. He couches his rhetoric in the lionization of

amateurism, bemoaning the deleterious effects when moneyed-interests get involved with

a hobby:

> I just thought…that it might be kind of fun for people to help each other see the
> TV shows they would like to see, just for the pure joy of bringing pleasure to
> themselves and to each other. A radical and dangerous idea, I grant you…but
> perhaps a workable one on a small scale. This is a virgin hobby. We are on the
> frontier. Do with it what you will.
>
> <div align="right">("October 1976" 2)</div>

From the outset, *TVN* identifies itself and interpellates its readers as being

hobbyists. A sense of fellowship is identified as a major component of the community

and readers are encouraged to lend one another a helping hand. From Lowe's intrepid

rhetoric of novelty, *TVN* and its imagined community of VCR enthusiasts sketch a virgin

cultural landscape waiting to be shaped by those "on the frontier." The emphasis on

trading tapes and connecting with fellow enthusiasts was encouraged to be organic and

Jim Lowe did not see himself as a leader of this movement. Instead, Lowe provided

exhortations to connect with one another but ultimately left the ways in which these

relationships would take shape up to the will of the community. Norms did eventually

arise—such as the 1:1 suggested ratio of taped material and the person requesting the

material being the one to pay for shipping and packaging. More playful social norms also

developed, such as the inclusion of surprise recorded material when taping a show for someone. Such gestures might be included at the end of a tape and could be anything from a variety show to a special news report or even a Saturday morning cartoon (Lowe "December 1976", 7). The inclusion of these 'goodies' added a personal touch to what might otherwise be understood as a simple exchange between readers of the same newsletter. The practice also allowed tape traders to inject their own personality (to a limited extent) by demonstrating what they enjoyed, found funny, or otherwise found interesting. The value-added by the addition of unrequested material served to strengthen the bonds of a community organized by informal networks and suggests that participants wanted to grow closer with one another.

Tape Conventions and Parties

Exemplary of the early videophile community would be the regional VCR conventions held somewhat regularly throughout the country. The conventions were *ad hoc* affairs and organized by enterprising subscribers; in the early days of the VCR, there were no official organizations. One such convention was actually recorded on video— the 1979 Video Collectors of Ohio Convention—and tells us much about the social practices of these videophile communities, as well as what was valued socially . Art Vuolo, a *TVN* subscriber and VCR-enthusiast who serves as the narrator and host for the video, immediately emphasizes the number and variety of technological devices present in the hotel conference room in which the gathering is being held. In all, there are 39 video recording devices in the room, mostly represented by Betamax players with a couple U-Matic recorders, a couple of VHS players, and the newly-released MCA

Discovision laserdisc device (Glasser *Video Collectors*). What makes this significant (and brings the materiality of the community to mind) is that all of the participants have brought their own VCR, each of which could weigh up to 70 pounds; attendees also traveled long distances and made significant sacrifices to attend, with some attendees driving from Missouri and New Hampshire while one man made the trek even though his wife was due to give birth at any moment (Greenberg 17-18). *TVN* would also publish instructions on how to organize one of these regional conferences, offering best practices learned from past gatherings, particularly with regards to technical issues, including making sure to account for the number of power outlets and adapters available at a location due to the intensive power required of the machines (Glasser "Reflections On"). Clearly, members of the videophile community were ready, willing, and able to make personal sacrifices to help strengthen their bonds with other community members, as well as the community as a whole.

Taping parties, where VCR-owners in a more localized setting would gather at someone's house to connect their devices together and copy tapes from one another, were also common early in the history of the VCR. As Marc Wielage and Rod Woodcock, two original subscribers to *TVN*, tell Joshua Greenberg, generally the person that had acquired the hardest-to-find material would have his (and it would usually be a male) VCR serve as the master device while everyone else wired theirs into it; whomever had the rare material was generally considered the "hero" of the night (Greenberg 24). Often these gatherings would go deep into the night with participants sharing stories and beers, acting as parties with an emphasis on video recording.

The informal tape trading economy and early videophile community appears to have served important social functions for members. Beyond meeting their media consumption desires, VCR-based communities created new friendships, disseminated technical knowledge, and fostered the development of (sub)cultural capital. Ray Glasser, an active member of the videophile community, provides an *in situ* account of one of the benefits of the community while discussing an ad[13] he placed for TV programming he wanted in *TVN*:

> …Received the Newsletter with our Ad, knowing that we would reach at least one hundred other Betamax owners. Elated just to see it, I anxiously hoped to get a few letters. Beginning a week later, my mailbox began to fill up with something other than bills. It was beautiful! Then came the mindblower: that Saturday night, my pal and I were sitting over at my apartment watching *Forbidden Planet* (1956)…The phone rings. A faint voice from the other end claims he's calling from San Francisco, California (!!!), saw my ad in *The Videophile's Newsletter*, and wants to trade. Half an hour later…the phone rings again…This one's from Miami, Florida. And so on. Total that night, four calls. And once in a while, the phone still rings. Unbelievable!!! [sic]
>
> <div align="right">("Reflections on Owning a Betamax" 9)</div>

Glasser's account is illuminating for a number of reasons. First, it evinces the sheer joy members felt communicating with fellow aficionados. Glasser writes that he was "elated" to see his ad in the newsletter while simultaneously feeling anxious about possible responses. When Glasser receives letters in the mail, his connection with the community appears to be one of genuine joy. That he is happy he is now receiving correspondence with fellow home media lovers instead of bills and junk mail suggests

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[13] Ads were originally free to submit to *TVN*, but due to the rapid increase in readership, Lowe instituted a flat rate for ads, differentiating between personal and professional ads (professional ads would be selling equipment or marketing a business. Ad-purchasers would often include a phone number instead of an address in order to expedite the transaction. Most often, readers would submit ads requesting a list of programming or movies they would like to have taped for them while at the same time offering material from their own collection in exchange.

TVN is a major social experience for him. Glasser also explicitly notes he was watching *Forbidden Planet* when he received his first phone call, a relatively unnecessary inclusion which nonetheless signals his taste to the rest of the community and perhaps an unconscious effort to show he has the credentials for cinematic respect. Finally, Glasser writes at length about the frequency of calls he received and the fact he still received calls months after his initial ad suggests not only did his tape trading request resonate with *TVN* subscribers, but also he came to be someone of importance in the community.

Not only would videophiles drives hundreds of miles at great personal expense to connect with fellow enthusiasts, they would also generate large phone bills on cross-country calls. Although Glasser does not mention it, one would assume that over time the conversations would begin to include personal concerns (or perhaps immediately, feeling a closeness that is fostered by affinity communities), much like any friendship. The process of forging relationships between videophiles would be echoed in the 1990s with the feminist video chainletters begun by experimental filmmaker Miranda July in which geographically disparate women would send an artist statement and tapes to an address; after receiving enough tapes, July would compile them into an anthology or chainletter and then mail back copies of the completed film (Hilderbrand 195-196). Additionally, the video chainletters never rejected a submission, a practice which was in place to prevent the establishment of social or artistic hierarchies, an ethos which is well in line with *TVN*'s stated goals. While it is important to note not all Betamax owners were members of the videophile community, it is equally important to recognize that significant portions of VCR owners belonged to a community that was characterized by a

nominal lack of social hierarchy[14]; a feeling of inclusion; and hopes by community

members that needs will be met by their relationships with one another. Above all else,

early videophiles were fans of both film and television and, to a lesser extent, were

interested in the newest consumer electronics technologies, as evidenced by the

voluminous requests for a wide variety of television programming and movies and

frequent news update about the latest developments in home media technology.

Technical Discussions

The community-building components of early home media culture were often

bolstered with technical discussions. A common subtheme that runs throughout the

technical discussions is the inclusive nature of the videophile community. Questions

were regularly printed without answers in one issue under the expectation that someone

somewhere would know how to solve the issue. Because the VCR was a new technology

and most early adopters were hobbyists as opposed to professional engineers, building a

body of knowledge about the technological apparatus was done on the fly in an *ad hoc*

process. Initially, this development of knowledge took the form of Jim Lowe posing

questions he had regarding various aspects of the Betamax player to his readers. For

instance, in *TVN*'s first issue, Lowe was having problems with recording true black and

white images on a tape that had either already been recorded with color material or

contained color material as part of the broadcast (*e.g.* black and white programming that

included color commercials) (Lowe "September 1976", 4). Exemplifying how quickly

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[14] Social hierarchies did exist within the community, such as Lowe functioning as a de facto leader and those with rare and expansive tape collections occupying higher echelons of prestige. However, the discourse which circulated within *TVN* emphasized the horizontal aspects of the community rather than vertical.

the early VCR community formed, a reader offered an in-depth solution the very next issue, suggesting that Lowe (and others encountering the same problem) contact the broadcast station and ask that they switch their broadcast off of a color film chain to a black and white one (Lowe "October 1976", 3). This was followed up with even more precise information in a later issue. Other major concerns in the early issues included questions about wear-and-tear on the machine, proper maintenance, the longest amount of cable one could run before losing picture quality, and the longevity of videotapes.

The community quickly developed what can be called a standardized body of knowledge. In discussing the ways knowledge was developed, it is important to ask who was trusted and who was allowed to speak and develop knowledge, in addition to what type of knowledges were value. As Carolyn Marvin notes about early electric technologies, the introduction of new technologies and media presents the possibility of upheaval of established social norms and formations (4). However, at the same time, new media emerge into a world with innumerable existing social, political, economic, and cultural contexts that necessarily inform how people (both ingroup and outgroup) interface with them. Looking at Marvin's work on electrical professionals at the turn of the 20th century in comparison to VCR hobbyists may seem disjointed; however, her approach is applicable when considering the ways in which individuals and knowledge were structured in a way that developed social and technical hierarchies. One example that will be explored further in the next section was the ongoing debate as to what forms of content should be valued among the community. Jim Lowe was a proponent of preserving most textual sources, including talk shows and commercials; others felt that recording commercials was not only inappropriate, but it would also waste time, storage

space, and money. The larger issue at play here is what type of community *TVN*

supported. Was it one that was archival in nature, dutifully recording even the lowest of

culture? Or was it meant to be a community that emphasized the sharing of relatively

scarce goods among members?

Because Jim Lowe was the founder and main contributor to the newsletter, he

occupied a privileged position within the community's hierarchy and his views were

necessarily given greater prominence. However, as *TVN* matured, Lowe began soliciting

readers for questions, as well as incorporating tips and tricks that were submitted,

widening the horizon of discourse for readers and welcoming more members to positions

of prestige while also making the community more collaborative in nature. One

particular subject that routinely came up in both questions and tips and tricks in the early

issues of *TVN* was how to edit out commercials. VCR owners were interested in this for

two main reasons: they wanted their programming uninterrupted and they wanted to

increase the amount of content on each tape, an interesting instance of consumers hacking

products they own. Initially, readers submitted rudimentary work-arounds (including

taking the average commercial time of two minutes and 15 seconds into account when

rewinding a paused tape so as to know when exactly to restart the taping) to edit

commercials out of broadcasts, by their own estimates succeeding about 60-70% of the

time (Lowe "October 1976", 3). Shortly thereafter, however, Lowe compiled reader

input as well as his own experience to devote a full page and a half to a 12 step guide to

successfully edit out commercials from broadcasts, with Lowe noting that absent a

professional-grade recorder this method was the best that existed ("December 1976" 8-9).

Such a guide is indicative of the collaborative nature of the early VCR community and

echoes the technical discussions and troubleshooting that takes place in private, virtual

media communities as well.

Archiving

The technical discussions which took place in the pages of *TVN* also speak to

debates surrounding how VCRs should be used, with some parts of the community

desiring uninterrupted programming on their tapes while others wanted to preserve

contemporary culture, commercials and all. In this way, archival concerns were an

important part of early home media culture. For example, in the second issue of *TVN*,

Jim Lowe editorializes in defense of including commercials in certain recording

instances. He admits that users interested in recording feature films airing on television

would not want commercials interrupting the experience; however, he champions the idea

of including commercials with network shows as they have "a certain historical value"

and are representative of contemporary culture ("October 1976" 5). Like any

community, there was debate as to the value of recording *everything* in a television

broadcast. Speaking to the relatively flat social hierarchy of *TVN*, Lowe's opinion was

not shared by all, and a number of pro- and anti-commercial columns and reader letters

were published. For example, in his post-script to his initial pro-commercial column,

Lowe published a letter from a reader recognizing the value of commercials with stars,

both current and former, but argued "some things are best buried and forgotten"

("January-February 1977" 8). Lowe responds that he is amused by the idea of arbitrarily

deciding which commercials have value and which do not, not least because of the

physical and temporal components of getting up quick enough to decide whether or not to

pause the ongoing recording. Ultimately a consensus was never reached, although over time there was less and less commentary decrying commercials, owing either to the acceptance of a plurality of views within the community (as suggested by Lowe's bemused yet respectful response to the aforementioned letter) or an editorial decision was made to consider the matter settled.

From nearly the start, we can see that early adopters in home media culture are thinking about issues larger than merely consumption. For many of them, there was recognition that while commercials may be cultural detritus to large portions of the viewing audience, advertising holds important cultural value in late capitalism as it often represents or sublimates a particular culture's aspirations and fears (Jhally). In addition to commercials, there are repeated requests to record talk shows, variety shows, sporting events, news programs, and a number of other television programming that would never be syndicated and, thus, fade away from the cultural memory. This analysis is not exaggerating the forward-thinking of Lowe and others, as Lowe explicitly calls for the preservation of televisual ephemera for future generations: "That fleeting light on the screen, commercials and all, can be lovingly recorded by each of us and filed away for the future enjoyment of ourselves and our progeny" ("November 1976" 6). Lowe goes beyond the unemotional drive to preserve culture as an historical exercise (although he values that aspect as well) and attaches personal feelings to his recording: he wants his children to be able to enjoy what he enjoyed in as faithful a re-presentation as possible. The act of recording television programming becomes an instrument of cultural stewardship and preservation, an aspect that is often overlooked in the histories of home video recording. This personal interest is paralleled throughout *TVN* regarding all of the

themes identified so far and—perhaps—can be attributed to the amateur or hobbyist

nature of early home viewing culture. In particular, the emphasis on enthusiasts defining

what is important to them about the technology as opposed to broadcasters or

manufacturers speaks to the resistant and grassroots nature of the *TVN* community (*e.g.*

using the VCR as an archival device rather than merely a time-shifting technology).

With that said, there is recognition on the part of Lowe and his fellow VCR

enthusiasts that collecting for the sake of collecting can be problematic. Lowe notes that

while it may be enjoyable to record everything possible, it may ultimately end up being a

liability, playfully writing:

> Now, I know that when *Gone With The Wind* (1939) is on, the gentle clicking and
> whirring of the trusty Betamax will undoubtedly be heard throughout the land, but
> mark my words, all of you having those hours and hours of tape hanging
> around…it's going to be a burden on you someday.
> ("November 1976" 2)

The counterpoint to cultural preservation is the recognition of material realities; if

a VCR owner is dutifully recording hundreds of hours of television, the collection of

video tapes amassed would eventually reach a size that would become problematic for

most people. At issue was archivally-minded VCR owners balancing the desire to

preserve American television culture on one hand and making sure that the collection of

tapes does not become spatially (and financially) problematic on the other.

Another reader writes that he thinks the idea of creating an archive of

contemporary television is an interesting idea, but he is not sure if it is economically

feasible. Instead, the reader argues that such preservation should be left to universities

and organizations with government grants (Lowe "January-February 1977", 8).

However, such an attitude goes against the hobbyist nature that Lowe and many others in

the community articulate. Much like record collectors, VCR owners who were interested

in recording television for purposes other than time-shifting viewed their recordings as

contributing to their cultural capital with their video tapes serving as both an archive and

a resource for identity-growth (Shuker 321). Bourdieu's formulation of capital (241-242)

declares the basis for the production, distribution, and consumption of such capital is

class. Traditionally, the division of society into classes was sustained and reproduced

through education and social strata; however, in textual communities like *TVN*,

discerning an individual's class is more difficult. Nonetheless, as previously discussed,

the group of early VCR owners was largely homosocial and many of the published

subscribers indicate a middle class social milieu. With that in mind, cultural capital (in

conjunction with social capital) emerges as an important arbiter of prestige within the

TVN community.

How was cultural capital cultivated within *TVN*? Most notably it involved getting

one's name printed in the newsletter, achieved by submitting a letter with poignant

questions or insight to Lowe, answering other readers' questions, and submitting notices

for tape trading. Very few readers got letters printed in *TVN*; however, those that did saw

their name consistently repeated by Lowe, effectively becoming *de facto* contributors.

Many of these community members went on to later contribute to and edit *TVN*. Other

users would answer technical or legal questions for the newsletter, lending them a more

pragmatic type of cultural capital. Those who submitted pseudo-classified ads with lists

of material they wanted or that they held in their collection were the most numerous. It is

this group that signaled their taste to others most often, using the ads not only to fulfill

their desire for unseen media, but also to let their fellow readers know that they had a

particularly interesting taste in movies and television. Each list was idiosyncratic, but they often followed Jeffrey Sconce's model of paracinema fans distinguishing their taste as culturally distinct (*Trashing*). Effectively, the trading ads signaled who had more esoteric (or canonical in some cases) taste and thus deserved elite status in the community's social hierarchy. Cultural capital is important in all social contexts, but it is especially so in communities which are media-based, as evidenced by the continuous signaling of taste and prestige by *TVN* readers in their tape acquisitions and classified ads.

What these anecdotes suggest is the consensus among early VCR owners was anything but a consensus. Rather, there was an ongoing debate regarding a variety of archival issues ranging from whether or not to record commercials to discussing how many discrete instances of a recording should exist with one side echoing Horkheimer and Adorno ("Dialectic of Enlightenment") in decrying advertising as manipulative detritus while the other side followed Raymond Williams ("Television") in believing advertising, promos, and bumpers to be important cultural artifacts and important to the experience of watching television. The debates were also important spaces where community members were able to exercise cultural capital to influence and reshape the boundaries of the social hierarchy. These conversations continue to this day and are echoed on the forums of private filesharing sites to be discussed in the following chapters.

Legal Concerns

As a corollary to the concerns about archival practices, the legality of recording material for personal use and circulation among a small network of acquaintances was also a frequent topic of discussion in early *TVN* issues and the issue also functioned as a way to further organize the readership of *TVN* into a community. Initially, Lowe and his readers idly wondered if there were issues with copyright and intellectual property violations by taping broadcast material, but these concerns were quickly brushed aside as they considered their activities innocent and smalltime enough to not warrant attention from the copyright industry (Lowe "October 1976", 5). The early VCR community also anticipated the rise of bootleg dealers who would tape shows and proceed to sell them for a profit; Lowe repeatedly laments this inevitably, but suggests that the hobbyists would be able to insulate themselves from being grouped in with the black market dealers by developing a strong community and fair trading practices that would indicate this was a practice of passion as opposed to one of commerce (*ibid*).

Despite these (perhaps) naïve views toward copyright and their practice of taping broadcast material, Lowe and company quickly realized that their noncommercial activities might yet cause them trouble. In the third issue of *TVN*, Lowe includes an item noting the uptick in interest among readers about what is legal and what constitutes a violation of copyright. Lowe promises to look into the matter, citing his Law degree as an aide in the process ("November 1976" 2). In the following issue, a ¾ page editorial is devoted to copyright concerns as they specifically relate to the *TVN* community; Lowe comes to the conclusion that legal authorities are only concerned with the sale of copyrighted material and therefore he is outlawing advertisements which sell copyrighted material on tape ("December 1976" 2). This is noteworthy because, as Lowe notes, there

were a number of rival publications that openly advertised "literally thousands" (*ibid.*) of tapes of copyrighted material. Consequently, Lowe couches his rhetoric in the amateurism that permeates the corpus of early *TVN*, noting that he started *TVN* as a forum for the free exchange of ideas and recorded television among collectors and to preserve contemporary televisual culture for the future (*ibid.*); Lowe also explicitly denies any desire to profit from his tape trading and publishing ventures. The initial discussions of copyright and the legality of taping in *TVN,* particularly Lowe's invocation of amateurism and the adversarial comparisons between *TVN* and other publications which advertise tapes for sale, appear to function as social adhesives in strengthening community bonds.

The concern over what rights VCR owners had is actually an interesting look at the microlevel of the evolving status of copyright in the 1970s. When the 4th issue of *TVN* was being written, Congress was in the process of revising copyright law, an activity which Lowe noted was ongoing and of relevance to his readers. What would eventually become known as the Copyright Act of 1976 legally codified fair use provisions, which had been around since the middle of the 19th century, as well as extended the amount of time that a work was under copyright protection to the life of the author plus fifty years ("Copyright Act of 1976"). While the depth of their knowledge of copyright law is unknown, that early VCR enthusiasts were engaging with the relatively arcane legislative process of copyright revision suggests this was a community aware its taping activities may be illegal (not in the sense of tape pirates and organized crime), but believed they had a moral right to continue their hobby unmolested:

> It would seem to me that once the networks and copyright holders have allowed their product to escape into the atmosphere, the consumer has the right to receive it, reduce it to his possession and continue to enjoy it in the future, so long as he does not undertake to copy and/or resell it or charge an admission price to see it rerun
>
> <div align="right">("December 1976" 2)</div>

This cavalier attitude towards personal use indicates early home media culture had a somewhat libertarian streak—at least in terms of fair use and popular culture as belonging to the public—with regards to copyright and fair use, an attitude that remains deeply embedded in contemporary filesharing communities. They believed that so long as they were not engaging in commercial activity with the tapes they recorded, they should be left alone. In fact, the community was ardent in its rejection of pirate activities, re-printing a statement from Sony speaking out against piracy with *TVN* adding a "Hear, Hear!!" (Lowe "January-February 1977").

It should be noted that among contributors to *TVN*, only Lowe is identified as being involved in the field of law, suggesting this was a group of legal amateurs apprising themselves of copyright provisions *in medias res*. In perhaps a bit of misplaced faith in the legal system, Lowe further elaborates on his moral posturing with regards to personal use of recorded copyrighted material:

> Surely…SURELY!...the corporate attorneys and the FBI have better things to do than to break down the door and prosecute some poor schmoe who has a few tapes…which he is keeping purely for his own enjoyment and that of his friends. If any of you are hassled on this level, I think that a complaint to your congressman would be in order. Not only would this be harassment based on the most marginal of legal authority, but it would be a shameful waste of the taxpayer's money for the FBI to beef up it's 'cases made' file with such trivial matters when organized crime is corrupting the very fiber of the nation virtually unchecked.
>
> <div align="right">("December 1977" 2)</div>

Lowe's response brings to mind contemporary discussion of filesharing and law enforcement priorities and it is clear that early home entertainment hobbyists were resolute in their belief that they were doing nothing wrong, perhaps to the point of recklessness. This faith in the lawfulness of their hobby was almost immediately put to the test, however, when Jim Lowe received a subpoena related to the *Universal v. Sony* case in February of 1977.

As might be expected, Lowe published his subpoena on the front page of the March/April edition of *TVN* (it moved to a bi-monthly schedule in 1977) and devoted one and a half more pages to discussing his views on the lawsuit, as well as his experience giving the deposition which seemed to be more of an annoyance for him than anything else. While the subpoena and subsequent deposition certainly were a wakeup call to Lowe, he maintains an attitude that exemplifies the strength and resolve of the early VCR community. During his deposition, Lowe was pressured to not only reveal his list of recorded material, but he was also requested to supply the prosecution with the mailing list of *TVN* and personal correspondence that Lowe had with a number of readers. Resolute in his righteousness, Lowe declined all three requests and instead outlined his beliefs regarding trading tapes in a nonprofit manner ("March-April 1977" 3). Furthermore, Lowe argues in his editorial that if the copyright industry thinks their legal maneuverings will "nip the fledgling interests of the home video hobbyist in the bud," they are sorely mistaken as there were over 30,000 Betamax players sold at that point, a consumer base which would only continue to grow (*Ibid* 2).

That Lowe felt that his subpoena and subsequent deposition were worthy to devote several pages of a *TVN* issue is telling. Not only was it of major interest to *TVN* readers as a potential legal issue for themselves, but it also suggests that Lowe felt he was doing his readers a service by outlining ways to handle legal issues related to recording material from television. Furthermore, by consolidating all VCR owners into the conversation, Lowe is implicitly connecting his readership with VCR owners across the country. In doing so, he strengthens the bond within the *TVN* community by pitting them against corporate legal teams intent on quashing their growing hobby. Though beginning with a naïve faith in the legal system and copyright industries, Jim Lowe and other early VCR enthusiasts quickly realized that their hobby would be an ongoing battle, one that remains with those who share files on both public and private sites.

Pre-Recorded Material

Finally, while pre-recorded movies on tape did not become a regular commodity until the 1980s, early adopters of VCRs were clamoring for them from the start. In the first issue of *TVN*, Jim Lowe writes that he is aware that many of his fellow Betamax owners specifically purchased the device to build a movie collection. Presumably he was in contact with local Betamax owners at that point as it was the very first issue, which speaks to the deep roots of the early VCR community. Interestingly, Lowe prognosticates that it will actually be video disks (in this case the MCA-Phillips Video Disk) that will be the format adopted by film studios for home release with video cassettes serving as archives for television programming and obscure films "that no respectable video disk maker is ever likely to produce" ("September 1976" 4).

Underlying this proclamation is that there exist a large number of films that the market would be unable to support (not to mention marginal television programming like commercials, promos, and bumpers) and therefore video tapes are necessary tools of cultural preservation; as a corollary, videophiles are the stewards of contemporary culture, both low and high. Lowe also speaks to the myriad technical concerns that are consistent throughout *TVN*, noting that editing commercials out of movies is a hassle and, thus, having pre-recorded material available for purchase would be preferable.

The practice of recording movies and television programming suggests two things about the *TVN* community. First, many readers who share Lowe's opinion that there exist a large number of films that would never be released felt an obligation to record such material as a way of preserving all forms of culture. The programming may exist in storage rooms at a broadcaster, but it would not be readily available to viewers at home. By working together across different television markets in the US and recording any and everything, *TVN* readers theoretically compiled an accessible library of material for circulation and consumption. Second, rather than assume the market does not know what consumers want in terms of films released on VHS or video disc, Lowe believed movie studios were simply ignorant to the contemporary viability of pre-recorded movies at home. In the interim until the studios released movies on video, *TVN* readers would have to do it themselves. In a way, the concerns with cultural stewardship and lack of faith in the film industry dovetail to indicate practice and content (recording movies/programming on VCRS and the actual movies/television shows) were imbricated within many minds of the *TVN* community.

Also of concern was the integrity of the film. While it is true that Lowe wrote in defense of recording commercials in order to preserve contemporary culture, he is adamant about recording movies as they were designed to be viewed: "If you're like me, you would rather miss a second of the show than to have a second of Morris the cat in the middle of *Casablanca* (1942)" ("December 1976" 9). The intrusion of commercials into the filmic text would be enough to break the immersion of the filmic apparatus (Baudry) for many early VCR owners and would be enough of a distraction to warrant the loss of a second of film in order to excise all nonfilmic material. Put another way, in order to maintain the cinematic illusion (*i.e.* the excision of all commercial breaks), Lowe is willing to sacrifice roughly one second of a film. There was however, never a community standard developed and it appears that this is one issue that would be decided by personal proclivities until pre-recorded movies became widely available in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, for Lowe and his readers, the introduction of pre-recorded material on tape was a foregone conclusion. It was a question of when, not if. For instance, the opening letter from Lowe to his readers in the third issue of *TVN* outlines why movies on tape is an inevitability:

> Here we are again with another mixed bag of goodies especially tailored for the video tape cassette fiend and the young at heart generally. Since you last heard from me, I have heard from many of you and have received much encouragement to continue. I feel more strongly than ever that this is the wave of the future, and some of the lists that I have seen where private (and anonymous) collectors have already accumulated staggering numbers of TV shows and feature films confirms this. Prerecorded material is on the way, and just about everything else that your little heart could desire. Patience!
>
> <div align="right">("November 1976" 1)</div>

Lowe's letter indicates an unerring willingness to purchase legal versions of the movies he and his readers had been taping. This also provides contrapuntal evidence to

the industry's claims that tape traders are no different than video pirates as tape traders are willing to pay for legal copies of movies (in addition to their lack of profit motive). What Lowe's letter does not suggest is that *TVN* readers will cease recording television content. For many (most notably Lowe), the activity of recording television programming was not merely to satisfy consumption desires. Instead, recording television was an act of cultural preservation, something to be lauded and not shunned. This all suggests that while *TVN* readers clamored for pre-recorded material, this was not the sole issue for them. *TVN* readers, led by Jim Lowe, were concerned with legal matters relating to home video, they were interested in maximizing the potential of their new technological device; and they were invested in preserving all forms of culture for posterity. The characteristics of this community are not unique and they are not isolated. Just as home video echoed the experiences of early home movie connoisseurs of the 1920s, it also extends into contemporary technomedia-based communities, such as private BitTorrent trackers.

Conclusion

By the 1980s, pre-recorded material on videocassettes would become the norm. Movie studios finally realized how lucrative the home video market could be and, ironically, home video became the major source of their income, overtaking theatrical exhibition as the industry's cash cow by the end of the decade (Wasser 131-57). The adoption of home video distribution by the film industry led to a concurrent rise of video rental businesses (Herbert) which introduced a slew of new social practices for home viewing culture, not least of which was the introduction of what might be termed

"viewing deadlines" as consumers who rented a movie generally had less than a week (often three days or less for new releases) before the tape needed to be returned.

However, while new practices arose with the emergence of new industrial and commercial paradigms, established practices (if one can call roughly five years enough time to cement a practice as established) remained. VCR owners still recorded material off of television, a practice that continues to this day, albeit it with large technological advances in the form of DVRs. Understanding how the social practices and needs of home viewing culture developed in its formative years is important to appreciate the residual effects that remain in contemporary home viewing culture, particularly with regard to those who might be considered at the vanguard of emergent media consumption practices, such as users of private filesharing sites.

Throughout this opening chapter and in the service of answering how INMSs can foster the development of community, I have tried to define what social practices developed with the introduction of VCR technology in the 1970s, the cultural, legal and technological contexts in which these practices emerged, and provide an in-depth snapshot of one segment of members of an engaged textual community. The *TVN* community is one that preached a horizontal social structure but was actually composed vertically, with individuals who accrued cultural and social capital through contributions to the publication and demonstrations of their elite taste occupying positions of prestige. Those in positions of authority within the community often set the agenda and Lowe and the small number of valued contributors established many of the major discursive issues, including the extent to which the community should function as an archive, the way in

which the community should handle ongoing litigation regarding claims of piracy, and how the community should develop best practices for trading media.

Each of the major community topics exist at the intersection of technology, social formations, and culture. Often times new technological platforms lead to proclamations of paradigm shifts; such is the case for digital filesharing. However, what this chapter has tried to do is establish a baseline illustration for practices that emerged in the 1970s as a counterweight to claims that digital media practices—specifically those relating to private filesharing sites—are revolutionary and heretofore unseen. Instead, it is useful to conceptualize the introduction of new technologies as instances of social and cultural anxiety whereby the new technology offers the possibility of unsettling established social and communicative hierarchies while emerging and drawing from those same contexts. As Carolyn Marvin (5) has argued, the value to scholars of these instances of technological uncertainty is located in the negotiations of power, representation, and authority by different groups.

In the following two chapters, I will extend the work done in this chapter by focusing on how official and unofficial networks of distribution develop and function online, placing particular emphasis on the ways in which users deviated from developers' expectations in how platforms would be utilized or, in some cases, outright rejected commercial models. The rise of digital INMSs represents a similar historical juncture as the introduction of VCR technology and with it the opportunity for marginalized epistemologies (such as the free culture movement) to shift the discourse surrounding economic models of media distribution and circulation. This moment of technological

change presents scholars with the opportunity to better understand the ways social and

cultural norms and practices emerged and reproduced in virtual communities.

Chapter Two: Social and Technological Developments in Media Distribution Platforms in the Digital Era

In the previous chapter, I examined the historical formation of informal networks of media sharing, emphasizing audio-visual media by tracing circuits of distribution among amateur filmmakers in the 1920s through tape trading communities of the 1970s. In particular, I chose *The Videophile's Newsletter* as a case study for understanding the social practices and hierarchies that develop around textual communities based on media sharing. I argued that by existing within a textual community dedicated to film and television sharing, early VCR enthusiasts were able to envision wholly different uses for new technology than manufacturers' imagined. However, rather than contesting the designed uses implemented by Sony and other companies, *TVN* readers imagined new uses for video recording technology, often expressing hope that manufacturers would follow their lead in realizing the full potential of these new sociotechnical practices. Specifically, early VCR owners imagined their community as one in which media texts were meant to be consumed and should move with ease through both time and space. Moreover, a sizeable contingent of the community viewed VCRs as tools for cultural stewardship, desiring to record all types of media texts, including talk shows, news broadcasts, and commercials.

The most ubiquitous desire, however, was for film studios to license their properties for release on home video. From nearly its inception, Jim Lowe and the *TVN* community were convinced the studios would see their point-of-view and make pre-

recorded movies on cassette a reality and they were correct. By 1982, every major studio

had either a home video arm or licensed a third party to distribute their movies on tape

(Wasser 131-57) and retail video rental stores had become a fixture across America.

While home video was on the ascent, the same could not be said for *TVN* and in 1981, the

publication ended its run, the timing of which roughly coincides with the rise of pre-

recorded cassettes. *TVN* was an important text and community in the history of informal

networks of media sharing because it was at the forefront of the social, cultural, and

industrial struggles to define a new technology. The social and cultural practices and

hierarchies that developed within the TVN community did not disappear, though, and

tracing their migration and evolution in the digital era is the emphasis of this and the

following chapter.

Formal Digital Media Distribution Networks

By the time of *TVN*'s demise, digital systems of communication (what would now

be called the Internet) had been in existence for roughly 15 years. However, these

systems required expensive equipment, a high level of technical expertise, and proximity

to urban areas, government facilities, or institutions of higher learning to access. The

material, spatial, and knowledge-based obstacles that needed to be overcome in order to

connect to the Internet in the 1980s prevented widespread adoption of digital

technologies as a form of communication for media sharing; nonetheless, there was a

small but committed number of users, entrepreneurs, and government actors who

nurtured the social and technical systems required to support a media distribution and

circulation network capable of achieving the level of cultural stewardship envisioned by

Jim Lowe and his cohort. In particular, the release of easy-to-use Web browsers, the standardization of Web protocols, increasing bandwidth speeds and telecommunications infrastructure, the proliferation of ISPs, Acts of Congress, and the commercialization of the Internet all contributed to Americans getting online in record numbers starting around 1993. As a coda to the decade and illustrative of the exponential growth the Internet saw in the US, the number of users vaulted from 58M in 1997 to 120M by 2000 (Tedeschi), an astonishing 107% increase in just 3 years.

What were Americans doing with audio-visual media online? In this chapter, I will first turn to examining the formal networks of distribution that developed online to explore the services and technology available to users, starting with the 1980s and continuing into the mid-2000s. First, I examine licensed music platforms because they were the first to gain traction online due a variety of factors, including limited bandwidth technology, storage space limitations for consumers, and the introduction of compression protocols that made music files smaller and easier to circulate. Second, I examine moving-image media technologies and platforms, starting with services like TiVO and Video On Demand (VOD) before looking at contemporary streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu. Despite focusing mostly on content delivery, many of these systems offer social capabilities to one degree or another. In combination with the conclusions drawn from the previous chapter, looking at early formal digital media distribution platforms will help explain how and why certain practices and social structures for sharing media evolved and/or emerged online, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Of importance is looking at the ways licensed media distribution platforms adopted social affordances that mirror practices and processes prevalent in existing informal networks of

media sharing. That authorized platforms incorporate social practices fostered by informal networks suggests the copyright and media industries recognized that consumers and users were engaging in their own forms of media distribution. The industries sought to both capitalize on the practices and curtail networks of distribution that circumvented commercial systems.

As Americans increasingly accessed the Internet, they wanted to consume media in a digital setting as well, particularly as technological developments afforded greater opportunities to host audio-visual content online. However, major media conglomerates were not as eager as users to make their products available digitally, leading to elaborate informal networks of media circulation on platforms like bulletin board systems (BBSs), Usenet, and peer-to-peer platforms, all of which will be discussed in the following chapter. With that said, there were many attempts at establishing licensed, legal avenues of distribution prior to the new millennium, including some from unexpected sources. The social practices that emerged from the matrix of intersecting corporate interests, technological affordances, and consumer desires are reminiscent of those from informal networks, yet are relatively different due to the inflexibility of corporate and legal demands on the platforms.

Music

One company that was at the forefront of media distribution was AOL (née Control Video Corporation or CVC), which began in 1983 and offered a service whereby consumers could download videogames for the Atari 2600 over a modem that was purchased from CVC (Lumb). After continuing with videogame distribution to mixed

success in the 1980s, the company shifted its focus and became an ISP, offering what

became known as a walled-garden[15] approach to the Internet (Wasserman). By

employing a walled-garden approach to the Web, AOL may have unintentionally

accelerated legal media distribution online, as the walled-garden business model is built

on offering promoted content to users while restricting content from creators that do not

pay and as such, artificially limited the amount of media content available to users.

Because users were limited in their ability to access the entire Internet, AOL needed to

create or aggressively license media content to satisfy users. In doing so, AOL would turn

to licensed games and music.

However, AOL recognized that it was not just content with which users were

concerned. In addition to playing games and listening to promoted music, users wanted

to interact with one another, with AOL President Jack Davies arguing in 1995:

> The reality with America Online is more than 50 per cent of our usage has
> nothing to do with content. It is about chat, it is about e-mail, it's about
> posting messages on message boards. It's people communicating with
> other people. So anytime you hear somebody say content is king .... that is
> we believe a substantial myth and that the development of this medium is
> very much about community. It is about bringing content and community
> together in an interesting fashion and making it interactive and
> participatory rather than one way. (Davies)

While one may take issue with Davies suggesting that what users really want is to

utilize the services most pertinent to AOL for community building, his statement still

speaks to the early development of social networks based on media consumption online.

Not only do users want to listen to music in 1995, but they also want to talk about it with

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[15] Walled-garden Internet restricts users' access to the Web, directing them to content that is approved (and most likely licensed) by the ISP. Walled-garden Internet was prevalent throughout the 90s with companies like America Online (AOL) and Prodigy the most popular.

other people. Despite their assertion that content[16] takes a back seat to communication,

according to AOL, their users desired and created a sense of community around content.

Hence, it is no surprise that AOL chat rooms for specific artists (such as the Backstreet

Boys and Britney Spears) would reflect the content they promoted as part of their walled-

garden Internet.

However, the media offered by walled-garden Internet was limited because there

was not yet a well-defined licensing apparatus between the music industry and digital

content providers. In 1995, the Mechanical-Copyright Protection Society (MCPS)

launched a trial run of Cerberus, the first digital music licensing service, and by 1996

Cerberus was fully operational (Kohn & Kohn 1057). Despite the development of a

digital licensing program, resistance from the music industry to turn licensing music on

digital platforms into a normalized practice prevented the mainstream adoption of music

by content providers. The main reason why the music industry resisted distributing their

holdings online was their steadfast commitment to DRM technology. Without a

guarantee of strong encryption by digital content providers and platforms, the recording

industry was satisfied to continue selling music mainly on physical media (*ibid.* 40-41).

What was needed was a way for users to access their desired media on demand and on

their own terms, parameters which most major media conglomerates were loath to

embrace initially. Thus, it took pioneering independent artists to lead the way.

One of the first legitimate, wide-reaching digital music distribution platforms was

the Internet Underground Music Archive (IUMA). Founded in 1993, IUMA was created

with the explicit purpose to allow unsigned artists to release their music in a viable way

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[16] In this context, content refers to a wide variety of digital material, including news articles, music, images, games, chat rooms, primitive video, and instant messaging.

that bypassed the distribution model favored by the major labels at the time (Collins).

The service originally existed on file transfer protocol (FTP) and Gopher[17] servers before

shifting to the Web where it soon offered music downloads in both mono and stereo, as

well as allowing users to sample a 15 second clip to 'try before you buy' the music

("Alternative Distribution"). Originally the service operated under a "pay what you like"

model, whereby users would decide how much they wanted to pay for a song or album,

similar to the shareware model[18] that was popular in the 1990s (Lieb). Initially, artists

could upload content for free (labels had to pay $50 per artist); however, by 1996 IUMA

was charging artists $240 per year to upload and distribute their material (Collins).

IUMA also served as a promotional platform and offered users access to band profiles,

tour date information, pictures, and interviews; they also partnered with AOL and

Compuserve to make their holdings available to subscribers of the two ISPs (Bloom).

The company's model evolved during its lifetime, but emphasis was placed on

underground artists using the site as a platform through which to release music and

cultivate a fan base that otherwise would be unavailable to them through the recording

industry.

By 1997, the service was incredibly popular, registering 40,000 hits per day and

millions per month according to Jon Luini, one of the service's co-founders (Maurer).

The initial success was also coupled with a keen eye for the future by IUMA's founders,

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[17] FTP is a protocol that transfers files from a central server to a user, usually involving an encrypted password. Gopher protocol might be considered a precursor to HTTP and the Web, functioning as a search and retrieval service that was menu-based.

[18] Shareware is a model of software distribution whereby users are initially offered a software program free of charge, but are expected to pay for it at some point (usually after a free trial period). Software developers encouraged users to share the material with friends and others in order to increase their potential userbase. With the advent of centralized websites and cheap hosting, shareware has diminished in prevalence.

who believed digital downloads and streaming were the next generation of music

distribution:

> Let's say down the road everyone has Silicon Graphics[19] equipment in
> their living room and they hook it up to their stereo- then they don't need
> CDs anymore. They can collect music directly off the Net in real-time.
> The Indy can already hook directly into the stereo. It has all the jacks for
> it, just plug it in and you're all set.[20] (*Ibid.*)

By emphasizing digital distribution over physical sales, as well as creating a space

where artists could share pertinent information like tour dates and interviews with fans,

IUMA helped establish not only a model that the recording industry would eventually

adopt, but also introduced a new way of thinking about music and the Internet: many

consumers would eventually prefer to access rather than own music, and embracing the

Internet was the most efficient avenue. Moreover, the service created a platform whereby

fans could communicate with their favorite artists in ways that they would have been

unable to prior. While the communication was fairly limited and one-way (the artists

communicated information they wanted fans to receive), it nonetheless created an

atmosphere of greater community whereby there was an expectation of discourse

surrounding the consumption of music rather than only consumption. Additionally,

IUMA served as a node in the larger network of music fan discourse, a network that is

cross-platform and sees fans of particular artists or styles of music converse in an

ecosystem that can include Usenet boards, music distribution platforms like IUMA, p2p

platforms like SoulSeek or Napster, and blogs, among many others (Baym "The New

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[19] Silicon Graphics was a computer hardware and software manufacturer which rose to prominence in the 1980s and 90s. The company emphasized high performance 3D imaging.
[20] Silicon Graphics was the company IUMA worked with to manage their music files and the Indy was a workstation specifically designed to author the files into manageable sizes while still maintaining fidelity.

Shape"). The success of the IUMA was short-lived, however, as the company was purchased by EMusic in 1999 and shut down submissions from new artists by 2001 (Healey "EMusic"). Despite the brief success of the service, IUMA and its founders played an important role in establishing the viability of digital music distribution and were visionaries of the possibilities afforded to digital media, particularly with regards to establishing legal streaming models. Moreover, the service played an important role as a node in a larger network of fan discourse, a network that gains strength with each additional node as more members can be recruited, possible forms of communication increase, and visibility increases for the network.

In fact, IUMA is an exemplary early instance of what Paul Goldstein has termed 'the celestial jukebox.' The celestial jukebox can be described as "a technology-packed satellite orbiting thousands of miles above the Earth, awaiting a subscriber's order…", an order which might be a movie, music, or a television show (Goldstein 199). Goldstein's concept of a media transmission apparatus was already in use by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in the late 1980s in an effort to gain support for legislation which would regulate the transmission of musical performances on the Internet and continued through the early digital distribution experiments by major media outfits, such as music streaming service Rhapsody proclaiming itself as "THE Celestial Jukebox" in 2003 (Burkart & McCourt 4).

Launched in December 2001, Rhapsody initially partnered with Naxos Records and 46 independent labels to offer a variety of features which have become standard to digital music platforms today, including: unlimited, on-demand streaming; free Internet radio with 50 professionally curated stations; free access to editorial reviews and

recommendations; and the option to create and share playlists. The service offered three tiers of subscription to users, ranging from $5.95 per month for access to certain catalogs of music to $7.95 per month for an all-access subscription ("Listen.com"). From its inception, Rhapsody recognized that users preferred a relatively frictionless experience when accessing the Celestial Jukebox. In other words, there were few restrictions on legally purchased or accessed material that characterized early digital distribution efforts from services partnered with major labels. Furthermore, Rhapsody gave users an in-depth definition of what the Celestial Jukebox entails, emphasizing the liberating features of the service including: the ability to listen on demand; a high quality, safe file; the ability to access the music from anywhere with an Internet connection; and increased cultural capital from discovering new music ("The Celestial Jukebox"). The rhetoric used in this description trades heavily on American themes of liberty and emphasizes user agency, an appeal which would become the standard of web-based content distribution. Thus, in the discourse put forward by Rhapsody, the user and her desires are purportedly most important.

Implicit in the concept of the Celestial Jukebox is a commercial transaction. As with traditional jukeboxes, users are expected to put in an amount of money specified by the distributor in order to receive the music. Early digital distribution services like Rhapsody and IUMA had users pay fees to access the music, but it was not until 2003 and the launch of the iTunes store that monetization of digital music files became widely successful. When it launched, Apple's model was simple: Consumers pay $0.99 per song with access to a library of 200,000 songs. Furthermore, iTunes Music Store was the first mainstream service that allowed users to do whatever they wanted with the file they

bought, including burning it to an unlimited number of CDs or moving it to a portable music device like the contemporaneously-launched iPod (Pogue). Apple also borrowed from successful services like Rhapsody, including top ten lists, staff picks, and new releases, in order to both promote specific artists as well as offer users new music to explore (and buy).

With the advent of Apple's service, the digital distribution landscape began to quickly evolve, as the iTunes store clearly indicated that consumers were willing to pay reasonable amounts of money for digital music files. While the iTunes store forever altered the ways in which media are distributed online, it should be considered both emergent and residual in the way that Raymond Williams ("Marxism and Literature") conceptualized. On one hand, the iTunes store was emergent because it represented a new mode of distribution that legitimately threatened the entrenched industrial practices of the music industry, which had previously relied on economies of scale, sales of entire albums[21], and resource scarcity to optimize its profits. On the other hand, it should be understood to have residual forms of culture in that: it promoted dominant conceptions of copyright that were born of an analog era; it included burdensome digital rights management (DRM) onto every piece of content that was purchased; and it engaged in monopolistic practices, such as only offering music files in a proprietary file format (advanced audio coding or .AAC) and integrating the store into its software and hardware (iTunes and the iPod/iPad/iPhone respectively) (Parks 191; "Apple to End Music Restrictions" 2009). iTunes is now the largest music retailer in the country, surpassing

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[21] Record labels have sold singles for nearly a century and, in fact, the single was the dominant form of music sold prior to the introduction of LPs in 1948. However, for the half century that followed the emergence of the LP as a format and the birth of digital distribution platforms, the album was by far the most dominant format. When available, major label singles were released, but remained more popular in Europe than the United States and lagged far behind in sales and visibility.

Walmart in 2008 and exceeding 25B total sales in 2013 ("iTunes Store Top Music

Retailer in the US" 2008; "iTunes Store Sets New Record" 2013).

While the iTunes store did not offer a space designed for the cultivation of

community, the versatility of its products offered the possibility to increase the strength

of social ties between users. The synergy developed by Apple between the iTunes store

and its iPod portable music device was an important selling point to both investors and

consumers and the company actively marketed the compatibility between the two in a

way that suggested owning Apple music products facilitated social connections with

fellow music listeners, most famously in its dancing silhouette advertisements, many of

which featured dancers in concert with one another or sharing a single pair of earbuds to

listen to the same music. Furthermore, because iTunes allowed users to transfer music

between three to five different devices early in its product cycle, friends could easily

share music in a way that was not possible on other digital distribution platforms. This

was particularly true on college campuses where users would be connected to the same

network and thus able to browse and listen to one another's music[22] with ease. This, in

particular, is an example of users de-scripting a feature of a technological platform, as the

sharing feature was referred to as "Home Sharing" in the program, connoting a social

organization of a small family. College students, particularly those living in dorms who

shared the same network, could connect to other students' libraries, and download their

music using an unlicensed program like OurTunes. Speaking from personal experience,

this deviant use of a technical affordance helped create new social ties and strengthen

existing ones by providing greater insight into a person's musical taste, a topic of

conversation that is common on college campuses. Despite not being explicitly

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[22] Apple limited this practice in the mid-2000s.

constructed as interested in building social ties based off their use of the platform, iTunes users nonetheless used the program in ways conducive to social engagement.

The iTunes Music Store is important to the history of networks of media circulation because it forced the music industry to finally embrace digital distribution by presenting a model that satisfied most of the demands of record labels and, more importantly, users (such as the ability to purchase individual songs, limited DRM, and portability) to the extent that after 16 months, Apple controlled 70% of the digital distribution market (Flynn "Can Microsoft"); the RIAA could no longer ignore the Internet as an integral marketplace, nor could it place the blame of declining physical sales on piracy, as users embraced the service to the tune of 100M purchases in 15 months (Flynn "iTunes Shores"). However, just like the brick-and-mortar distribution practices that it disrupted, iTunes itself has recently been under siege for its market share by an emergent force—Internet streaming.

Streaming services subtly shift the ways in which consumers identify with media as material objects. Being able to physically hold a piece of media that one has purchased in one's hand leads to greater identification of that object as not only something one owns, but as a commodity (Herbert). How does this relationship switch when a user is not purchasing media? This question will be taken up later, but one answer of immediate concern here is that it promotes a regime of access rather than ownership, a system that many pro-business publications are calling the wave of the future for media consumption (Earley; Swart; Zimmerman). Regimes of access are defined by impermanence and are on demand, meaning consumers utilize a service (*e.g.* renting a car for one time use via Zipcar) or consume a text once when desired (streaming

music sites) but must pay at each instance. There are also different models of access,

such as subscription on demand (Netflix or Spotify premium) and transactional on

demand (VOD and pay-per-view movies), which give consumers greater choice in

determining how they consume their media in terms of access and payment. While the

paeans of business editorials paint this as a sustainable and progressive paradigm, what

these new methods of consumption mean for consumers is less certain. Access-based

models do allow for on demand media at cheaper rates than normal, but they also limit

the creative abilities of consumers. Consumers are unable to remix, re-use, and re-

distribute (Jenkins) their media in ways that are made available by digital technologies, a

sort of digital gift of the Magi.[23]

What regimes of access mean for INMSs is ambiguous at this point. Traditionally,

informal networks of media sharing involve physically circulating material and, in the

case of videotapes, keeping the material (and possibly duplicating it for others) rather

than returning it. Similarly, digital platforms like BitTorrent encourage users to keep their

downloaded media (either locally on a hard drive or remotely in Cloud-based services).

Both of these models would fall under the aegis of regimes of ownership despite the lack

of commercial transactions involved in the media circulation process because the media

is readily available for consumption after receiving it. Put simply, both traditional and

p2p-based INMSs[24] adhere to regimes of ownership because there is no mediation

between user and media once the media is the consumer's "possession" beyond a VCR or

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[23] Streaming has also been criticized by those concerned with artists' rights, as the compensation per play (or access) is pitifully low (Dredge "How Much Do Musicians Make").

[24] Popcorn Time is an example of a p2p platform that would be classified as adhering to a regime of access because it is essentially a p2p streaming service using BitTorrent technology. Users do not download files, but instead simply stream media from a swarm of users. The community on Popcorn Time is nonexistent and is roughly on par with *The Pirate Bay*. To wit, the service has 388,000 likes on Facebook and their forums (the only community space on the web site) have a total of 12,880 posts as of March 2017.

media-player software like Quicktime or VLC. Regimes of access represent a fairly decisive break with the types of communal culture cultivated within INMSs, not least because greater control over the way audiences can interact with a media text is granted to the copyright industries. In particular, cultural stewardship is no longer the domain of the community when access to a pre-determined library of texts is mediated by corporate entities running platforms that do not allow for the vernacular logic of a community to order and decide what media texts are meaningful to the community.

Beyond introducing a shift in the ways in which people relate to their media in terms of "ownership," streaming is an important change in the authorized consumption of media online for three reasons: it allows users access-based consumption; it provides users with different forms of peer recommendations via algorithms; and it incorporates more robust community formation tools. The new affordances offered by streaming platforms not only increased users' consumptive choice, they provided a greater variety of tools with which users could engage with one another socially. Moreover, they allow for users to both taste signal and provide other users (who are potential social ties) with a cursory glimpse into their personality. While it is important to keep in mind that users of these platforms had their activity rigorously circumscribed by copyright concerns of music corporations, it nevertheless remains apparent that streaming platforms envisioned their users being in dialogue with one another, either through the sharing of playlists, the creation of public user profiles, the establishment of friends lists, or the communal input of data to contribute to a robust algorithmic recommendation system.

One of the most popular features of services like Pandora or Spotify[25] is the ability for users to select songs that they enjoy and receive recommendations based off of their preferences by the platform's various algorithms. For instance, a listener may decide that she would like to hear a playlist that is ideal for the feeling of just waking up on a cold Winter morning and Spotify would be able to fulfill that request. Or a Pandora user may decide that he wants to explore more songs like Satan – Break Free, relying on the service's Music Genome Project (Gray "Pandora Pulls Back") algorithm to select more tracks like it because he does not listen to heavy metal at all but is interested in finding out more. In a sense, this process can be thought of as computer-assisted, collectively compiled peer recommendation.

Algorithmic recommendations are a fundamentally different option digital music services offer that older analog distribution options did not. While a radio DJ may be able to craft a set based on a certain type of sound, genre, or artist, user input into the process does not exist in any meaningful way, at least to the extent that these platforms incorporate it. There are three different ways user input works with algorithmic recommendations to craft a curated music experience. First, users can create a station based on a specific artist, song, or composer. This process allows the user an increasingly granular amount of control over their listening, ranging from the broadest category of "artists with similar sounds" to selecting specific songs from an artist's catalog around which to craft their station. Second, after the station is created, users can then "thumbs up or down" tracks the algorithm selects to provide further input and fine-tune the station. Third, Pandora actively solicits input from users about what music to add to the platform's library. By allowing users to create stations based on specific artists

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[25] Spotify launched in 2008 and has been a constant competitor with services like Pandora and Rhapsody.

or songs, the ability to refine the selections made by the proprietary algorithm, and suggest additions to its library, Pandora creates a data-driven, user-defined streaming experience. Furthermore, Pandora's algorithm is based on trained musicians' input, with the musicians listening to and coding each track in Pandora's library (*Ibid.*). The process means a human rather than a computer has analyzed each song and the algorithm uses this analysis when constructing individual playlists.

The algorithmically-assisted process of curation is a way for other members of the imagined community of Pandora or Spotify users to communicate with one another, albeit obliquely. While such a process does not allow for direct communication to occur between users, as a *process*, users get a sense of how their cohort understand the connections between different types of music. To be sure, it is a social process lubricated by computer code, but it is a social process of recommendation nonetheless and might be considered an advanced and more impersonal way of readers of *TVN* recommending certain movies or television programming in relation to other movies or TV shows. The algorithmic recommendation is more closely related to the social phenomena of user-curated lists and projects on private filesharing sites, social practices that are discussed in greater detail in chapters four and five.

Pandora and other streaming services have also adopted social media features, indicating a desire on the platform's part to develop communities and strengthen already-existing interpersonal connections in order to create a stronger sense of connection with the platform. For example, Pandora allows users to create a profile, upload a picture of themselves, and follow one another. While relatively rudimentary in terms of social media, the included features allow users to connect with one another in a way that allows

an organic discovery of musical tastes, like checking the songs a fellow user has liked or the stations a user has created. The ability of one user to see stations created by another user allows a level of familiarity through digital observation that would otherwise require active interpersonal interaction, thereby eliding the physical and/or digital conversations usually necessary to gain a sense of a person's musical tastes. As Peter J. Rentfrow and Samuel D. Gosling (241) have noted, strangers that are young adults are able to accurately discern an individual's personality based on musical preferences and that information gleaned from musical discussion is different than that that obtained through non-musical discussion. Such taste and personality signaling recalls similar practices by *The Videophile's Newsletter* readers, such as listing desired television programming or movies or a reader's accumulated cinematic library.

Another social media feature built-in to Pandora is the musical feed, which allows users to see their friends' musical activity and further explore new music. Twitter was launched in 2006 as a service that displayed tweets in reverse-chronological order and Facebook followed suit later that year by introducing its Feed[26] to users. Since then, feeds have become a regular component of social media platforms, normalizing the presence of continually updated streams of information for Internet users. Social media and feeds have received criticism for their perceived integration with a panoptic surveillance state (Dencik & Leistert 6); however, such beliefs limit the agency of users while risking infantilizing them, suggesting Internet users either do not realize they are being surveilled or that they are being exploited. Certainly there are insidious uses of corporate or government surveillance of social media like predictive policing (Elmer), but users also engage and play with the panoptic aspects of social media feeds, challenge and

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[26] A continually updating stream of posts, links, and photos shared by members of a user's social network.

strengthen social norms, and perform identity and authenticity (Westlake 23). In

particular, feeds on platforms like Pandora or Spotify fall under the Goffman's definition

of performance, which includes the activities of an individual occurring "during a period

marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has

some influence on the observers" (22). The always-changing text of the feed is a

combination of performances for the observers (or friends), yet for the individual

streaming the music, each discrete entry is a performance of identity, whether intentional

or not. The imagined audience may not enjoy the music being shown in the feed, but

they are witnessing the public performance of part of an individual's personality and thus

taking part in "dramaturgical cooperation" (*Ibid.* 83), a phenomenon that is part of

establishing a community (Westlake 27). Streaming feeds ultimately serve two purposes

of interest to this chapter: they help define a user's personality for that user's social

network and they are a tool in the establishment of local communities.

Despite its creative limitations and paradigm-shifting components, streaming

services remain incredibly popular; Spotify has over 75M active users, 20M of which are

paid subscribers and Pandora having over 81M active users that listened to 20B hours of

music in 2014 ("Spotify Information"; "Pandora 2015 Annual Report"). The popularity

of streaming services can be attributed to five factors: First, accessing media via

streaming services is as easy as opening an application or loading a website and browsing

the service's library; second, most streaming services use advanced algorithms to offer

suggestions to users which allow them to discover new music that they will potentially

enjoy; third, streaming services usually have much larger libraries than brick-and-mortar

stores and traditional radio stations and, thus, can satisfy a wider audience; fourth, the

proliferation of mobile devices and expansion of Internet infrastructure means that users can have access to their media almost anywhere and at any time; and fifth, streaming services are cheaper than purchasing media. Even though such services are currently *en vogue*, the long-term solubility of streaming services might be in doubt, particularly as artists push back against the perceived royalty pittances they receive (Dredge "Spotify Finance Results"; Popper).

Each of these components of streaming services involves greater flexibility for consumers in terms of what to watch, when to watch, where to watch, and how to watch, to use VCR vernacular. Accordingly, streaming services have altered the landscape of digital media distribution significantly. Furthermore, the new streaming landscape represents a continuation from older technologies of the ways in which users can cultivate media-based communities across time and space. Through the implementation of social media components like friend lists, the ability to share playlists and artist, music recommendations, and activity feeds, streaming services have transcended warehouses or retail locations as sources for media. While users join Pandora or Spotify for the music, their experience is enhanced by the variety of tools available to perform an identity and develop social ties with other users. However, streaming services also augmented regimes of access for digital media consumers, thereby limiting the ways in which users can manipulate media texts and weakening the potential for communal cultural stewardship by instituting an intermediary between the consumer and the media text and by artificially limiting the media that can be accessed via licensing deals. Nonetheless, the potential does remain for INMSs to integrate certain aspects of regimes of access (*e.g.*

the ability to immediately stream movies or TV shows *á la* Popcorn Time) and repurpose them to suit the social, cultural, and consumptive needs of the community.

Music was at the forefront of digital home media distribution because the infrastructure required is significantly less burdensome than multimedia (namely, films and television shows). Compression technology for music has always been more manageable because the files are smaller and require both less bandwidth and less computing power to handle (Sterne 828-32). Moreover, the nature of most music releases is such that they are more amenable to digital distribution with the low bandwidth realities of the 1990s. That is to say that albums are not necessarily discrete media objects, as they are made up of individual songs; therefore, a user may want to download an album or individual songs. Such a piecemeal approach is not applicable movies and is generally only used for catching up on or sampling a television series.

Television and Film

While music was the first form of commercial media to accept digital distribution as a normalized mode of dissemination, there were early forays into distributing and/or consuming film and television via the Internet that had varying degrees of success. One such service was WebTV, which was founded in 1995 by a Silicon Valley startup and intended to be a media convergence technology. Put simply, the initial model of WebTV was a media distribution apparatus, including both a set-top box with an integrated dial-up modem and a web service which included email and web browsing functionality (Sebenius & Fortgang). WebTV was intended to be a low-cost alternative to desktop computers whereby users would be able to easily switch between watching television and

using the Web. WebTV creators imagined users as agile consumers who may see a product they were interested in on television and immediately switch WebTV to find more information (Hof). With the release of the second version of WebTV (the "Plus" model), users were able to engage in rudimentary recording of material from television or a VCR, in addition to offering picture-in-picture Web browsing and television viewing and including a tuner, which allowed users to schedule their VCRs similar to the soon-to-be-released TiVO. In 1997 Microsoft bought WebTV and then renamed it to MSN TV in 2001, dissolving the previous WebTV team and moving the service in-house.

Where WebTV offered a glimpse at the digital possibilities of television delivery systems, TiVO turned it into a reality. In 1999, TiVo Inc. announced that it would be releasing a TV scheduling and recording device that was entirely digital, an important difference from the VCR. Not only did TiVO (along with competitor Replay) allow users to schedule and record television shows (thus shattering the live television window and completing the process begun by VCRs), it also allowed users to customize their content by utilizing computer algorithms that filtered programming based on specific subject matter (Markoff). This recommendation system is remarkably similar to Pandora's algorithm-based system with the TiVO system taking community ratings (ranging from 3 thumbs up to 3 thumbs down), comparing them with a user's ratings and viewing habits, and providing a personalized recommendation. While WebTV may have billed its services as similar to a computer, TiVo's functionality actually mirrored computer-use more closely, as it allowed users to define the ways in which they would interact with media in a far more sophisticated manner, particularly with regards to the customization of programming, a feature that is one of the most social for the platform.

TiVO also represents a direct historical precursor to certain features that are now considered essential component of virtual retailers and distributors. First, they expand the range of programming available to users by virtue of freeing the user from network scheduling. Just as Sony advertised its Betamax by proclaiming its owners now would not have to choose between *Kojak* and *Columbo,* so too would owners of TiVOs no longer have to choose between competing programming. In fact, TiVOs worked even better than VCRs: they could be easily automated; they could be instantly accessed through a central repository; and they could record more programming without running out of tape.[27] Second, TiVO collected data from users that effectively turned the device into a recommendation service, a fundamental part of most retailers and distributors of digital media today. The recommendation features of TiVO are also mutually beneficial to both producers and consumers, as producers are given greater insight into audience tastes and consumers can more easily find content they might like (Lotz 114). However, where streaming music services like Pandora and Spotify incorporated elements of social media such as activity feeds and friend lists, TiVO did not; thus, TiVO was more in the tradition of the VCR whereby users had to exogenously develop community rather than utilize affordances built-in to the device.

Despite benefits for producers, many networks and production companies have been ambivalent towards TiVO and digital video recorder (DVR) technology, not least of which is the potential loss in advertising revenue. Michael Ramsay, the President of TiVO, brashly proclaimed that the device would change everything: "This is revolutionary change. It's a massive play." Research analysts would take turns predicting the death of television, either due to lack of advertising revenue, dearth of content, or

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[27] Early models ranged from 6 to 30 hours of storage capacity (Markoff).

Americans abandoning their televisions altogether (B. Carter). Bombastic rhetoric aside,

Ramsay was mostly correct in his assessment that digital video recorders (DVR) altered

viewer-expectations for programming consumption. Instead of linear, schedule-focused

viewing, users in what Amanda Lotz has called the "post-network era" pick-and-choose

when, where and how to watch their favorite films and television programming. Such

active, rather than passive viewing habits lead consumers to place a greater emphasis on

individual programming instead of networks (Lotz 59). Thus, whereas viewers may have

settled in for a night of CBS in 1975, contemporary DVR users may jump from

Elementary (CBS) to *Dr. Ken* (ABC) to a recording of *Da Vinci's Demons* (Starz). While

a la carte cable packages are not yet a reality, viewers can construct their own menu of

programming that allow them the choice of when, where, what, and how to watch.

It is a great irony that DVR technology addressing a number of important

consumer desires has rendered irrelevant some of the most important social practices of

early videophile INMSs. The ability to record television programming for time-shifted

viewing, the ability to record multiple programs at once, and the ability to watch

programming wherever one wants (mobility is admittedly very limited with DVRs) are

all major selling points for the DVR. However, these exact functions combined with the

fact that TiVO or the DVR are a proprietary 'black box' of sorts has had a chilling effect

on the establishment of networks based on distributing and circulating personally

recorded material. A community like *TVN* was reliant on scarcity of television in a

number of ways: members could only record one program at a time with each device and

television set and they could only record what their local and regional stations

programmed. To supersede these restrictions, VCR owners gathered as a textual

community to create an *ad hoc* network of community members creating and fulfilling requests to circulate media.

The DVR's capabilities have not only rendered such exigencies as obsolete, the device also includes a form of DRM that creates significant obstacles for consumers to share copyrighted media with one another. The stored video is encrypted and can only be unlocked by authorized players (*i.e.* the specific device owned by a consumer), severely limiting the ability of consumers to manipulate and re-distribute their recorded media. TiVO did, however, introduce the ability to share stored media between devices on the same network, a feature that has since become normalized in DVR technology. Hackers have also cracked TiVO and DVR technology with open source tools, theoretically allowing anyone with the technical acumen to rip and circulate recorded media. With that said, in practice, being able to share stored video on devices in the same house and a hack that requires significant technical knowhow is hardly adequate to sustain an informal network of media sharing.

Arising concurrently with DVRs, video on demand technology has also played an important role in shaping what users expect from digital distribution systems, as well as coopting the library-component of early INMSs. Put simply, VOD is any type of digital delivery system whereby users select from a list of available, licensed titles and can immediately begin watching them. VOD can operate as both a pay per view (PPV) and free models; generally PPV content is recently released material (usually movies) and free content is older, produced by the owner of the VOD channel, or promoted material. An important distinction between VOD and streaming services like Hulu and Netflix is that VOD services are usually offered by cable providers as a value-added service on top

of a consumer's existing cable package, although there are numerous similarities between the two types.

Nationwide VOD use has been steadily rising with 59 percent of all cable subscribers (both digital and analog) reporting they have used VOD, up from 46 percent in 2009 and 10 percent in 2004 ("76% of US Households"). Not only are consumers with access to VOD using the services in large numbers, they are also watching *more* content than their non-VOD peers. A Nielsen survey in 2014 found that Americans with VOD service in their home watched 11 more minutes of live television than those without VOD (one hour and five minutes and 54 minutes respectively) ("Nielsen's Quarterly Cross-Platform Report Finds"). This finding runs counter to the expectation that time-shifted viewing will lead to a decrease in engagement with live programming. What is happening is quite the opposite and suggests that the viewer's ability to watch the content she wants on her own terms leads to more committed viewing of live television.

Furthermore, a 2013 survey from Vubiquity, a multiplatform video distribution service, reports the most important aspect of VOD to users is the size of a service's library ("Increased Consumer Satisfaction"). With their relatively large libraries of movies available on demand, VOD services cannibalize another important component of videophile INMSs. During the VCR's infancy, members of a community like *TVN* would have been restricted in the amount of material they could access; they would be limited by the cost of cassette tapes, the amount of time they would have to spend to record each program, and the programming decisions made by network executives. The solution to overcome these obstacles was to build a communal library (or archive, depending on which community member was asked) where a member could request a certain movie or

television episode and reasonably expect to have that request fulfilled. However, by fulfilling these consumer desires on a platform that is part of a regime of access, VOD undercuts social practices of traditional INMSs.

Despite the implications for INMSs in the tradition of *TVN*, the rise in VOD use by consumers is key in understanding how users have come to expect content to be delivered, particularly with regards to video streaming services like Netflix, which also emerged in the mid-2000s. Similar to streaming music, streaming video existed conceptually for decades (recall AOL's early videogame distribution attempts) but had to wait for infrastructure and technological developments to catch up, in addition to developing new licensing and royalty agreements (as can be seen in the WGA Strike of 2007). In particular, 2007 was an auspicious year for streaming video as a new method of transferring content called adaptive bitrate streaming was developed by Move Networks, whereby content is encoded at several different bitrates and cached at a middleman data distributor known as a content distributor network (CDN) to ease bandwidth requirements. The adoption of adaptive bitrate streaming using HTTP meant a drastic reduction in users encountering buffering screens; at the same time, the new technique increased the quality of their connection by virtue of reducing the network stress on CDNs (Zambelli "The Birth of Smooth Streaming"), meaning consumers could increasingly expect fast, reliable, and high quality streaming video services.

Among the most important streaming sites to emerge in terms of popularity and economic impact was Netflix, a DVD distribution company whose subscription service for physical media launched in 1999. Despite operating as a DVD rental company, founder Reed Hastings wanted the company to operate on a VOD model, glibly noting

that was the reason it was called Netflix and not "DVD-by-Mail" (Hastings). In 2007,

Hastings vision came to fruition as the company launched its streaming service and by

2009 there were 3M users, an incredibly healthy level of growth considering the relative

youth of the field (Roth). As of 2015, Netflix has 57M total subscribers in America and

generated $266.8M in net profit in 2014, a significant increase in $112.4M in 2013

("Netflix, Inc."); these numbers help illustrate the robust growth experienced by

streaming media companies. Services like Netflix expand on the opportunities afforded

to consumers by VOD-type services by allowing them to watch their favorite films or

television shows whenever, wherever, and on whatever devices they desire. Moreover,

Netflix and similar services also (re)introduce social components to television and film

consumption. Most notably, Netflix allows users to rate each television show or movie

they watch, a score which is included in the calculus for the service's recommendation

algorithm, very similar to Pandora and TiVO's systems. By rating each media text, users

provide more information for Netflix to better recommend other films and television

shows, not only to themselves, but also for other users. The recommendation system

works to match users with similar taste profiles in order to better predict what users will

like. Put another way, users who rate the same movies similarly are good predictors of

what one another will like. Netflix inputs the data into their recommendation algorithm,

thereby turning user ratings into "endogenously generated social influence" (Onnela *et. al*

18379-80). However, there are privacy concerns with such recommendation algorithms,

as Jeremy J. Albright notes that the number of variables platforms like Netflix collect

about users can lead to the revelation of subject identities (777), an outcome made

increasingly important with the rise in cybersecurity breaches in both the commercial and governmental sectors.

Compared to music streaming services, subscription video on demand (SVOD) platforms like Netflix are lacking in social features. There is no way for users to automatically share what they have been watching; to do so, they would have to communicate with others on different platforms. There is also no way to create and share playlists. The ability to create queues or watchlists exist, but they cannot be distributed to other users on the platform. Users cannot "friend" one another on SVOD services and any social contact would have to be generated offsite[28] thereby limiting the social network possibilities within the platform. These are not oversights in the design process, Netflix, Hulu, and other services like it have chosen to eschew social network functions in their services, which suggests they do not view their customers as desiring digital social interaction while using their product or they do not want social interaction on their platform. Netflix CPO Neil Hunt claims the company has experimented with social features numerous times, but none of them succeeded with users so they have since been abandoned (McAlone). Hunt notes that users felt the process of developing social networks on a platform they used to watched movies or television shows took too much effort; more importantly, users voiced concern about breaches of privacy, with Hunt describing the attitude toward linking Netflix with a platform like Facebook "toxic" for many users (*ibid*). The consumer concern for privacy is telling and speaks to the major hurdles that a streaming service like Netflix faces: if users feel they cannot trust the platform on which a community may be built, how can a community possibly exist? That

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[28] Netflix does allow multiple user profiles on the same account, but each profile is sectioned off from the others.

thriving communities exist on unauthorized networks based on p2p platforms like

BitTorrent suggests that corporate control over a network, no matter how benign or

disinterested they claim to be, presents significant stumbling blocks for the formation of

communities.

Netflix also introduced users to more sophisticated recommendation and

categorization systems for films and television programming. In 2006, the company

released a tremendously large dataset (over 100M ratings given by 480,000 users on

17,770 films) for researchers to utilize in attempts to improve on Netflix's

recommendation and rating system (Potter). The winning entry was from a team called

BellKor and called Pragmatic Chaos; however, the algorithm—for which BellKor

received $1M—was never used. This is because Netflix had introduced streaming

between the announcement of the contest and its finish. The company realized that there

were significant differences in the ways users interacted with films in terms of what they

wanted to watch when they are given the option to stream it immediately as opposed to

waiting for it to arrive in the mail:

> One of the reasons our focus in the recommendation algorithms has changed is because Netflix as a whole has changed dramatically in the last few years. Netflix launched an instant streaming service in 2007, one year after the Netflix Prize began. Streaming has not only changed the way our members interact with the service, but also the type of data available to use in our algorithms. For DVDs our goal is to help people fill their queue with titles to receive in the mail over the coming days and weeks; selection is distant in time from viewing, people select carefully because exchanging a DVD for another takes more than a day, and we get no feedback during viewing. For streaming members are looking for something great to watch right now; they can sample a few videos before settling on one, they can consume several in one session, and we can observe viewing statistics such as whether a video was watched fully or only partially.
>
> (Amatriain & Basilico)

Here we can see the way in which a user consumes her media influences what she chooses to watch. The company identified immediacy as the most important expectation of most of their users; many Netflix subscribers are willing to trade the deeper library of the traditional Netflix model for the instantaneous gratification of streaming. Psychological research by Zhong & DeVoe found that people who are exposed to products that involve near-immediate gratification like fast food are more likely to seek out "time-saving behaviors" (619); such research is paralleled in Netflix's shift towards a focus on their streaming model as opposed to mail-order, as the majority of Netflix subscribers have embraced the digital-only service. Netflix's algorithmic recommendations feed the time-saving behavior of streaming by providing an artificial delimiting of selections. Certainly users have access to the complete library of material licensed for streaming, but Netflix presents only a small portion of that library to the user on the main page (usually based on the viewing habits and preferences of each user). Functionally, users are limited in their exposure to films and television programming if they happen to be browsing, although Netflix's recommendation engine is robust enough to provide a wide variety of material to which a subscriber may have never been exposed. Furthermore, the ability to sample a film before fully committing to watching it allows users greater agency in their media consumption, similar to how videogame publishers will offer demo versions of their product or software creators will release trial versions.

Despite the technical complexity of algorithm-based systems, they lack a number of important social components fulfilled by the community-based recommendation systems prominent in INMSs. While Netflix's algorithm may compile petabytes of quantitative user information, that data is missing important qualitative components.

Netflix can measure when people stop and start watching episodes, but that information lacks context. Perhaps a viewer received a phone call or had an appointment to keep rather than being disappointed in the movie or television show. User ratings may be given by someone that is not the user or the user may have specific reasons for rating a media text a certain way. A counterargument may be made that the sheer size of Netflix's data is enough to overcome aberrations, such that a highly predictive model emerges. Nevertheless, recommendations given by those people that a user trusts is more socially significant than what emerges from an algorithm, even one that is partially communally constructed. Moreover, an algorithmically-based system does not allow for the development of social and symbolic capital or the production of social hierarchies in the same way that the recommendations ever-present in informal networks of media sharing do. The impersonal nature of Netflix *et al*'s recommendation systems provides a stark contrast to INMSs like *TVN* and those discussed in chapters four and five.

Whereas with Netflix's original model a user might plan their selections ahead of time, streaming introduced instantaneity to the consumption calculus. Not only could users immediately access their content, they could also sample a wide variety of films and television shows before deciding on what to watch. This exposure to more material, while artificially delimited by the algorithmic recommendation system, necessarily means that users broaden their horizons in terms of the types of movies and television programming to which they are exposed and consume. Furthermore, the ability for users to provide ratings that influence not only the films they receive as recommendations, but also for users with similar taste profiles suggests a shift in how users perceive the importance of their opinions, their role as gatekeepers of community taste, and the ability

and/or right to the production of knowledge. Moon *et al*. have found consumers are increasingly giving greater significance to the opinions of fellow consumers, particularly as they are exposed to greater numbers of products (108), an aspect of Netflix that can be overwhelming at first. Additionally, as viewers watch and rate more movies, they begin to become more discerning in the ratings they give each movie (117). Thus, because greater emphasis is being given to user ratings and because user ratings are an important component of Netflix's recommendation algorithm, viewer agency via user ratings serves to inform subscribers of a wide variety of films, moreso than would be possible at a movie theater or even the most well-stocked video store.

In this sense, Netflix functions as an example of Chris Anderson's "long tail" hypothesis (2008), which argues consumers are best served by online retailers by having access to a wider range of products as opposed to merely having access to cheaper products. As Chuck Tryon notes, the recommendation algorithm of Netflix mostly tends to direct subscribers away from popular new movies to older, more critically acclaimed releases, suggesting audiences prefer niche products that match idiosyncratic taste profiles over mainstream releases (45). However, Netflix implicitly denies users from having the right to produce knowledge on its platform; instead, users must be content to contribute only their opinions to the mass of data that is compiled into recommendations for other users. Users are unable to annotate, qualitatively review, or otherwise provide any sort of personal context through which other users can learn about or gain interest in a movie or television series. While not quite a pedagogical apparatus, Netflix and its recommendation algorithm nevertheless inscribe users into a system that places Netflix's

code, its generic classification system, and the opinions of its userbase as the only arbiters of taste and knowledge.

Emerging at the turn of the new millennium and becoming a normalized part of the media ecosystem by the end of the decade, digital distribution of film and television has genuinely altered the ways in which consumers understand and engage with media. WebTV offered the first glimpse of the future of media convergence by collapsing the Internet and television onto a single device, although the product was not destined to be a success. TiVO and DVRs followed soon after the WebTV experiment and were met with much greater acclaim, becoming permanent fixtures in the cable/satellite service apparatus. By digitizing television recordings, as well as offering recommendations based on content, DVRs brought the VCR into the 21st century and expanded the opportunities consumers had to watch what they wanted, where they wanted, and when they wanted. VOD augmented this improved viewer agency by cutting the recording portion of the equation, thereby giving the viewer direct access to licensed programming (at the cost of being available only as long as the license itself). Further diversifying the legitimate digital distribution landscape are streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Instant, and Hulu, which not only make a wide selection of films and television programming available to the viewer for instant access like VOD, but users can also sample material to decide if they want to invest the time to watch it. Moreover, pay-per-view is eschewed in favor of monthly or annual payment plans, allowing the user access to the service's entire library of holdings. Traditional retail models that are transposed into the digital realm (such as iTunes or Amazon's physical media shipping), as well as emerging trends by television networks to offer livestreams of their programming to

paying cable or satellite customers[29] (Stelter) illustrate just how diverse the current media ecosystem is. The greater choice viewers have with regards to all aspects of media consumption also means that content producers must tailor their products to audience tastes more closely, as viewers have enough selection at their fingertips that they can easily switch services if one is not satisfying them.

Conclusion

In 2003 there were fewer than 50 legal digital distribution services for the music industry; by 2011 there were more than 400 (Kennedy). By the MPAA's count, there were zero such services for film and television in 1997, while that number has since risen to more than 110. Through these digital platforms, users have watched more than 66.6B television episodes with that number expected to grow to 101.6B by 2019 (Fried). Just as movie studios were skeptical of home video for copyright and windowing concerns, so too were the cultural industries hesitant to embrace digital distribution. Their first efforts like PressPlay and MusicNet may have failed because of limited selection and cumbersome restrictions that dictated the ways in which consumers accessed the media, the American media industries learned from their mistakes and have increasingly embraced digital distribution as a vital component of their business models.

The growth in social features of authorized distribution platforms is not a coincidence. Digital retailers and streaming services recognize that users want to communicate with one another about the music they like. They want to see what movies their friends are watching. They want to share and communicate about media with one

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[29] These services are known as over-the-top (OTT) and are meant to appeal to viewers who either do not subscribe to television packages or want greater freedom in the ways they are able to watch television.

another. These are all social practices and processes that already existed in informal networks of media sharing. This chapter has not tried to argue that media industries consciously co-opted social practices of INMSs; however, it is clear that consumers' desire to interact with friends, family, and those with shared interests within platforms of media distribution and access has played a significant role in social affordances of media distribution online.

The advances in media distribution platforms and consumer agency have satisfied some viewing desires while at the same time limiting a number of social practices facilitated by informal networks of media sharing. TiVO and the DVR allow users to record and store large number of television shows and movies without worrying about cumbersome and expensive cassette tapes and they allow users to record multiple shows at once. By satisfying these specific desires, however, the new technologies undercut material conditions that gave rise to the social practice of circulating VHS tapes by members of a videophiles community. While VOD services offer viewers immediate access to a wide variety of material, they also diminish the significance of communally generated libraries. Streaming services like Pandora and Netflix have introduced complex algorithmic recommendation systems that use the wisdom of the crowd to generate personalized media lists. However, such recommendation systems remove the complex social mechanics inherent to INMS; users cannot describe why they prefer a song or movie, they cannot jockey for position in the community as arbiters of knowledge and taste, and they simply lack the significance that social connections bring to a recommendation. Moreover, all of these platforms are proprietary and institute varying

levels of DRM on the stored media, severely limiting the ability of consumers to use the media as they wish.

Where authorized platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and Pandora implement safeguards mandated by the copyright industries, unauthorized systems have emerged and potentially offer a way forward for understanding the evolution of social practices within informal networks of media sharing. Thus, the following chapter explores emergent INMSs in digital spaces, beginning with Usenet and BBSs and ending with BitTorrent. Filesharing platforms embraced the sociality of analog INMSs, including a wide variety of features that allowed users to communicate with one another, including chatrooms, user media lists, and message boards. By looking at a brief history of filesharing online, evolutions and ruptures in practices of offline INMSs like *TVN* can be better understood.

Chapter Three — A Brief History of Unauthorized Digital Media Sharing

The last chapter chronicled and analyzed the social and technical affordances of formal networks of digital media distribution, highlighting the ways in which new authorized platforms adapted specific social practices or processes organic to informal networks of media sharing while at the same time restricting others. This chapter looks at the obverse side of digital networks of media sharing, profiling the informal platforms used by media consumers and emphasizing the social affordances offered to them, particularly in regards to practices and hierarchies. I argue that platforms like Napster, Grokster, and BitTorrent should be viewed as holding the potential to create communities that are the spiritual successors to offline media sharing communities like *TVN* and concurrently offering greater transformative and transgressive potential than formal services like Netflix, Pandora, or the iTunes Store. Because chapters four, five, and six all provide close analysis of a number of INMSs, this chapter serves as an historical overview and investigates the myriad social, cultural, legal, and economic processes that inform and influence the contemporary digital INMS landscape.

Informal Networks of Media Sharing

Despite the prevailing narrative, unauthorized filesharing did not begin with Shawn Fanning and Napster in 1999. In actuality, the practice has been around since the early 1980s when Usenet was created by Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis in order to offer a space for discussion about specific topics (Lueg & Fisher). Usenet allowed users to

transfer files, although that was not the main purpose of the system. Emerging from faculty and graduate students in engineering and the sciences using ARPANET, Usenet was conceptualized as a community of individuals interested in generating and circulating technical knowledge, as the first invitation to use the network marketed the opportunity to discuss "bug fixes, trouble reports, and general cries for help" (Hauben & Hauben 40). Furthermore, Usenet was the result of engineers reshaping ARPANET[30] from a resource-sharing network to a mailing system (Rosenzweig 1547). Emerging concomitantly with the VCR, Usenet's development history and social uses seem to parallel those of *The Videophile's Newsletter*. In each instance, a group of technologically-minded individuals sought to establish a community based on a new platform with the goal of circulating information and media and just like VCR, Usenet represented a disruption of a technology's intended use.

Rather than serve solely as a collection of newsgroups focused on discussion of niche topics, Usenet members can utilize the hosting functions of Usenet to store files. To host a file on Usenet, a user must upload the file(s) to their local Usenet server, which subsequently automatically distributes the material to global Usenet servers (Adamsick 11). While Usenet is officially marketed as a communication network for likeminded people, 99% of all material is hosted on one category of newsgroups (alt.binaries), the overwhelming majority of which is copyrighted material (*ibid*). Writing in 2004, one new user was pleased: "For less than $10 you can download all the music you want; at least that's what I use it for. Didn't have any retention/completion issues. I found everything I was lookin' for" (Butler). For users solely interested in media consumption, Usenet

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[30] ARPANET was the first instantiation of what became known as the Internet. For more information, see Abbate (1999).

represents an emporium where, for $10 per month, they can sample any music, movie, or videogame they desire.

Despite the proclivity of many Usenet members to download copyrighted material, Usenet is a media sharing network that occupies a liminal space in terms of informal networks of media sharing. Unauthorized filesharing may be the primary activity that occurs on Usenet, yet the initial purpose of the network was to facilitate communication. Moreover, there are still many thriving Usenet communities that focus solely on discussing topics of shared interest like soap operas and where meaningful relationships are being created between people (Baym "From Practice"). With that in mind, Usenet is almost a bifurcated network, one that was founded on notions of shared discourse and communication and still retains a large community of active posters. At the same time, a parallel group of users exist who strictly use the network for downloading copyrighted material. In this way, Usenet differs slightly from a community like *TVN*, as well as digital INMSs like the BitTorrent communities discussed in the following chapter.

Similar to Usenet, the bulletin board systems (BBSs) that arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s were early hubs of unauthorized filesharing with users dialing into a host server to access message boards and hosted files (Edosomwan *et al.* 80). BBSs housed a variety of social features, including message boards, online chat, and text-based games, features that allowed computer aficionados to socialize with one another from their own home via the computer. The ability to host files on a BBS server quickly led to the development of piracy groups, collections of computer-savvy users who worked together to 'crack' a computer program and make it available to others (Honick 23-25). These

pirate groups established their own social hierarchies within the larger field of BBSs (and

Usenet) where cultural capital was accrued by being the first to successfully crack and

distribute a program. Similar to Usenet, BBSs occupy a liminal space when considering

informal networks of media sharing. On the one hand, BBSs as a technology were

developed with networked communication in mind, a space where computer hobbyists

could come together to discuss shared interests; on the other hand, filesharing was a

popular activity on BBSs, especially when technological advancements like improved

telecommunications infrastructure, disk storage capacity, and compression protocols

occurred, often having little to do with the topics of conversation on the message boards.

Most of the files traded on both Usenet and BBSs were software and code

(particularly computer games), but activity was limited due to a number of constraints,

including the high cost of equipment, poor network infrastructure, and low participation

rate. However, bandwidth and computer hard drive sizes did increase throughout the

1980s and by 1991, a 9600 bits/second modem[31] was available to consumers, speeds that

much more easily facilitated file transfers (Oxford). Despite the availability of a large

number of files, BBSs remained a niche medium with their usage peaking in 1995

(*Figure 3.1*) and declining as ISPs like AOL and Prodigy facilitated Internet access

(Fidonet). Filesharing remained a low volume trade for most of the 1980s and 90s until

three college students released a program called Napster in 1999.

Napster was the first unauthorized filesharing platform embraced by a significant

portion of the American populace and the first to come under legal assault by the

copyright industry. As the discussion of Usenet and BBSs suggest, and to which the

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[31] For comparison, 56 kilobits/second (or 56000 bits/s) was the standard dial-up modem speed for much of
the late 1990s.

work David Carter and Ian Rogers ("Fifteen Years") attests, Napster's model of peer-to-peer filesharing was not revolutionary. Furthermore, some scholars have argued Napster was the end result of a confluence of social and technological factors, of which the creators of Napster were most likely unaware (Spitz & Hunter). Instead, Napster's importance can be seen in the 'mainstreaming' of filesharing, with 70M users (Richtel "With Napster") active at the peak of the platform's popularity.

Napster was conceived by Shawn Fanning, John Fanning, and Sean Parker, university students who wanted to create software that would facilitate the trading of music—specifically, compressed music files known as MP3s (Menn). The program launched in 1999 and was immediately popular with Internet users and college students—who had access to broadband Internet connections—before catching the eye of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and their subsequent legal challenges. Napster functioned as a clearinghouse for users to connect with one another to share their files, an adaptation of the earlier filesharing procedures of Usenet and BBSs. More specifically, the Napster software allowed a user to search through the shared file libraries of all other users connected to Napster at the moment; when the user finds a file for which she is looking, she directly downloads it from the file host and not Napster.

Napster represented the crystallization of numerous experiments in filesharing technology pioneered by BBSs and Usenet. First and foremost, Napster was designed as a filesharing program, not a space for user communication. At its peak, the Napster's user interface (UI) housed seven buttons for seven different features at the top of the window. Of these eight buttons, five pertained to distributing media: the library button, which

allowed users to view their own musical holdings; the search button, which users clicked

to search for music they wanted to download; the hot list button, which allowed users to

see a random assortment of music shared by someone from whom they just downloaded;

the transfer button, which displayed the upload and download history of the user's current

session; and the discover button, which was a way for users to see popularly downloaded

tracks. Napster also included a chat feature that provided users with a list of music-

specific chat rooms that developed their own social hierarchies and communities. Looked

at this way, Napster is a mirror image of Usenet or BBSs: the platform was designed with

filesharing in mind, but the affordances of the software allowed users to embrace its

communication potential. Moreover, Napster was also one of the first media distribution

platforms to offer social discovery possibilities with its hot list button, a feature that is

analogous to shared playlists or liked songs on a platform like Pandora or Spotify.

Despite its inauspicious demise brought on by numerous legal cases, Napster is an

important instance in the evolution of media sharing platforms, both formal and informal.

With the rapid adoption of Napster among tech-savvy young people, unauthorized

filesharing was normalized to an extent and with Napster's litigation in the national

spotlight, developer and user interest was focused on finding legal loopholes to stay out

of court. While Napster was shut down in 2001 after a second injunction was filed

against it (Evangelista), a flood of similar programs was unleashed. Many of these

programs built off what Napster started and expanded their scope, trading not only music

files, but also movies, software, and documents; programs such as LimeWire, KaZaA,

Grokster, and SoulSeek picked and chose from Napster (and each other) in order to build

more legally robust software, as well as to take advantage of expanding Internet

infrastructure. For instance, KaZaA functions similarly to Napster except in the way in which users connected to content; whereas users contacted a central server on Napster to find content, on KaZaA (and similar decentralized systems) a number of users with fast computers and Internet connections are designated as supernodes and most program traffic is directed through them. In this way, the creators of KaZaA are not liable for copyright-infringing user actions, a clear example of the lessons learned from the videophile community's experience with the Betamax Case and Napster's downfall. The developers' cognizance of looming legal battles is evident through these architectural and design decisions, although they leave users at risk. The threat of litigation was something which many of my interview participants keenly recognized, yet it did not curtail their activity. However, what the risk of legal action against users did do was build up a sort of psychological tolerance, such that they feel at ease when using more 'secure' platforms like BitTorrent. In other words, by participating in illegal media sharing activity for long periods of time without suffering negative consequences, members of private filesharing communities no longer feel threatened by lawsuits.

The platforms that arose following the demise of Napster also significantly downplayed the social components of media sharing platforms. Whereas BBSs, Usenet, and Napster all offered significant opportunities for users to communicate with one another either through message boards, chat rooms, or personal messages, applications like Grokster and KaZaA afforded no such features. SoulSeek is an exception, which functioned very similarly to Napster, including the ability to join chat rooms, send personal messages, and browse other users files; however, SoulSeek is an outlier in the immediate post-Napster application landscape. It is clear that software developers

constructed users as strict consumers of media with no interest in engaging in

communication with one another, a design legacy that continues to this day.[32]

Cyberlockers like MegaUpload and RapidShare also emerged following the

downfall of Napster. Differing from the peer-to-peer (p2p) model[33] of the

aforementioned software, cyberlockers centralize access to material in cloud-based

servers, usually hosted in overseas nations so as to avoid US copyright law. Where p2p

involves users connecting to one another to share content, cyberlockers remove the

element of sharing, leading Nick Marx to argue that cyberlockers represent an accession

to the emergent cultural mode of access-based models as opposed to acquisition-based

models, a dynamic that can be seen mirroring the rise of streaming-based services in

systems of authorized, licensed distribution (Marx 1). At this point in time, two

competing strands of unauthorized digital media consumption are struggling for

dominance among users, with access-based platforms gaining in popularity.

Furthermore, users are increasingly consuming unauthorized material via mobile devices,

with 28% of all visits to music sites through mobile devices and 44% of all visits for

streaming film and television in 2015 (MUSO). With an increasingly diverse field from

which consumers can choose, it is important to outline the ways in which users see

themselves and their actions within the large media landscape. To that end, findings for

private BitTorrent communities will be presented in the following three chapters.

The preponderance of different articulations of how content should be informally

distributed in the wake of Napster demonstrates just how powerful the allure of not only

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[32] The BitTorrent communities discussed in this dissertation formed around web sites exogenous to the BitTorrent platform. The actual program offers no social features beyond browsing a user's files.
[33] P2P distribution is defined by users directly distributing data between one another rather than involving a third party.

'free' media can be, but also novel ways of distributing content. Importantly, many of

these unauthorized filesharing platforms offered nominal tools for community building.

BBSs and Usenet emerged as communication platforms that concurrently developed into

repositories for media circulation, evolving through both technological affordances and

social pressures. Napster included chat functions so users could not only browse each

other's music collection, but also discuss it (Logie 96). Likewise, Margie Borschke ("The

New Romantics") has argued understanding and acknowledging 'piracy poetics'[34] is

essential in the establishment of authenticity in networked communities. Because

unauthorized filesharing is seen as a reaction to capitalism, the act of sharing files with

other users contributes to the feeling of authenticity, both for users and the community. I

define authenticity as a "cultural construct" that embraces the unspoiled, the pristine, and

the genuine while being embedded in a culture of individuality (Handler 2). In the

context of filesharing, authenticity is achieved by a rejection of regimes of copyright and

by platforms allowing individual users the ability to download, upload, and otherwise

circulate whatever media they desire freely. Additionally, danah boyd ("A Blogger's

Blog") has suggested that, traditionally, sites of access grant authenticity to media (*i.e.*

value is given to the text's provenance); therefore, users of digital distribution platforms,

particularly those that display basic user information, consider those platforms as

authentic because of their prominence as distribution points. Put simply, because

platforms like Napster or BitTorrent operate(d) outside the bounds of market capitalism,

users are more likely to consider them authentic sites of media distribution and

consumption; consequently, the establishment of authenticity is more likely to lead to

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[34] A term Borschke never defines, but appears to mean the creativity surrounding encounters of
unauthorized amterial.

mutual feelings of community among users, similar to the ways in which members of

subcultures see themselves as members of the same imagined community.

A further benefit of filesharing programs for users is the wide selection of

material, much wider than that offered by legitimate distribution systems. In fact,

underground and independent music was often at the forefront of the development of

digital informal media sharing networks, a factor which Burkart & McCourt believe led

file traders to develop "social practices based on a collective belief that the doctrine of

fair use and noncommercial distribution of media content extended to the Internet" (48).

Strahilevitz extends such arguments and posits the anonymous nature of services like

Napster lead users to believe in a closer-knit, more cooperative community than actually

exists, beliefs that are based on traditional, offline social norms of reciprocal behavior

(508). Put another way, users of Napster or BitTorrent are conditioned into the belief that

the sharing of media is normalized through what Strahilevitz calls "charismatic code"

(550-51), the feature of early p2p platforms that displayed those who shared files yet

masked those who did not share. Presented with evidence that a wide variety of other

users shared content, Napster users then activate existing social norms of reciprocity,

norms that Elinor Ostrom (92) argues are fundamental to all human cultures.

Thus, the dominant cultural mode for people using unauthorized filesharing

programs is a belief in the righteousness of their activity and the free exchange of

information, provided that it is purely without remuneration and reinforced by existing

social norms. A media ecosystem based on the accumulation of content from users

across the world is one that is robust and varied, a complete and noncommercial Celestial

Jukebox. To see what such an ecosystem would look like, I will now examine one particular informal distribution platform more in-depth: BitTorrent.

BitTorrent

Tarleton Gillespie has argued that the emergence of p2p platforms represents a fundamentally different way of interacting with the Internet. On one level, p2p encourages decentralized organization (social) and structuration (technological) between users and platforms; more importantly, on another level, p2p is symptomatic of a new cultural politics of decentralization that is native to the Internet. The new politics rebalances the power of distribution in favor of the consumer in contrast with more traditional media models:

> [p2p applications] pose a conceptual challenge to our ideas about how information should be produced, organized, distributed, and consumed –and most important, by whom—and to the economic actors whose business models depend on being the exclusive distributors of information to a dependent public.
>
> (46)

The point Gillespie is making is important: Not only do users interact with media differently when using P2P applications, they necessarily must adapt their digital ontology to the new system by virtue of interfacing with it. The traditional capitalist mode of distribution for media texts is a long path whereby products pass from the hands of producers to distributors to consumers; indeed, Ricolfi argues that copyright holders preferred this "trilateral" arrangement because of the complicated logistics involved (286). p2p technology drastically foreshortens the route(s) media texts take to consumers and, as such, re-organizes the ways in which consumers experience media.

Furthermore, Helen Nissenbaum writes that there is no part of contemporary culture that is not impacted by norms of the flow of information. Of note, Nissenbaum is careful to remind us that informational norms are not monolithic; instead, she argues norms are context-dependent and can either be explicit or implicit depending on the situation (137). Pagallo & Durante augment Nissenbaum's argument by noting existing social norms inform the emergent norms surrounding p2p distribution (556). For example, the belief that artists should generally be remunerated for their work remains the prevailing opinion among most p2p users. However, each user will define their personal ethics differently. Put simply, the introduction of new ways and models of distributing media texts creates opportunities for new norms and understandings to emerge, both from consumers and producers. This process is similar to the transcoding property of new media put forth by Lev Manovich whereby human culture evolves as it becomes more and more imbricated with computers (46). It should not be taken as mere coincidence that new structures of legal distribution coincided with the rise of unauthorized models with applications like Napster, Limewire, and Grokster forcing the hand of the copyright industry to work on meeting consumers halfway.

Perhaps the most radical of the p2p platforms, BitTorrent differs from services like Napster because the only nominal mediation between users exchanging information is the site on which the files are listed (but not hosted) and because users can concurrently send and receive information from multiple other users. Accordingly, BitTorrent is a decentralized protocol that allows users to download information from one another. However, instead of users directly sending a file to one another like other P2P applications, BitTorrent uses what are known as swarms, large collections of hosts that

distribute the bandwidth burden equitably. Swarms work by having users continually

upload different parts of a file so that no one user is responsible for distributing it in its

entirety; this piecemeal distribution method drastically cuts down on download times for

users, particularly if the swarm is large. The protocol's radically decentralized nature

also means that it only needs a central server (known as a tracker) to host the links to the

BitTorrent files which then direct users' computers to the program and allows them to

connect with the file's hosts. As a result, BitTorrent continuously skirts copyright

enforcement due to its decentralized nature; usually the authorities in a country can only

hope to remove links to trackers from search engines, legally force ISPs to block access

to the tracker's website, or shut the tracker down and hope that it does not immediately

reform on a different server (Andy; Ernesto; "Google Transparency Report"). Because of

its versatility, BitTorrent is popular with users and firms who have very large files to

transfer—at its high point in 2008, the protocol had 31 percent of total North American

Internet traffic, although that number has steadily fallen to 4.4 percent in 2015, mostly

due to legal streaming alternatives like Netflix and Spotify ("Global Internet Phenomena

Report").

Despite its relative traffic volume diminishing, BitTorrent remains popular with

users acculturated in the politics of decentralization. While BitTorrent has 'legitimate'

uses,[35] the majority of traffic violates copyright, with a 2011 report finding that 63.7

percent of all torrenting involving copyrighted material ("Technical Report"). Sites like

The Pirate Bay (*TPB*) are infamous hubs of unauthorized filesharing, functioning as a

sort of black market bazaar where users could find anything from the latest Hollywood

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[35] The BitTorrent company has actively nurtured and promoted its technology for authorized and commercial uses, including its recent push of the Bundle product, a way for artists to distribute their product either for a fee or for free.

blockbuster to an obscure Romanian novella from the 1930s. While the potential to find any piece of media imaginable on large public trackers like *TPB* exists, the reality is often less utopian with highly visible releases like Hollywood blockbusters and chart-topping albums being the most viable pieces and in some ways, public trackers reinforce dominant cultural dynamics. One need only look at the most active torrents to see that, despite an incredibly diverse selection of media, users across the globe are scrambling to consume the same media (Andersson Schwarz 33). Moreover, large public trackers are home to faulty files, mislabeled material, and even malware, Trojan horses, and viruses (Stone). While public trackers offer much to entice users, the reality is less ideal than one would hope, with high visibility and ease of access being the sustenance of networks like *TPB*.

Users looking for a better experience do, however, have an alternative in the form of private trackers. Private trackers are usually structured around either a specific type of content (*e.g.* foreign art films, anime, or television shows) or an already existing community (usually offshoots of message boards). To gain access to the tracker, a user must have an invite from a member or prove their worth to site administrators, usually a demonstration of taste and appropriate knowledge-levels via informal interview for sites that are organized around specific media. Once on the site, a user can expect to have access to a wide array of hard-to-find material that is: actively being seeded[36]; properly marked and/or tagged; and free of hazardous digital material that one might encounter on a public tracker. The fidelity of the file is of paramount importance to members of private trackers, as almost all of my interview respondents noted it as a reason they avoided using public trackers whenever possible. Technical concerns aside, private

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[36] Seeding is the term used for sharing content by making it available for download.

trackers also offer users a great community experience, as most of the sites offer both web forums and internet relay chat (IRC) channels for users to debate, discuss, and otherwise interact with one another. Additionally, there are numerous other features available on private trackers (some more idiosyncratic than others) that will be discussed further in depth in the following chapter.

With both public and private tracker options, BitTorrent users are able to scour the filesharing landscape—what I term the filescape[37] (to borrow from Arjun Appadurai ["Modernity At Large"])—to acquire their desired media. Indeed, two of the most important innovations offered by p2p services like BitTorrent are the ability for users to simultaneously act as both client and host and ease of access to an almost endless availability of content (Gillespie 44-45). Whereas public trackers offer larger swarms and a veritable smorgasbord of media yet come with the caveats of large numbers of dead or inactive torrents, potentially hazardous digital material, and criminal prosecution or extortion by the copyright industry, private trackers compromise by presenting the user with a more stable community that is usually focused on depth rather than breadth while requiring significant cultural capital to join. Nevertheless, the emergence of BitTorrent protocol significantly altered the ways in which information is distributed online and the relationship users expect with their content.

Conclusion

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[37] Appadurai employs the suffix –scape to emphasize the fluid, amorphous characteristics of fields that exist within late capitalism. Furthermore, the suffix is useful because it connotes a subjective perspective that changes depending upon the actor (*i.e.* the mediascape looks different to media conglomerates than it does to a right wing radio listener).

The purpose of this and the previous chapter has not been to judge the business decisions of media conglomerates nor has it concerned itself with copyright law and unauthorized filesharing; it has focused on the ways in which users interact with media distribution platforms and the social structures and practices which develop around them. New technologies alter the ways in which users interact with media, giving users greater agency in: content selection and discovery; when, where, and how they watch television programming or films and listen to music; and the variety of services they can utilize. TiVO and DVRs introduced personalized recommendation systems that utilized viewing metadata to create a taste profile for users; streaming services such as Pandora and Netflix have since expanded on this function and created complex algorithms to match user's interests and consumption habits to media in their libraries. Television networks have also recently been forced to tailor distribution methods to consumer tastes, with over-the-top streaming services quickly emerging as an industry-wide trend. All of these services allow the user greater control over the content they consume and, thus, have forced media conglomerates to pay greater attention to the programming and films desired by consumers. While not Henry Jenkins' utopian, empowered user capable of remixing and reusing all digital media with which they consume (2006; 2013), today's media consumer undoubtedly has a greater role to play in the media ecosystem than in past eras. Contemporary audiences can utilize the affordances of platforms to develop social networks, they are able to more directly provide feedback to media producers through social media like Twitter (to what extent the feedback is meaningful, scholars are not yet certain), and they are better positioned to disrupt business models due to the panoply of legal (and otherwise) distribution services.

Along those lines, legally questionable services like Napster and BitTorrent have also given users greater abilities to resist dominant ideologies of the media industries. p2p platforms not only allow users to circulate material in an economy outside of the control of the copyright industries, they also allow the development of social formations that are fundamentally different from those fostered by formal media distribution networks. Decentralized networks create a more balanced playing field for the actors involved and many of the platforms foster the development of social networks. In this way, contemporary informal digital distribution networks mirror those of the early tape traders discussed in chapter one.

As emergent social and distributive networks, p2p platforms are sites ripe for exciting new research possibilities. Platforms like BitTorrent exist as sites of social formations whereby users take media texts as starting points to develop social hierarchies, establish new social practices, cultivate and exercise social and symbolic capital and power, and negotiate the social meanings and understandings of media distribution platforms, just as *The Videophile's Newsletter* community did. The next chapter looks specifically at the formal qualities of three different private BitTorrent communities. By examining the visual culture, technological affordances, and archival potentials of these two sites, it becomes clear that sites like these not only function as lively hubs of subcultural media, but also as loci of struggles for cultural capital and authority, operating as contemporary extensions of their informal networks of media sharing antecedents.

Chapter Four — (Re)producing Social Hierarchies: Technical Capabilities and Affordances in Digital INMSs

The previous two chapters traced the evolution of formal and informal digital networks of media distribution and circulation, focusing on the shifts in consumer relationships' with music, movies, and television when media texts are available for direct download from authorized retailers or unauthorized users, when they can be streamed, and when they are distributed through decentralized networks such as those that use the BitTorrent protocol. I argue that the increased agency available to users on authorized platforms through abilities to choose what and how one consumes media comes at the expense of certain social practices engendered by informal networks of media sharing like *TVN* or cassette tape trading networks. Moreover, many of the informal digital networks to emerge similarly eschewed social functions in favor of consumption-focused features and design decisions, particularly in the wake of the downfall of Napster. However, BitTorrent is one platform that emerged in the mid-2000s that offered the affordances needed to cultivate the sorts of communities, social practices, and social formations modeled by informal networks of media sharing like *TVN* and analog music trading networks.

This chapter is the first of two that explore the ways in which informal networks of media sharing are established in online spaces and how they can be understood as spaces that (re)produce unique social structures, as well as sites of struggle over the production of knowledge and who has the power to produce it. Specifically, this chapter

examines private BitTorrent trackers, the communities that form around them, and the ways in which social hierarchies and practices are established and maintained through technical features and affordances of the networks and their website. Examining the technical affordances of community websites indicates that important community members (designated by either social or cultural capital) play fundamental roles in shaping the social realities and expectations of each site, which further define the larger field of digital INMSs. Ultimately, the design decisions and affordances of the structural components of digital INMSs (*i.e.* their websites and attendant communicative platforms) serve to construct an ideal user who is committed to sharing media and strengthening the health of the network while at the same time interpellating the user as culturally and technically elite. In addition to such interpellation, digital INMSs also reproduce filmic epistemologies that emphasize auteurs, national cinemas, and genres through the ways in which metadata for torrents are displayed. Taken as a whole, the technical affordances of the communities under study allow users to establish social hierarchies in relatively similar ways, suggesting a somewhat unified field of user expectations.

This chapter will focus on three private, digital filesharing networks centered on the P2P platform BitTorrent: *MusicChest* (*MC*), *FilmDestruction* (*FD*), and *Great Cinema* (*GC*)[38]. Because of the legally tenuous nature of filesharing, the names of each site have been changed so as to not compromise their identities and FD and GC will also continue to be used as case studies in the following chapter. *MC* was a community that focused on music and was the premiere music tracker until French authorities raided its servers in late 2016, forcing the site to shut down. My research, however, was performed prior to its closure. *FD* and *GC* are invite-only movie and television trackers that

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[38] *FilmDestruction* and *Great Cinema* will continue to be used as case studies in the following chapter.

explicitly forbid contemporary, mainstream movies in favor of alternative fare. *FD* is focused on exploitation cinema, horror movies, and what the community terms 'trash' movies, movies that have low ratings on IMDB. *GC* takes the obverse approach, organizing itself around an ideal of quality cinema, suggesting users share art films, international and independent movies, and classical Hollywood cinema. The case study sites of this and the following chapter are used to examine the components of digital INMSs, both technical and social, which are nearly universal across the field of private BitTorrent communities. In doing so, Bourdieu's concepts of field, symbolic capital, and cultural capital are utilized as theoretical constructs to understand how community boundaries are shaped and the ways in which exogenous social processes and structures can work in tandem with individual agency to avoid a deterministic analysis, processes that are largely circumscribed by previous, individual experiences and designers' conceptions of imagined users.

In applying Bourdieu to digital INMSs, the chapter focuses on the ways in which individual sites utilize technical features based on content (search functions), communication (technical limitations of web forums and IRC channels), and information (metadata) to influence the way in which specific power structures form within the community. Each of these technical components of digital INMSs are hardcoded to limit the potential uses of the site for users to what site administrators and designers feel is the ideal way for the community to function. What emerges from user discourse, administrator rhetoric, and design decisions is a desire to mark the community as culturally and technically elite and to sustain a vertical social hierarchy, where administrators, moderators, and regular users who accrue the requisite social and

symbolic capital are the ones with the ability to set the terms of acceptable discourse and help define the community in comparison with other, similar networks. In essence, these nominally horizontal communities are, in fact, very rigidly structured and who has the power to speak and influence the tastes of the community is relatively circumscribed.

Social Hierarchy and Symbolic Power

As can be seen with the *The Videophile's Newsletter*, the function of INMSs does not solely revolve around the sharing of media. In fact, the sharing of films, television shows, or music is often only the entry point for many involved with the network. After entering the network or community, members may begin to start socializing with one another, as can be seen by the numerous conventions, long distance phone calls, and local meetups of early videophiles. While entry into a virtual community may initially be spurred by interest in a specialized topic, Wellman & Gulia note information is just one component of the social value extracted from virtual communities (172). For example, a network meant to provide postdoctoral researchers with job advice developed an informal social support group and a mailing list for female computer scientists evolved into a forum for similar social services (Sproull & Faraj). Much of the early literature on virtual communities actually describes the phenomena of groups and forums, initially established with one purpose in mind, growing into general support networks (Rheingold; Furlong; Rice & Love). Rather than functioning as mere information consumers and distributors, people online are actively social beings; in virtual communities, a horizon of acceptable social interactions is established and a set of ethical guidelines or rules emerges through social interactions and taste signaling. For example, within the *TVN*

community, a consensus for fair tape trading practices emerged after public (and private) discourse circulated within the pages of the publication. Notably, the development of tape trading best practices was a discursive process rather than a pronouncement from editor-in-chief Jim Lowe, whereby different readers would submit their opinions on what fair trading practices should look like. After public deliberation, Jim Lowe put forward an amalgamation of community suggestions that was designed to encourage equity of sharing within the network.

Within informal networks of media sharing, social hierarchies are founded based on those who were most visible and instrumental in shaping community policy, further delineating the range of acceptable social positions for group members. Analogously, members of offline communities (such as neighborhoods in a city) also engage in social stratification, basing their attitudes off characteristics like income, occupation, education, and ethnicity (Warner; Semyonov & Kraus 781). Whereas social hierarchies develop out of socioeconomic and racial components in neighborhoods, virtual communities based on media sharing have different standards and are more reminiscent of *TVN*'s community, in which cultural capital and stratification developed around knowledge, technological prowess, taste, and sharing. Attaining cultural capital can occur in a number of ways that are field-dependent and the ways in which individuals acquire and maintain it speaks to the need of close, ethnographic study of specific fields. For members of digital INMSs, cultural capital might be accrued through the acquisition and sharing of hard-to-find movies that are desired by a number of community members. The social hierarchies of INMSs, built in part by the community regulations, help define the ways in which

members perceive not only their relationships with one another, but also the relationship between the community and a larger industry or art form.

Benedict Anderson notes that communities are "distinguished…by the style in which they are imagined" (6). Anderson is discussing communities to make sense of the larger project of nationalism, but his formulations can be extended to agents or actors beyond nations. Communities are imagined in the sense that shared experiences (*e.g.* schooling, language, or media consumption) constitute the glue that holds people together (Fine & van den Scott 1320). Members of a community do not need to personally interact with one another to recognize that they share a connection with other members of the community. Furthermore, Virginia Crisp argues that imagining a community involves a calculus of reciprocity; the community is born from a set of rules or codes (nebulous as they may be) while at the same time the rules are informed by the vicissitudes of the community (112). In other words, the existence of rules or conventions puts a community into relief and the community allows regulations and conventions to form organically in a sort of feedback loop. For example, looking at the first issues of *TVN*, it becomes clear that the recognition of an INMS community is coeval with the establishment of community guidelines like acceptable tape trading and recording practices. The community conventions helped solidify and map the extent of the community while the contours of the community helped codify the rules.

As boundaries are established within a community, social hierarchies closely follow, if they are not already coeval with the establishment of such boundaries (in conjunction with rules and social conventions). Because social hierarchies are contingent upon the ongoing definition of community borders, it is important to understand how the

contours of a community influence who has the power to speak and 'imagine' how a community is shaped. As such, this chapter uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field, as well as his model of symbolic power, capital and violence to analyze the social topography of digital INMSs. By utilizing the theories of Bourdieu, the following sections illuminate the imbricated relationship of community conventions, taste, and social mobility, while delineating the differences between traditional classes and fields, the latter of which is more applicable to INMSs. What emerges is a portrait of an ideal user, one who is technically and cultural advanced and committed to sharing her media with fellow community members. By imagining such an ideal user, the networks and their administrators are transitively marking the entire community as technically and culturally elite. In other words, the status of the community in relation to other networks in the field is heavily influenced by the taste and cultural capital of its users. In exploring these social phenomena, this and the following chapter outline the various technical and social mechanisms that help explain the structure and types of social practices and needs fostered and met by analog and digital INMSs while also arguing for a general standardization of technical frameworks and social structures.

Symbolic Capital, Power and Violence

Bourdieu's "genetic sociology" (Johnson 4) sought to tackle the problem of existing social structures without falling into the false dichotomy of subjectivism or determinism. Instead, Bourdieu looks at social structures (*e.g.* the field of art criticism) and their intersection with the way in which individual members of those social structures conceive of their social practices. In doing so, he developed the dual concepts of

'habitus' and 'field.' For Bourdieu, a person's habitus is an unconscious, persistent system of adaptable "structured structures" that subsequently create and order social actions (*Logic of Practice* 53). One's habitus is inextricably linked to one's economic and social class, education, and family. Essentially, Bourdieu is speaking of the lived experience of individuals and the way a person learns from every interaction they have with their social environment in their lifetime. Habitus functions invisibly over the course of a person's life and might be understood more colloquially as a 'gut instinct,' the feeling an individual has for particular situations in life that lacks a conscious logic

Paired with Bourdieu's habitus is the concept of field, or the social contexts in which individuals experience life. A field is an independent, structured space that functions according to its own conventions and codes and there are many types of fields, including the academic field, the political field, and the legal field. Critically, Bourdieu argues that cultural objects cannot be understood in isolation, they must be placed in their appropriate context, which is the object's field. The relations and struggles for power between each actor in a field define the field's contours and it is this struggle that Bourdieu (*The Field* 106) argues is the creation of the history of a field. Fields also necessarily change when the individuals or agents occupying the field move, meaning close attention must be paid to the motivations and beliefs of individual social actors. Thus, fields can be understood as relational and the relationships between field members determine the way in which a specific field functions (Johnson 6). For instance, when Netflix was introduced as a DVD rental service, it entered the field of home video rental and retail. As Netflix's membership expanded, previously entrenched video stores like Blockbuster and Hollywood Video began losing business and were forced to adapt, as

evident by the failed streaming service established by Blockbuster (Herbert). Moreover,

agents within a field are in constant competition with one another for resources, whether

consciously or not, and these resources are not necessarily material. Often the

competition within a field can center on cultural capital and power. Who speaks with

authority in the field? Who defines the discourse? Who shapes the boundaries of a field?

The field of digital INMSs is populated by each member website or community.

As Bourdieu theorizes, each agent and their relation to one another define the borders and

meanings of each field; fields are necessarily dynamic. Similarly, Bruno Latour's actors

in his Actor-Network Theory are "not the source of action, but the moving target of a vast

array of entities swarming toward it" (*Reassembling* 46). Latour's actors, which are both

human and nonhuman units (*e.g.* users of a BitTorrent community and the community

itself are both considered Latourian actors), are purely relational. While Latour and

Bourdieu appear to fundamentally disagree with one another in terms of the validity of a

measurable 'society' or 'social structure' (Latour, *Aramis*; Bourdieu, *Reassembling* 84;

Bourdieu, *Science*), Willem Schinkel usefully argues that the two can both be understood

as engaging in a discourse of the relational. This chapter takes "the underlying idea of

entities that are related and…would not be what they are if they were not related" (725)

as its theoretical framework for squaring the circle of Bourdieusian fields and Latourian

actors.

The relational components of digital INMSs can be clearly seen in how similar

most private BitTorrent communities are to one another, regardless of their objects of

emphasis (*e.g.* East Asian cinema, Jamaican music, or academic manuscripts). While

idiosyncratic features like curated media lists, grassroots projects, or community contests

may differ, the code-based framework (*i.e.* the functionality offered to users) and social structures of most of these sites are remarkably similar, suggesting a gradual standardization over the past 30 years (and owing to the practices and vicissitudes of analogue INMSs).

Technical Features

When understanding how a field is constituted, it is necessary to look at the material components that influence the ways in which individual actors organize themselves. For a study based on virtual communities, the components that afford specific actions and impact social organization are based on technical specifications and protocols. Thus, the remainder of this chapter is focused on examining the technical affordances and design decisions made by administrators and what becomes clear is that the similarities of the various technical features suggests a standardization of affordances and imagined users.

Looking at the purely technical mechanics of the three BitTorrent-based sites under study, there are three broad categories of features available on each site: content, communication, and information, all of which look different on each site, but still function exactly the same[39]. Content components are site mechanics that allow users to interface with content, including searching for, requesting, and downloading specific media texts. Communication mechanics allow users of private trackers to communicate with one another. Informational features present users with news updates, community rules, and technical help, functioning as a form of metadata for the community. Studying

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[39] As communities that use the BitTorrent protocol, media sharing on all three networks functions exactly the same.

these technical features tells us three things. First, they speak to the ways in which the technological affordances of the sites of study influence how users interact with the site and with others. Second, the technical features of the sites provide evidence of each tracker's imagined audience, speaking to how site administrators have historically conceptualized their users and user interactions. Finally, analyzing the architecture of private filesharing communities provides the skeletal structure around which the personal interviews discussed in Chapter 6 can flesh out.

Content

Of greatest interest for many users are the content functions, under whose aegis the search, browse, request, upload, and download features fall. These features are categorized as content-based because they are the tools that users have for managing site content. Most prominent is the search function, which both *Music Chest* (*Figure 4.1*) and *Great Cinema* (*Figure 4.2*) have displayed centrally at the top of their landing pages while *FilmDestruction* (*Figure 4.3*) locates it on the left side of the landing page below a sidebar of site functions, with each placement suggesting either an idealized user that knows what they want to download or one that wants to browse the network's library.

The placement of the search function on digital INMSs tacitly suggests what is important to the imagined user. For example, *MC* and *GC* users are imagined by site designers to have a good idea of what artist/album or movie they want to download upon using the site because of the emphasis on search bars and lack of prominent browsing features. To be clear, each site offers a browse function, either explicitly as in the case of *GC* or implicitly like *MC* and their Torrents button, yet neither site emphasizes browsing

in their web design. Instead, *GC* and *MC* prominently display search features, with *GC* placing a relatively large search box with dropdown menu options at the top of the page near the user control center while *MC* includes six separate, side-by-side search boxes right below the user options at the top of the page. *FD*, however, places its search function in a relatively obscure part of the page, such that users with small screens would have to scroll to find it. Instead, *FD* emphasizes its latest news on the landing page and places the Browse button more prominently than the search field, implying a user who may not know what they want to watch and instead would rather spend time perusing the site's library. Furthermore, that *FD*'s collection is designed to be largely obscure, forgotten, or "bad" movies speaks to the type of imagined user, one who is willing to search through large numbers of unknown movies in search of one that can satisfy a specific desire. Research on imagined users in design and planning studies also suggests the life experiences of creators plays an important part in the plotting of designed spaces, with Throgmorton noting designers often relying on what "feels right" (128) while Adrienne Massanari argues designers often use tools to construct platforms that entrenches the designer-user divide despite rhetoric that places the needs of the user as paramount (402). For example, *GC* has a number of features that suggest site administrators have internalized theories of auteurism and art cinema, organizing the site in such a way (*e.g.* the "Master of the Month" feature or allowing only classical Hollywood, foreign, or arthouse cinema to be uploaded) that makes manifest their unconscious artistic ideologies.

For instance, when performing a search on *GC*, the results are returned with a number of metadata attached that speak to the ways site administrators conceptualize

cinema (*Figure 4.4*). The first column of data is pictorial representations of what kind of file the media is (*e.g.* Blu-Ray, DVD, CD, etc.) and if it has ever been a part of Master of the Month. Next is the name of the media along with any subtitles that exist for it. Third is a column devoted to directors and artists. That they feel it necessary to include a column for directors and not production studios, stars, producers, or any other above-the-line labor speakers to the primacy of the *auteur* for site designers, especially because it is the first column after the name of the movie or album. Following the director/artist column are various other ways of categorizing media, including year of release, loose genres, and the country of origin. Following information for the media text, 8 columns are provided to give users information about the torrent itself, including the number of comments, who uploaded the filed, when it was added, the number of files in the torrent the size of the torrent, the number of times it has been downloaded, and the number of seeders and leechers. The organization of and information contained within the search results display page indicates a specific filmic epistemology, one that conceives of cinema's most important information in terms of authorship, chronological history, genre, and nationalism. The effect is that users of all levels of cinematic knowledge interface with a cinematic epistemology that de-contextualizes important components of a film like a film's producer(s), the movie studio, stars, or cinematographer while also limiting the ways users can input their own meanings and knowledge (*e.g.* users cannot create unique genres or ways of classifying a film).

Another way site designers imagine ideal user practices can be seen in the way *GC* and *FD* differ from *MC* in the ways in which browsing is nurtured. Browsing is a practice that appears to be more emphasized on film-focused INMSs, as both *GC* and *FD*

have literal "Browse" buttons on their landing page (*Figures 4.2* and *4.3*) while *MC* has a more obtuse "Torrents" button (*Figure 4.1*). The difference may seem slight but it is significant as it suggests users searching for music have a general idea for what they are looking (*i.e.* "I know I am looking for music by Prince" or "I want to download *Purple Rain* by Prince"). The reasons for this may be both practical—there are roughly 2.5 million torrents on *MC* as compared to 140,000 on *FD* and 154,000 on *GC*—and cultural, with video stores cultivating browsing as a social habit while there was no mainstream retail analogue for music rental. However, both suggest differing imagined users and uses of the site in terms of content consumption: one who is certain for what they are looking and the other who is not. The user who knows what they want will spend their session[40] searching for the content they want to download and based on in-depth interviews, most sessions by most users would fall under this categorization. Those users who do not know what type of movie, music, or television programming they want spend much longer sessions on the site looking for something that piques their interest.

Members who want content that is not available on the site have the opportunity to request specific films or music releases through a request feature, whereby users detail the type of media they would like and are subsequently "charged" a varying amount of ratio, a site metric that measures the ratio of uploaded material to downloaded material and is used to maintain active distribution across the tracker.[41] Other users can browse current requests and, if they have some way to access and rip the media, they will upload the desired media and fulfill the original user's request. While a seemingly mundane feature, request is a vital component of the digital INMS field, as there is much overlap

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[40] For our purposes a session refers to a unique instance of uninterrupted site activity.
[41] Some sites like MC allow users to offer a 'bounty' which is an amount of ratio chosen by the requester in order to further incentivize the community to fill the request.

between the user bases of different sites and media is diffused much more efficiently when users introduce new works into the ecosystem. Sites whose members are active in fulfilling requests tend to have more exclusive movies or music than less proactive communities, a characteristic that generates more cultural capital for the active network.

In fact, cultural capital is a major motivating factor for digital INMSs, with sites highlighting both the extent and rarity of their holdings. By allowing users to request new material, a site gives itself two advantages, both of which involve cultural capital-generation at a personal and organizational level. First, it provides users with an organic yet technical way to grow its to its library. Instead of users having to post forum threads or send private messages to others, they can browse the requested movie list at their leisure to see if they can fill any requests. Relatedly, this also streamlines the process of fulfilling requests by centralizing the list of requested media, meaning potential uploaders have less work to do to find the requests. Second, it incentivizes users to add to the library by providing bounties to boost their site currency. In doing so, the request features generate a wider variety of material available for circulation within the community while at the same time remunerating those who fill requests economically (in terms of site ratio) or socially, as Virginia Crisp (143) and Rayna Denison (8-9) have found users who upload material or produce fansubs often develop positive reputations for their work. In other words, users who routinely fulfill requests accrue cultural capital within a community because they are seen as having access to rare material, holding specific kinds of knowledge in the case of subtitle additions, or being a generous member of the community willing to devote time and (potentially) material resources to providing for his or her fellow users.

To fulfill requests and allow other INMS members to download, users must upload material. There are two ways to upload material: a user either downloads and seeds existing material or uploads original material, requested or not. The former is quotidian to the point of invisibility (beyond the cognizance of ratio requirements), but the latter is a feature of importance for many of the same reasons that requests are. Each of the three case studies includes an Upload button placed among the most trafficked portion of the landing page and offers users FAQs, tutorials, and rules on the upload pages to ensure that content matches the quality and scope of the site. That tutorials are routinely included suggests that users of these INMSs are not uniformly technologically savvy, instead drawn in through their media-specific interests. If users are not as tech-savvy as they are interpellated by the site, then it becomes apparent that such interpellation is viewed as necessary by site designers and administrators in order to manufacture ideal users for the community. Thus, the presence of technical guides are top-down correction of technical deficiencies of users and suggests a field-wide expectation for technical competency, not only for the purposes of cultural capital, but also to ensure the network continues to function without issue.

Communication

Another category of the technical components of digital INMSs deals with communication-based features, which facilitate communication between users, such as web forums, IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, commenting systems for individual media files, and private messages. The web forums offered by digital INMSs are by far the most robust in terms of communicative possibilities. The forums provide users with

space to discuss a wide range of topics, including general talk, media-centric discourse,

site-specific issues, and technological help, the content of which is touched on in greater

depth in the following chapter. While not explicitly involved in the distribution and

circulation of media within the case study sites, web forums serve as one of the major

community-building components of the sites. For example, the "Lounge" subforum in the

"Community" section of MC's forums is the most active of all subforums with 41,229

topics and 1.8M posts as of June 2016 (*Figure 4.5*). By comparison, the most active

music subforum on the site—the general music discussion forum—has only 25,481 topics

and 771,154 posts. Moreover, numerous value-adding projects (such as assembling

collections of a director's or studio's filmography) begin on the forums as collaborations

between regular, non-administrative users.

Furthermore, web forums are hot spots for sparring over symbolic capital;

community members regularly use them as an opportunity to provide further information

about themselves in the service of accruing symbolic capital. For instance, on *Great*

Cinema's movie-specific subforum, a thread exists for users to vote and describe how

many movies they watch per week. Many of the posts are mere statements of total movies

watched, but a significant portion of them involve the user explaining circumstances

surrounding their film consumption habits. Anthony, a user with only seven posts, marks

himself as someone with a deep knowledge of cinema by explaining that he is a film

professor and therefore watches two films per day, sometimes four per day on the

weekend. Distinguishing himself as a purported film professor in a cinephile community

immediately endows Anthony with symbolic capital and he notes that he is "not the norm

in any way," to distinguish himself from those who watch less cinema than he does. In a

different topic, he gives his opinion on Wes Anderson's movies and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) in particular, noting that he is an Academy voter, further adding to his 'credentials' as a cinematic insider and lending gravitas to his opinions. It is a subtle rhetorical technique (and perhaps not a conscious one), but the effect is to mark Anthony as a knowledgeable user both in terms of the amount of cinema he consumes, as well as his profession. A different user, Geert, establishes his/her symbolic capital credentials in a slightly different way, highlighting his/her high motivation to consume artistic cinema:

> I used to watch 2-3 movies a week in cinemas when I was in high school. Then I watched around 10 movies a week at cinemas and on TV when I was at the Uni Nowadays I watch 3-4 movies a week at home (and around 50 films at art house cinemas in a year) I also attend festivals 4 or 5 times a year and watch several films at each.

Geert provides readers with a narrative of his/her cinematic consumption history starting with his/her teenage years and proceeding through to the present day. The striking parts of Geert's post are not the number of times he/she watches movies per week, but the admission that he/she regularly attends "art house cinemas" to watch films that fall outside of the mainstream. Because *GC* is a community that prides itself on appreciation of quality cinema and because the network encourages users to regularly download and then circulate movies, Geert is signaling to the *GC* community that he is one of them; (s)he regularly devotes time and money to watch new and old cinema, most likely not produced by Hollywood, while at the same time actively participating in the circulation of movies within the community. Moreover, Geert also mentions attending four or five movie festivals each year, activity that requires a number of conditions to be met, including living in or near a major city (or having the financial means of paying to

attend festivals across the country or globe), having the time to attend multiple festivals, and the interest in seeing new movies in a festival setting. Essentially, Geert is positioning him/herself as someone with the cultural and symbolic capital worth listening to and respecting within the community. There are numerous other posts from different users within the same thread that evince similar desires to position oneself as culturally-authoritative.

Similar to web forums, IRC channels are used primarily as community-building resources. IRC is a text-based chat platform that runs separate from the Web and in the context of digital INMSs would be considered off-site. With that said, IRC channels are even more important sites of non-media community-building because of the off-topic nature of much of the chat. Put another way, members of IRC channels spend less time talking about their home INMS's media (*e.g.* music or movies) and more time about personal issues. Jonathan, an interview participant and active member of *FD*, suggests that while movies serve as the foundation of *FD*'s IRC channel's discourse, personal topics take precedence:

> Well, after being in there, so long, we talk about just our personal lives. It's like: what are we having for dinner, tonight? Or somebody's talking about, like [a different user] was talking about some car accident he got into like ten years ago. Like, we don't talk about movies. We talk less about movies than we talk about other stuff... it's really just the same as any IRC channel, but the conversation will always eventually go back to movies, and that's what I like about it.

Jonathan's response indicates that the level of familiarity with other users, built by both the IRC channel and the *FD* website, leads to positive feelings of community. Stella Koh's research into IRC socialization echoes what Jonathan implicitly suggests, with Koh arguing that the delineation between physical and virtual spaces begins to blur

the longer a person engages with an IRC channel (222). This would seem to suggest that the longer an individual engages in the communicative features of an INMS, the more comfortable a user feels in discussing real world, personal matters with their fellow community members. This is another significant arena where social hierarchies develop based on taste-signalling and social posturing.

Comment threads on individual media files are another important component of the communicative features of digital INMSs. Each file offered by a tracker has a comments section where users can discuss anything they would like. The topics of the comments include thanking the uploader, commenting on the quality of the rip, and providing personal anecdotes about past experiences with the movie, all of which are discussed in greater detail in the following chapter. Socialization has standardized the accepted topics of discussion within these comment fields, but users still have relatively wide latitude.

The final communicative function offered on most digital INMSs is the private messaging (or PMing) feature. PMs are exactly what they sound like—messages which can be sent user to user in a private system that only allows system administrators to view them. Essentially, PMs are site-specific emails. Private messaging offers users the potential to develop personal, intimate connections with one another by virtue of the concealed nature of the communication. Where users may feel reticent to post personal information in spaces that are publicly visible, they can feel more comfortable in the private space of PMs. Users can also use PMs as spaces to take heated arguments out of the community's eye and continue the discussion in private. However, data on PM usage is not available for any of the sites and based on personal experience, the array of

communicative features available on INMSs, and respondent interviews, PMs are rarely used and usually reserved for messaging administrators or moderators about technical or regulatory issues.

Information

Less integral to the ways users access audio-visual material and communicate with one another on the site but equally important for keeping the community abreast of news and maintaining the operation of the site, the final category of functional components of digital INMSs is information, under whose umbrella fall news posts, site statistics, rules, and donations. The purpose of information features is not so much to allow community members greater ability to define the contours of the field; rather, they serve as reflections of the already ongoing efforts of the community (both administrators and users) to imagine themselves as culturally and technically elite, as well as committed to serving the community through circulating media and/or donating money to help pay site server expenses. Essentially, the information features are spaces where site information is disseminated to users with the information functioning as metadata for users about the site. The information features are also where individual sites offer the greatest contrasts between one another, most notably in the ways in which they display site news and updates.

Keeping the user base abreast of developments is integral to the ongoing operation of digital INMSs. Not only is it indicative of a site's vibrant nature, but it can also alert users to technical or security issues, a common occurrence on private filesharing sites. Beyond disseminating critical site information, news updates also

function as locations of struggle over symbolic capital. Universally located on the landing page of trackers, the news section frequently includes updates from administrators, moderators, and highly visible community members making 'staff picks,' a form of curation whereby individuals suggest films, television shows, musical artists, or albums they feel are underappreciated and/or deserve consumption by the community. Usually staff picks are "freeleech," which means downloading the torrent will not 'cost' the user any ratio; the recommendation essentially becomes, to paraphrase the economic concept, frictionless, whereby there is complete price concession in exchange for immediate access (Demsetz). With no 'cost' considerations, staff picks have a much wider consumption base and with more people consuming the selected media, there are many more potential fans. Moreover, because staff picks are curated and displayed prominently for all users to see, they offer a feeling of shared media experience. Thus, by providing a highly visible space for esteemed members of the community, staff picks (and, by extension, news updates) are integral spaces for the cultivation of cultural and symbolic capital through the display of taste and the recognition of importance within the community. The accumulation of such capital is paramount among visible community members as it is the base on which symbolic power and the ability to imagine into existence the "social world" (Bourdieu *"Social Space",* 21) of the community.

Site statistics also function as 'structuring structures' in the field of digital INMSs by indicating the relative health of the community, the breadth and depth (and thus prestige) of a community's holdings, and the ways in which a community imagines itself as differentiated from others. The health of a community is indicated by the listed number of active users and a variety of ratios, including global ratio (the combined ratio

of all users), the number of seeders compared to leechers, and the torrent to user ratio.

Digital INMSs also display their community's cultural capital through site statistics, most

notably via the number of total torrents available.[42] The site statistics that are most

revealing about how individual digital INMSs imagine their communities are the

idiosyncratic numbers. For example, the music-centric *MC* lists the total number of

artists available on the site, as well as total number of releases (856,726 and 1,053,397

respectively as of June 2016). These statistics are important for a community like *MC*

because it indicates the staggering breadth, depth and health of the community all at once.

Moreover, the site also has a specific statistic for "Perfect" FLACs,[43] a proclamation

which marks this community as one that highly values lossless music and one that

imagines itself as comprised of audiophiles. Furthermore, users and moderators are quick

to flag and delete any torrent that does not adhere to the stringent uploading guidelines,

including properly tagging files, accurately representing the provenance of an upload

(*e.g.* a zero tolerance policy for transcodes, the act of converting one lossy format to

another), and mandating the minimum level of sound quality be at least 192 kbps. *FD*, a

community that focuses on underground and marginalized film and television,

emphasizes community growth and activity among its special statistics, including month-

by-month user registration numbers. This suggests *FD* imagines itself as a community in

need of constant growth, perhaps due to the hard-to-find nature of much of its holdings.

On the other hand, *GC*, despite being nominally devoted to arthouse and classic cinema,

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[42] The more torrents available on a tracker, the more important the tracker is viewed among the field. However, it should be noted there are distinctions made between public and private trackers. In other words, a site like *The Pirate Bay* which is open to everyone and holds millions of files, is held in less esteem than private trackers like *MC*, *FD*, or *KG*.

[43] FLAC is a lossless music encoding format that many music purists see as the ideal digital format. As of June 2016 *MC* held 849,272 "Perfect" FLACs.

highlights its varied holdings as part of its unique statistics. The tracker notes the total

number and percentage of torrents that are movies, music, and literature, as well as the

number of torrents that are DVD rips and those that are High Definition (HD). The

variety heralded by *GC*'s statistics suggests an imagined community of erudite users who

are interested in high cultural forms of cinema, music, and literature, not mainstream fare.

Neither is the selection intended to be encyclopedic, and while there is no mention made

of literature in the site's manifesto (suggesting literature was not in the initial scope of the

site), the most circulated literature are books about movies and scholarly texts like the

works of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, both of whose writings have applications

to film criticism, theory, and scholarship. Furthermore, the word choice of 'literature' as

opposed to books—in addition to the complete absence of television—suggests a refined

user base interested in cultivating 'indie' cultural capital (Newman).

Relatedly, independent video stores (inasmuch as they can be considered

monolithic in practices) provide an analogous institution with which to compare private

BitTorrent sites, particularly in regards to the ways their classification systems imagine

consumers/users. Daniel Herbert finds that independent video stores provide a more

granular, particularized vision of cinema in contrast to corporate retailers like

Blockbuster, indicating a more discerning taste by administrators and a belief that the

site's userbase is similarly discriminating (61-65).[44] For example, *FD* offers over 20

different genres— including exploitation, gore, and martial arts— through which users

can filter their queries (*Figure 4.6*); by comparison, a tracker like *The Pirate Bay* (which

might be analogized to Blockbuster) offers only a general movie filter to help users

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[44] Most corporate video stores have gone out of business, save for Family Video.

narrow their search results. Furthermore, *FD*'s splash page[45] interpellates users as the

type who prefer marginalized or 'trashy' cinema:

> It would appear as though you have stumbled upon the magical homepage of [*Film Destruction*], home of the finest (ahem) rare, obscure and of course trashy horror, martial arts, gore, exploitation and action flicks. Disencumber your weary body of the travails of your long journey across the seven seas of the Internets, find a nice leather chair and prepare to watch your childhood heroes in C-grade porn featuring something illegal in the USA. (*FD* Splash Page)

With appeals to "C-grade porn" that include illegal material, a clear delineation of

the specialized genres of the site, and a tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the quality of

their holdings, *FD* makes clear the ways in which the site imagines its community and its

individual members: they are users who embrace paracinema and derive value from the

lack of value present in much of the media they consume (Sconce 372). By presenting

unique site statistics that highlight the idiosyncrasies of the community (and specifically

important members of the community), these digital INMSs establish unique identities

within the larger field.

The final information-based feature is donations. First and foremost, donations

serve as a financial lifeline for the communities and remind us that material realities still

interject themselves into digital culture. While the distribution and circulation of media is

strictly peer-to-peer, the site and its attendant features like message boards require servers

to host information and those servers must be paid for by the site's administration and the

site administrators actively seek donations while informing users where their money will

be spent.   Most private, digital INMSs do not support themselves with advertising

because it opens them up to piracy litigation and closer scrutiny by governmental

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[45] The default page seen by users who are unregistered or not yet logged in.

agencies. Thus, they rely on the financial support of the community to keep the lights on, so to speak.

Donations also serve a more Bourdieusian function: they allow donors to accrue symbolic capital. Thinking about donations as a form of community investment, users who donate financially to the site can be seen as actively supporting the viability of the community, a benefactor for the cause of free culture. Because the functioning of the website is reliant upon servers that need to be paid for, those who financially support site upkeep are in positions of power relative to users who do not donate. Sánchez-Matamoros *et al.* note how local charities in early 20th century Spain developed symbolic capital in the community by actively supporting villagers when the government could not (492). Symbolic capital in this context was used to situate members of the board of directors in higher positions on the social ladder. Similarly, members who donate to private BitTorrent communities enjoy enhanced social standing; their opinions are taken into greater consideration by site staff and they distinguish themselves from regular users who do not donate. Furthermore, Arthur C. Brooks has found that those with higher levels of symbolic capital are more likely to give charitably, as they have more at stake in a vibrant, active community (1-2). Thus, the generation of symbolic capital through charitable donations within private BitTorrent communities inscribes those who donate into a system whereby their donations increase their social status, which further increases the chances of future donations in order to keep their community functional.

Universally the benefits to donors are an increase in cultural capital and greater influence in the community. On *FD*, donors are granted special stars next to their name, which appears on both the forums and on torrent comment threads, as well as an

individual's profile page. *MC*'s donor system is more complicated and offers further

perks:

> [*MC*'s] Donor Rank system is currently available to all credited donors. This system
> provides donors with perks. Some of these perks are cosmetic (e.g., a donor icon added to
> your account), some are one-time benefits (e.g., additional invites), and others modify
> specific site options (e.g., additional profile information boxes, or personal collages).
> Please see the Donor Rank System FAQ Document for more information about these
> benefits. ("*Donate*")

The tiered system proffered by *MC* includes greater incentives for users to donate

and, thus, further demarcate themselves as users of importance in the community. With

such capital comes greater influence in the community, most notably in the ability to take

part in staff picks. As previously noted, staff picks are a subtle but important way in

which users are able to obtain cultural capital, which implies the power to consecrate or

give value to specific media objects held by the community (Bourdieu, *The Field* 75)**,**

thus reaping the rewards of prestige and authority. While seemingly a feature meant to

pay the bills, donations incentivize users to maintain the financial and material health of

the community by offering symbolic capital in exchange for economic capital, perhaps

the clearest example of the relationship between symbolic and economic capital in digital

INMSs.

Conclusion

Benedict Anderson believes communities are constituted by the ways in which

they are imagined. Pierre Bourdieu argues fields are contoured by the positions agents

take within them. While disparate in their subjects, both of these thinkers are attempting

to explain phenomena of social reproduction, whereby specific community characteristics and social norms are developed by users in prestigious positions of the social hierarchy and replicated in newer community members through the technical affordances of the network. This chapter has applied their approaches toward understanding the ways in which social hierarchies are developed and sustained on private BitTorrent trackers. Looking at the architectural affordances of the technical components of digital INMSs (*i.e.* their websites and attendant communicative platforms), it becomes clear that the ideal user or community member is one that is devoted to media sharing and maintaining an active network of media circulation.   Users are also interpellated as culturally and technically elite and are inculcated with auteurist and nationalist ideologies of cinema through the presentation of cinematic metadata. The result of such interpellation is a userbase that is limited in the type of media of which they can express enjoyment within the community while at the same time they are inscribed into specific filmic epistemologies that subtly condition them to think about cinema in terms of directors, genre, and national cinemas.

Social hierarchies begin to form as actors struggle for the requisite symbolic capital necessary to wield symbolic power within the field. To maintain the concomitant authority, individuals with the requisite social and cultural capital police the actions of other, less prominent users. Such policing can be seen in a number of ways in digital INMS communities, including on message boards and IRC channels by insiders socially castigating new users for breaches in decorum; within the manifestos and enumerated ethos sections of web sites where administrators and moderators define the purview and definition of the community; and in the features offered by the site, which restrict user

actions to those deemed natural by site creators. Moreover, when looking at the technical affordances of networks across the field of digital INMSs, there appears to be a convergence of capabilities, suggesting we have reached a moment of standardization in the development of the field.

Despite varying in their media emphases, each of the case study sites is struggling to position the larger field as one that rejects mainstream culture, whether it be by lionizing exploitation and marginalized films, championing independent and foreign films, or showcasing independently-produced music. As Bourdieu reminds us, "ideologies owe their structure and their most specific functions to the social conditions of their production and circulation" (*Language* 169). The subcultural ideology developed by many digital INMS communities is one that is crafted through a variety of social phenomena and code-based functions, both of which are undergirded by the cultural capital and community policing of privileged community members, processes and phenomena to which the following chapter turns.

Chapter Five — Social Affordances of Digital INMSs: The Struggle for Cultural Capital and Power

Where the previous chapter examined the content, communication, and information-based technical components of private filesharing communities, this chapter is concerned with cataloguing and analyzing two social components of the communities: cultural capital-based and regulatory features. Using the same case study networks and building on the previous chapter, I argue in this chapter that users develop symbolic power in these communities through the accrual of symbolic capital, a process which can involve financially supporting the community, making oneself highly visible in the community, or distinguishing one's taste or knowledge as exemplary in relation to community standards. Moreover, regulatory decisions made by site administrators and social interactions dominated by those with symbolic capital and power serve to police community behavior by setting acceptable social standards.

Such social processes are instances of symbolic violence exercised by those in power within the social hierarchy and, as such, I argue that digital INMSs function as sites of struggle whereby Latourian actors (including moderators, lurkers, administrators, and cinematic/musical canons) conduct pitched battles over who has the authority to shape the ethos and social realities of a specific community. As theoretical constructs for this chapter, symbolic power and violence will be employed to understand the social processes that structure the communities of digital INMSs. More specifically, this chapter will employ Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power and violence to outline the ways in

which individual members of digital INMSs establish and maintain social power while further circumscribing the boundaries of these imagined communities. By looking at participant-site, participant-moderator, and participant-participant relationships and interactions, as well as analyzing the ways in which community members construct a shared imagination of informal media sharing norms, the chapter examines and deconstructs the (re)production of social hierarchies within digital INMSs. A shared ethos among the community emerges from the process of social worldbuilding such that the informal networks of media sharing cease to be about the sharing of media and instead function to reproduce specific social realities and hierarchies, which often emphasize elitist taste in music, movies, and television.

Symbolic Power and Violence

Inherent in all of the technical and social features are accumulations of symbolic capital and power. For Bourdieu (*In Other Words*), symbolic capital is the amount or degree of accrued prestige or reputation an individual has obtained and is based on the dialectical relationship between recognition and knowledge. At stake in developing symbolic capital within a field is the establishment of an individual as an authority figure whereby she is able to normalize and legitimate social practices, taste cultures, and the contours of the field.

Accumulating enough symbolic capital to gain authority within a field represents the achievement of symbolic power, which Bourdieu defines as an "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (*Language* 164). Symbolic

power is derived not from specific words or ideologies, but in the belief of the validity and authority of the words and those who speak them (Swartz 88); hence, symbolic power is defined by the relationship between ideologies and social structures. Furthermore, symbolic power is authority that is misrecognized[46] as a natural state of being and, thus, culturally invisible. The conditions under which symbolic power emerges are "culturally arbitrary" and are imposed by an "arbitrary power" purporting to operate under a "legitimate order," what Bourdieu calls structuring structures (Cicourel 90). The misrecognition that is at the foundation of symbolic power is a denial of very real political and economic factors that undergird social and cultural practices, practices that Bourdieu defines as inherently self-interested (Swartz 89-90). For instance, think of the private, corporate funding of public television in the United States; financial support for a public good is provided by an economic entity in order to generate goodwill and redirect the corporation's economic capital into symbolic capital.

Yet these practices are misrecognized as disinterested because they are symbolic and the more frequently practices can be separated from material interests, the more symbolically powerful—and invisible—they become. The effect of the invisibility of symbolic power is that it is able to structure the social reality of its specific field (keeping in mind symbolic power is generally not transferrable across fields) as it pleases (Crisp 112). Symbolic power as it relates to digital INMSs not only shapes the rules and conventions of individual trackers, but also is able to construct the social hierarchies contained within the community through the use of symbolic violence. Bourdieu couples symbolic power and violence together, positing symbolic power is power because of the misrecognition of its validity, validity garnered by misrecognition of the violence

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[46] The misrecognition of power is analogous to Marx's concept of false consciousness.

performed under its auspices (*Language* 209). In other words, an individual with

symbolic power is only able to obtain that power with the complicity of those upon

whom symbolic violence is enacted.

Bourdieu's symbolic frameworks are useful in determining what is and what is

not valued in digital INMS communities, as well as how social standards and hierarchies

are constructed and maintained. In doing so, this section will look at two features that

exist on each of the case study sites: official IRC channels and the site ethos or manifesto

crafted by administrators. In doing so, we will see how various individuals across the

social strata both influence and are influenced by the machinations of symbolic capital,

power, and violence. Furthermore, the forces behind the limits and boundaries of social

values and community ethos will emerge and make clear the ways in which agents within

the field of digital INMSs operate within Bourdieusian 'structuring structures.'

IRC

Most private trackers maintain an IRC channel where members (and

nonmembers) can congregate to talk about the arts, politics, sports, or any other topic.

The channels are similar to web forums in that they have moderators (or "ops" in the

vernacular)[47], but communication occurs more synchronously relative to message boards.

Channels consist of a variety of users who can be effectively segmented into different

social strata with a variety of powers that can be used to shape a community's social

reality into a specific vision. I will be adapting Robert Kozinets' (62) concepts of the

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[47] Channel operators police behavior by participants. Their function is to prevent spamming, phishing, or behavior that is otherwise disruptive. Being an op is also a mark of distinction and indicates one has gained the trust of administrators.

tourist, mingler, devotee, and insider to categorize and explain the ways in which the different levels of user relate to and interact with one another and the tracker's IRC network as a whole, ultimately arguing that IRC is a proving ground for many community members to generate the requisite symbolic capital to achieve positions of prominence within the community.

Starting from the bottom of the social hierarchy, the most numerous group of users are what Kozinets terms "tourists," a type of user who infrequently (perhaps only once) joins a channel with a specific goal in mind. Tourists usually ask questions pertaining to service issues with the tracker, most notably asking operators and privileged users how they can obtain membership to the site. Tourists have the least amount of symbolic power, as they are unknown and lack identifiable connections to the community, such as name recognition among established members and knowledge of community history. As Howard Rheingold writes, webs of personal relationships are necessarily required for the formation of virtual community; similarly, one must establish relationships with others to be a part of the community rather than an interloper (xx). In other words, tourists are community members who lack any power to define community tastes and norms. Similar to tourists are lurkers, users who may be present for long periods of time, but who rarely engage in conversation with other users. Lurkers mostly idle in a channel, yet display an unarticulated desire to learn more about a specific community for any number of reasons. As a result, lurkers also lack any sort of meaningful power to influence social practices and norms within a community.

On the next rung up are minglers, those users who have a somewhat established history in the community but are not regularly active conversation participants. These

users may be newer members who immediately entered a community's discourse or they may have been lurkers or tourists who, over time, felt comfortable entering into regular conversations. That they are participants in a community but not fully accepted suggests that, absent extraordinary circumstances, time spent in and discursive contributions to a community play important roles in developing social and symbolic power. Minglers may contribute to community discourse, but they are unable to effectively police the behavior of others due to their low social standing.

Third, devotees are active participants, but are not yet highly regarded enough to wield significant power within the community. These are users who have a shared affinity interest with the community (*e.g.* exploitation cinema), yet minimize their involvement in discourse when it does not pertain to their interests. Looking at digital INMSs as a whole, we might consider a majority of users as devotees because of their main desire to interface with media rather than other community members. These are users that can provide input towards shaping social norms and community tastes, but they lack the power held by the most important group of the community—insiders. Insiders are those channel members who have the ability to shape the ethos and horizon of social possibilities through the exercise of symbolic violence. Insiders include long-established community members and channel operators, the latter of who possess the ability to kick and ban users at their discretion. With a wide variety of social types, IRC channels are ideal spaces to observe the deployment of symbolic and social capital in an ongoing process of defining and redefining social norms, community taste cultures, and jockeying for positions of power within the social hierarchy.

Beyond a 'home' channel that serves as the default chat space, private tracker IRC channels can also be split up into a network of channels with devoted topics, such as the #help channel in *FilmDestruction*'s IRC network, which helps users with site problems like de-activated accounts, torrent client issues, and gaining membership to the site. The last issue—gaining membership to the site—is one of the main traffic generators for *FD*'s IRC network and provides insight into the interplay of power relations between tourists and insiders. Many times when tourists join a server's main channel to ask for an invite to the tracker, they use the generic name given to them by the server (*e.g.* guest74289934). This is an important distinction, as all users at the mingler class and above have a customized name that is representative of some part of their personality (Williams & Copes 76). By taking a name that is given to them, tourists implicitly mark themselves as nonmembers or guests of a community. The user's nonmember status is augmented by the request for an invite to join the community. Moreover, users are explicitly told to join #help if they are looking for invites or help with re-activating a banned or expired account, with the channel's topic offering the requisite IRC code for users to copy and paste: "/join #help for all your assistive needs | Thar be no invites here. Look elsewhere." Set by the channel operators, the topic delimits the discursive horizon for the channel, implicitly marking any technical issues as off limits (at least to non-regular users). When tourists disregard the warnings, regular users usually take it as an opportunity to ridicule the tourist while at the same time showcasing their own symbolic power:

> [14:14] <[FD]guest4892> anyone wanna invite me on [Film Destruction]? [user's email address]
> [14:15] <Alex> READ THE TOPIC

This exchange is typical of the power relations that exist within most IRC channels. A user joins the room looking for access to the community and is either unaware or incapable of understanding the established social mores, both as they are outlined in the channel's topic and widely understood by regulars. In this instance, insider Alex (username anonymized) immediately responds to the social *faux-pas* by excoriating the user. That Alex's response was in all caps further underscores the derision exhibited by devotees and insiders towards newcomers and strengthens his or her position of authority by suggesting he or she is well versed in the standards of conduct in the community.

Such behavior policing not only functions as a display of authority, but also is a machination of social reproduction. Mathwick *et al* (836) argue that the length of community membership is one of the most important factors in determining one's placement in core and peripheral groups of that community, initially observing from the perimeter of conversation and learning the social norms. To immediately enter into dialogue under the presumption of understanding a community's norms is a social *faux-pas* and is often met with harsh responses, such as Alex's. However, if a tourist or mingler spends the requisite time necessary to develop a "feel for the game", she influences and stabilizes social structures by finding and occupying a viable position within the field (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 257). As Lave & Wenger (*Situated*) argue, the process of gradual immersion into a community is an essential social experience for both the user and the larger social structures of the community. By policing the behavior of new users, those in positions of authority reproduce existing social norms.

By deploying the symbolic and social capital available to longtime members of a community, Alex is actively shaping the behavior of the new user, inculcating the values he holds into the interloper. In doing so, Alex is reinforcing the values he believes undergird the social structure of the *FD* community, where he holds a significant discursive position in the field. Similarly, new users to an IRC channel will often have their attempts at conversation actively ignored. This symbolic annihilation serves as a more passive way for established members to control the discourse of the channel. These are social phenomena that occur across virtual communities (Crisp 119) and the symbolic power wielded by established community members demonstrates their authority within the community and the ability to arbitrate acceptable codes of conduct, particularly for new users.

Because the imagined community for digital INMSs is global, many tourists who join IRC channels to ask for help are non-native English speakers. When speaking in 'broken English', tourists are sometimes ridiculed by devotees and insiders for not only breaking social customs, but also for speaking poor English:

> <[FD]guest3523> Hi !!!! How can I get an invite ? very need . help...
> <Michael> topic read you can?
> <[FD]guest3523> No , I'm from Russia
> <Michael> oh joy
> <[FD]guest3523> Sorry if that is not so
> <Michael> all yours [Chris] lol
> <&Chris[48]> no thnx :D
> <Michael> Do you have a auto download seedbox[49] guest3523. you need one of those here
> <[FD]guest3523> Sorry don't understand...:)

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[48] The & symbol represents administrator status in IRC.
[49] This is not a requirement for access to the community; Michael is deliberately taunting the new user.

In this interaction, a Russian user is interested in joining *FD* and inquires about

receiving an invitation to the tracker in the main chat channel using 'broken English.'

Michael, an insider, immediately mocks the user in two ways: first, he uses 'broken

English' to marginalize the Russian user for breaking with the communicative norms of

the channel; second, he criticizes the user for not reading the channel's topic, which

explicitly states where new users should go to obtain invites. Upon obtaining a reply that

marks the user as a non-native English speaker, Michael demonstrates annoyance at

having to converse with someone who does not have a good grasp of the English

language. Next, Michael attempts to re-route the tourist's query to a channel

administrator, Chris, to no avail; Chris also expresses no desire to help the new user and

even appears to be relieved in doing so. Finally, Michael gives the new user

misinformation about the necessity of having a seedbox[50], demonstrating a lack of

empathy for the new user's desires. Accordingly, the effect is that tourists are denied help

for their queries, but are also ridiculed and implicitly tagged as unintelligent for lacking

the ability to communicate 'properly' with the community.   Thus, language is another

component of IRC channels and digital INMSs in general where insiders are able to

police the behavior of users who lack power in the community in service of defining the

field.

While English is the main language used on all three case study trackers as well

as their IRC channels, neither in the rules nor the manifestos of the trackers is there a

provision for English being the official language. English has largely been adopted as a

lingua franca across 'global' digital sites as a result of the "conflict between

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[50] A seedbox is essentially an external server a user rents to automatically store and seed downloaded
material for the user so they do not have to do so locally.

intelligibility and identity" (Crystal 118), meaning the language emerged as dominant by communicative exigencies and the desire to avoid a virtual Tower of Babel. However, English's diffusion as a global language is one based on colonial histories (Errington) and should not be understood as culturally neutral, a view which reinforces the misrecognized reality of symbolic violence. Instead, the *de facto* establishment of English as the dominant language of popular digital INMSs must be viewed in the context of insiders—those with the requisite accumulated symbolic capital and power—defining their communities as ones which are English-speaking. For example, while *Music Chest*'s administrative staff are multinational, the userbase is well represented by members purporting to be from English-speaking nations (*Figure 5.1*).

Four out of the top five nations with the most users speak English, including America, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia (Sweden is the fourth largest userbase on the site). Nevertheless, countries like Russia, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and South Korea follow closely behind. These numbers reflect that, outside of a dominant American userbase, language barriers do not restrict access to the community and the material on the site does not reflect a pro-English bias. Both *GC* and *FD* have similar demographics and *FD* users are just as likely to find a sexploitation film from American International Pictures as they are to find Italian *giallo* from Lucio Fulci. Moreover, while English-language media may be a slight plurality, there is no dominant language in terms of the sites' libraries. Based on ethnographic experiences in *FD*'s IRC channel, that many insiders themselves are non-native English speakers highlights the extent to which disembodied symbolic power (*e.g.* the tacit assumption that English is to be spoken in the community) influences cultural fields like digital INMSs.

Beyond issues of explicit ridicule and behavior policing, symbolic power and violence also function in IRC channels to define the spectrum of acceptable taste in a community. In a community that revolves around exploitation and 'low culture' cinema like *Film Destruction*, certain genres and types of film are inherently privileged over others. However, in IRC channels the contrasts between what is considered acceptable taste and what is not are frequently up for debate, aided largely by the taste preferences of insiders. Regular chatters have defined cinematic preferences and frame discourse in such a way as to impose their preferences on others. For example, insider Po discusses *Hateful Eight* (2015) while watching it, critiquing certain components of the film. Regular user Jim chimes in with his experience, but mingler Prince (who rarely contributes to the chat) is less certain to interject into the exchange:

> [14:40] <Po> Watching Hateful Eight atm.
> [14:41] <Po> What a waste of 65mm film!
> [14:43] <Jim> I grabbed the blu-ray rip of that movie when it was on fl at PTP. How awful is it?
> [14:43] <Po> Watchable I guess :)
> [14:46] <Po> Hm, some nice shots in it.
> [14:46] <Prince> [Po], hateful sucks eh?
> [14:55] <Po> I hate that it's all orange and blue.

Prince's "eh?" reflects the caution exhibited by newcomers to a community, particularly because of the taste-based context in which it emerged. In particular, Po is criticizing the film for not utilizing its much-heralded 65mm Ultra Panavision filmstock (Yarm) to its full extent. As an insider, Po's opinion is significant within the IRC channel and, at the very least, will minimize dissenting opinions, if not outright define what are viable discursive positions for members of the community. Such an accusation is doubly

relevant in a community that is highly knowledgeable about film formats and history and appealing to the technical aspects of the movie's production strengthens Po's position.[51]

IRC is both a synchronous and asynchronous communication platform and often times conversations that occur between small groups of people can be later observed by others who have been in the channel but not physically present at their computer, also known as idling. This means that users, especially insiders, can have self-contained conversations that can be later read by tourists and minglers, as well as other idling insiders, although insiders are more likely to engage in the conversation rather than merely reading it. Instances like this also help shape the variety of accepted discursive positions and are avenues through which users can accrue symbolic capital because they are opportunities for those with power to define what is the collective belief (Swartz 92) of the community, a definition that relies on those in subordinate positions to legitimate the rhetoric of the powerful by implicitly granting the powerful authority. For instance, one conversation in *FD*'s IRC channel between a group of three insiders positions the acceptable tastes of the community as those which eschew humorous criticism of older B-movies (*e.g. Mystery Science Theater 3000* [1988-1999]) in favor of appreciating the original, flawed movies:

> <Lucio> I remember Tim Lucas bitching about MST3K because they showed this great print of some old movie that had always looked like shit and he said it was a shame to have their inane stupidity over it
> <Yancy> it was incredibly frustrating at the time
> <Yancy> since most of that stuff hadn't been re-released yet
> <Don> haha [Lucio]
> <Yancy> and there were few if any other shows that played old b movies anymore

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[51] It should be noted that Po is not criticizing the quality of the movie; rather, he is taking a position that evaluates the technical and artistic merits for directorial decisions.

<Lucio> I tried watching MST3K once or twice and I was like, "This is fucking stupid and dumb" and basically wrote it off
<Lucio> I was surprised years later that they had such a huge following
<Yancy> it's for younger people
<Yancy> people who would not have naturally watched those types of films

In this conversation, creating humor out of what are widely seen to be 'bad' films is seen as a negative. For the most active insiders (and these are three very active insiders), *FD* is a community that appreciates the original movies rather than those who would seek to find humor in them. Beyond criticizing *MST3K* and similar metacinematic outfits, Yancy also marks those who do enjoy such comedic commentary as inherently unaware of the cinema embraced by the *FD* community (*FD* hosts original copies of the large majority of films skewered by *MST3K*). Here, Yancy and Lucio are imposing a hierarchy of taste that places the original texts as paramount and distinguishing the tastes of the community from the tastes of (younger) people who have not or will not engage with the original films. In essence, they are exercising their symbolic power to shape the hierarchies of taste and prestige (Daly 614) of *FD* by signaling those who prefer *MST3K* over the original films as culturally unfit for the *FD* community. Furthermore, despite a large number of users in the room (most of whom are not insiders), there are no counterarguments presented; thus, this conversation serves as another instance of symbolic violence producing acceptance for a misrecognized authority (Poupeau 70), in this case defining the acceptable views on meaning-making, criticism, and B-movies. If it does not limit discourse on film and television that falls outside the taste purview of those with the most symbolic power in the community, the effect this exercise of power has is to subtly shape the taste culture of the tracker.

The struggle for symbolic power also plays out between insiders and involves intricate self-positioning by agents within the larger field, especially in popular IRC channels like *FD*'s, where close to 100 users with the ability to asynchronously read the discussion can be present at any time:

> <Steven> its funny though, the 2 remakes of I spit on your grave were both better than the originals.
> <Steven> original*
> <Chris> Never saw 'em. Don't care to.
> <Steven> the most recent remake was the best, it has a really good twist unlike the others
> <Steven> the remake of maniac? oh what a shitheap
> <Steven> had nothing to do with it
> <Jeremy> I liked the remake of Parts The Clonus Horror
> <Steven> they need to do a remake of lucker the necrophagous. id watch that.
> <Jeremy> it took the original, added explosions, car chases and a happy ending
> <Steven> I I even bother with most remakes and sequels..never saw evil dead, the last Indiana jones, anything by rob zombie.

In this instance, both Steven and Jeremy are *Film Destruction* insiders and are exercising their authorities in discussing exploitation movie remakes and sequels and their relation to their tastes. Steven marks his as mostly eschewing remakes in favor of the original, save for *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), an opinion that fellow insider Chris does not share; Jeremy facetiously describes his enjoyment of the alleged *Parts: The Clonus Horror* (1979) remake, Michael Bay's *The Island* (2005). Later in the conversation, Jeremy sincerely reiterates his support for remakes, citing the 2013 remake of *The Evil Dead* (1981). The discourse remains mostly civil with minor disagreements, but there is an undercurrent of jockeying for cultural capital inherent in these sorts of discussions. Many of the insiders in the *FD* IRC channel discuss the disdain with which they hold for contemporary remakes of older films, particularly those that fall under the aegis of exploitation cinema. In doing so, they are discursively positioning the

community as one in which authenticity (the original) is privileged above remakes, which are characterized as devoid of personality, artistic merit, and pathos. Without strong opposition, the communal disposition is naturalized in a way that authority is granted to the opinion of insiders because of their symbolic capital and power. Furthermore, such a struggle is inherent in the accumulation of symbolic capital and power and these instances of position-taking are exercises of symbolic violence, particularly in front of an audience largely composed of tourists and minglers.

Bourdieu (*Field* 96) reminds us that such violence is predicated on reciprocal acceptance of the misrecognized validity of insiders' symbolic power by tourists, minglers, and those who otherwise lack the requisite authority within a community to enact their vision of social realities. This is because the user lacking in symbolic power's social world is compatible with the insider's such that the user surrenders herself to the insider's authority. The same phenomenon is at play in the development of literary or cinematic canons. The delimiting of acceptable tastes is perhaps the most important exercise of symbolic violence within IRC channels, as Bourdieu (*Ibid* 75) notes that the only legitimate use of symbolic capital is to sanctify cultural objects and imbue them with symbolic value. In doing so, insiders reinscribe the cultural logic of their parent tracker's manifesto in spaces with theoretically should be open to imagination.

Site Ethos

One of Bourdieu's main contributions to sociology was positing a theory of social reproduction whereby not only are people imbued with forms of biological, social, cultural, and economic capital by their parents, but these built-in advantages are

augmented by the education system which perpetuates a certain vision of society compatible with elite social strata (Bourdieu & Passeron). In Bourdieu's estimation, the school itself becomes a central agent in reproducing a specific social reality and perpetuating social inequity. While Bourdieu is focused on the role education plays in reproducing social hierarchies, his theory can be applied to the field of digital INMSs, with individual networks analogous to schools, site ethos/manifestos representing the ideology underlying the institutions, and administrators and moderators serving as teachers and figures of authority.

As previously mentioned, all three of the case study private trackers house some form of site ethos, whether it be an explicit manifesto or an extensive rules page detailing the expected social practices. As such, most private trackers have inherently inscribed social expectations that reflect a particular social reality, which are maintained by what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence. The site with the most extensive definition of its ethos is *Great Cinema*, whose manifesto contains over 10,000 words to explain "the unique [*GC*] experience and…give you a better insight into how our community functions." Last edited in 2007, the manifesto has been a constant influence on the site and its community from nearly its inception and explicitly describes itself as a document that inherently shapes the way the "community functions."

The foundational articles of the manifesto speak more clearly to the specific social reality envisioned by the site and articulate the roles played by site administrators and moderators in reproducing that reality. This is most visible in the manifesto's delimiting of acceptable audio-visual material to that which falls outside of the 'mainstream'. There is a tacit acceptance of the nebulous nature of the term mainstream by the site, which

suggests a conscious effort on the part of administrators to re-shape the definition of

mainstream:

> The definition of "mainstream" is very elusive and almost impossible to state precisely. It is within the discretion of the tracker moderators to decide on each specific case. As a general rule, we limit our definition of mainstream to Hollywood and Bollywood movies made after the 70s. Classic Hollywood movies are allowed and welcome - even though some of them may enjoy mainstream popularity, we have high respect for their artistic quality and importance in cinema history. We draw the line with the advent of the big-buget (sic) Hollywood blockbuster (with movies like *Jaws* and *Star Wars*) which brought on a rapid deterioration in the quality of movies. Modern independent productions are allowed and we might make special exceptions for new Hollywood movies from special directors. Also allowed are most "mainstream" movies from other countries - what might be a common mainstream movie in Hungary might be totally unknown elsewhere. For further information, see this collective forum thread for the discussion of the "mainstreamness" of specific movies.

Despite beginning the section regarding acceptable media with an explicit

forbidding of mainstream material, the site massages the meaning of mainstream to allow

for certain types of films (*i.e.* foreign films, movies from directors which may be

considered popular arthouse, and Classical Hollywood cinema). Moreover, the manifesto

grants power to the site's stewards to enforce its ethos, turning moderators into the

arbiters of acceptability. Furthermore, by mandating that only specific types of films be

allowed on the site, *GC* reproduces a vision of cinema whereby arthouse, foreign, and

classical Hollywood films (what might otherwise be called 'quality cinema') carry the

most cultural cachet in the community. In particular, the invocation of big budget

blockbusters as a demarcating point between eras of quality cinema speaks to the inherent

apathy with which authoritative members of the community hold for the majority of

contemporary cinema.[52]

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[52] *GC* welcomes contemporary films, usually of the independent or foreign arthouse variety, but the explicit historicism in the manifesto points to a privileging of certain modes of production and eras of cinematic history.

Despite the elitist overtones of the manifesto, the administrative team of *GC* also supports its users consuming mainstream cinema from other cultures in the pursuit of exploring different cinematic experiences. The criteria for 'mainstreamness' seems to be one based on cultural hegemony—American blockbusters that can be seen the world over are not worthy of inclusion into the site's library, but Hungarian mainstream cinema might be welcomed. The criteria for mainstreamness is also muddled, as the manifesto purports to refuse Hollywood blockbusters on account of their commercialization, yet most films are commercial and are created to make money. The contradictory nature of accepted cinema within the manifesto suggests that the concerns of *GC* are less industrial in nature and more cultural with a large emphasis placed on a specific type of taste—that of the arthouse. Presumably most members of *GC* will already subscribe to a social and cultural mindset that eschews blockbusters for art cinema and there is little effort needed to keep the community following the guidelines from the moderators. However, that privileged members of the community are able to further distinguish media that are culturally acceptable reproduces a specific vision of cinema for the community, a dialectical one that champions both cinematic curiosity and exploration and an elitist cinema.

By administrators defining what the tracker inherently values, users are always already inscribed into an ideology—as Zizek defines it[53]—which is based on mutual sharing and emphasizing a particular type of cinema, music, or literature. For example, *GC*'s manifesto, clearly defines the site's purview:

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[53] Zizek defines ideology as "a set of explicit and implicit, even unspoken, ethico-political and other positions, decision, choices, etc., which predetermine our perception of facts, what we tend to emphasize or to ignore, how we organize facts into a consistent whole of a narrative or a theory." *("Some Bewildered Clarifications")*

> [*Great Cinema*] strives to be more than just a regular BitTorrent tracker for movies. We are an exclusive private filesharing community focused on creating a comprehensive library of Arthouse, Cult, Classic, Experimental and rare movies from all over the world.

With its manifesto, *Great Cinema* demarcates its place in the field (and thus simultaneously defines it) in a number of ways. First, *GC* is marked as a site that is exceptional; it is "more than just a regular BitTorrent tracker for movies." It is exceptional *because* it is exclusive; these two rhetorical claims work in tandem to signify that members of the site are unique by dint of belonging to the site (a sort of circular logic). Moreover, the site itself requires an invite to join and is password protected, further segmenting its users as members of a prestigious group and that segmentation occurs at two levels. First, users are marked as sociotechnically privileged because they have the connections and knowledge to gain access to a private BitTorrent tracker; sites like *The Pirate Bay* are publically accessible and widely-known among Internet users. By joining a private site like *GC*, a person marks herself not only as knowledgeable enough to find the site, but socially-skilled enough to gain access. Second, users distinguish themselves as culturally elite because they have been given access to a community that emphasizes artistically and intellectually challenging material in a way that is similar to the cachet carried by the Criterion Collection (Kendrick) in Western culture. The manifesto also defines *GC* as an active archive and its members as amateur archivists, an aspect of digital INMSs that will be explored in further detail in the following chapter. Finally, by declaring the types of films available on the site, the manifesto signifies *GC* as one that is based on quality cinema[54] and *haute couture*; the

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[54] Using Daniel Herbert's conceptualization of quality cinema, I use the term to mean cinema that plays with characteristics of "exclusivity, exoticism, intellectualism, and social activism" (3).

symbolic value of the films on the site are increased because of the context provided by the manifesto.

The manifesto then goes on to outline the praxis which members are expected to follow, including: no uploads of mainstream Hollywood or Bollywood movies; no deletion of materials downloaded in order to build and maintain libraries; give wide-ranging information about the media uploaded, including production information; highlight the quality of the rip[55] and include extra material like trailers and screenshots; and promote greater cinematic knowledge by monthly projects. In the gestalt, the manifesto serves as a document that marks *GC* as an exemplar of exclusivity, organization, and taste in the field of digital INMSs, imagining its members as culturally inquisitive and artistically erudite elites interested in furthering the community's educational, cultural, and social interests by outlining an ethos that must be strictly followed.

In this way, sites like *Great Cinema* are agents involved in struggles in the larger field of cultural production and work to shape cinematic classifications in their own image. The social reality being fought for and reproduced here is one in which foreign and non-mainstream American films (save for Classical Hollywood) are representative of cultural elitists imbued with deep wells of cultural capital, capital that can be read as a group of tastes that can be deployed for social signaling (Friedland *et al* 34). Independent (or 'indie') films have long been used by audiences interested in developing identities or tastes that are in opposition to the mainstream and such tastes are often used to cluster individuals into social groups (Newman 16), as can be seen on *GC*. What the manifesto is suggesting is by being a member of *GC* and ascribing to its ethos, users will find

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[55] The way in which the media was digitized.

themselves members of an elite (*i.e.* exclusive) cultural collective which is struggling against bourgeois art (although perhaps Bourdieu would redefine the avant garde-bourgeois art dialectic in today's media environment). Moreover, users are forbidden from selling invitations to join the community, a provision meant to preserve the integrity and noncommercial nature of the community. Site philosophies and the moderators that enforce them, thus, demarcate the boundaries of acceptable non-mainstream cinema and (further) enculturate users into their belief in the primacy of quality cinema.

Analyzing the ways in which digital INMSs reproduce specific social formations and their relationship with works of art is important because their status as symbolic objects is contingent upon their recognition as important works of art by spectators, users, and consumers (Bourdieu, *Field* 37). The work done by these agents of consumption is also symbolic in that it relies on the misrecognition of the normality of the accumulation of symbolic capital and the exercise of symbolic violence. Therefore, any sociological analysis of the field of cultural production must necessarily include the perspectives and machinations of all components of the value-adding process, to which digital INMSs and their privileged users (*e.g.* moderators, site administrators, and authoritative users) are party.

Social Features

When looking at how symbolic capital is exchanged for symbolic power that can be exercised in acts of policing, it is also important to understand the social norms and parameters which structure the community. Thus, in addition to the technical components of digital INMSs, there also exist a category of social features available to users, which I

define as features that are socially-constructed and based on community norms as opposed to the design features discussed in the pervious chapter. As an umbrella term, there are two sub-categorizations that fall under the aegis of social functions: Cultural capital-based features, both individual and collective, and regulatory features. Cultural capital features are social signifiers that inform other users of the amount of knowledge, respect, and authority a user has in a community while regulatory features are arbitrary parameters imposed by site administrators and moderators designed to maintain social and economic balance within the community. Both serve differing but complementary roles in defining the imagined community and the struggle to accumulate symbolic capital.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital cultivation is the most prominent sub-category of social functions for digital INMSs and includes staff picks (what I will call curation), user classes, and community projects. In communities based on the sharing of media, cultural capital is generated through deeds and actions that benefit the community (*e.g.* monetary donations, uploading requested material, or creating new subtitles) or demonstrate one's media knowledge and taste (*e.g.* posting about film history on web forums or participating in curated lists).

One of the most prominent ways users on filesharing sites can develop cultural capital is through featured curation of music, movies, or television shows. Curatorial features allow individual users to distinguish themselves as highly visible community members because of the prominence given to their taste. Accordingly, users given the

option to curate are viewed as having greater authority within the community because of the visibility of their selections and the tacit approval of the community gatekeepers (moderators and administrators). Moreover, members often use the curatorial spotlight to perform authenticity, to show they are true connoisseurs of the types of media valued by each site and selecting unique or provocative movies or music to highlight, keeping in mind that authenticity is a contested ground up to interpretation by individuals and always in unique cultural and historical contexts (Moore 210). Media texts that are highlighted in curated lists are also imbued with greater symbolic value because of their 'official' sanctioning by site administrators and their increased visibility (Li 17); however, their distinction as symbolically valuable texts is not infinite and will only last for a short period of time, usually until the highlighted curation is moved off of the front page. In other words, the unique social and curatorial contexts into which these texts are placed temporarily change their symbolic valence. In creating curated lists and altering the symbolic value of their chosen media texts, elite community members further develop social and symbolic capital and position themselves as members with superior taste.

Most curated selections from moderators, administrators, donors, and prestigious community members seek to highlight lesser-known, underground, or marginalized media; in other words, curated picks usually emphasize non-mainstream media. For example, among the most recent *MC* staff and donor picks, only Carly Rae Jepson's *E•MO•TION* (2015) and Depeche Mode's *Some Great Reward* (1984) could be considered mainstream. Even those two examples might be considered performed authenticity as Carly Rae Jepsen has been a major figure in the poptimist movement[56]

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[56] Poptimism is a school of popular music criticism that seeks to re-evaluate pop music beyond the traditional view of low culture as consumerist music.

(Austerlitz) and Depeche Mode's 1980s work has been historically embedded within gothic culture (Jerrentrup 27). Users are given further latitude to perform authenticity by writing brief reviews to justify their selection; the reviews themselves run the gamut from serious textual exegesis to simply posting song lyrics. Either way, the reviews are an outlet for the accumulation of cultural capital among users and serve as grounds for the struggle to define the field by emphasizing which media are championed.

The designation of user classes is the second feature of the cultural capital subcategory. User classes are site-specific classifications of users that are meant to indicate the level of cultural capital and respect a user has within a community. On digital INMSs, users can up their rank[57] a number of ways, including uploading new torrents, filling requests, seeding torrents they have downloaded, or donating to the site. User class is often a signifier for how long and active a user has been within a community, with longevity and activity positively correlating with higher rankings. For example, on *FD* there are a number of user classifications, including User, Power User, and Superfan, each level indicating greater status within a community. Furthermore, *FD* also offers ranks (in this case, sub-classes), ranging from Cardboard Robot to Masked Henchman to Ninja Master. These sub-classifications in particular define the culture of *FD*, a site dedicated to genre and exploitation films, and serve to delimit the boundaries of the site in relation to the wider field of digital INMSs. Compare this to *GC*, a site focused on classic and art cinema where users are given the standard classifications of User, Power User, etc., yet the only differentiation in terms of rank comes from the color coding of a user's name, visually marking the level of cultural capital among users. Mizuko Ito ("The Rewards") has found a similar dynamic at work within anime music

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[57] User rank is the colloquial term for levels of user class.

video (AMV) production communities, where those who produce works of the highest quality are seen as the most socially elite within the community. In other words, stark distinctions in social status are necessary to support a scene that produces and circulates high quality media texts, as highly visible community members are magnets for new and aspiring users. Thus, user classifications are yet another factor that comes into play when understanding the ways in which agents in the digital INMS field struggle to develop cultural capital and power in order to position themselves as important members of the community and thereby giving themselves to option to define how the specific site situates itself within the larger field.

Finally, many digital INMSs allow some form of collaborative projects, collective acts of curation which allow the community to highlight what it views as important and displays its taste culture. Collaborative projects (henceforth referred to as projects) usually take the form of curated lists of relational media to which any number of users can contribute, although normally only a handful of knowledgeable, committed people participate. They are relational in that they are logically grouped together, usually by production characteristics (*e.g.* all of a director's or studio's works) or thematically. *FD* has some of the more active official projects among the digital INMSs under study with 41 well-populated projects. Among the official projects are Troma films (735 movies), Blaxploitation films (703 movies), Golan-Globus films (471 movies), Godfrey Ho films (328 movies), and Sho Kusugi films (55 movies). The projects all come with varying levels of bonus ratio attached, meaning that users who download films that are part of a project are given, for example, 40% more ratio for every amount of data they upload to others while sharing. The ratio incentive helps maintain the health of both a project and

the individual torrents that comprise it while theoretically exposing more users to the content. Ratio appears again as a Bourdieusian 'structuring structure,' the pervasive logic of sharing more than one downloads conditioning the underlying attributes and motivation behind projects.

While *FD*'s projects lack contextualization or rationalization on the website proper, there are well-populated threads on the forum discussing a wide variety of issues, including the validity and feasibility of a proposed project, existing resources, and background information. In a sense, each project's thread is an important part of the history of its field; keeping in mind cultural and social contexts make one's worldview malleable, project threads are spaces for the delineation of a field. As such, the forum threads are where the sites of struggle over cultural capital and community authority are most overt. For example, in the Shaw Brothers' project thread, user Matt posts: "I thought it would be nice to start a [*FD*] Shaw Bros. Movie Project. Are you guys interested in this?" before continuing to outline various existing resources and format preferences. The next post by Craig, a site administrator, subtly diminishes Matt's standing in the community by claiming the idea as his own and asserting his expertise of Shaw Brothers films:

> I was the one who suggested it in the first place and I think it's a good idea. There's a pretty large list of Shaw Bros movies on wikipedia listed by year of release. My suggestion is to use that one as a guideline, maybe with a link to imdb for each movie (although that'll be a lot of work) so people can find out alternate titles. Also, instead of making a comprehensive list here on the forum you should use the wiki to make a project page. I have a few shaw bros moviesf on my hd and i'll definitely try to contribute. (*"[complete]"*)

Rather than solely discuss the merits of such a project, Craig first makes mention that the idea was originally his before proffering his own suggestion about how best to proceed. In doing so, Craig outlines his expertise in the subject, noting his research into Wikipedia's Shaw Bros. holdings and his own collection. Furthermore, Craig rhetorically positions his ideas as superior, declaring Matt should follow his suggestions. Later in the post, Craig delineates a plan of action to best handle the technical components of the project (*e.g.* giving his preference for different file sizes for different versions of the same movie), signaling his authority in technical matters as well as cultural ones. Craig's post, while cordial, is indicative of the constant struggle for cultural capital in search of communal authority and projects themselves are tools that digital INMSs use to both maintain the health of a community and mark their territory in the larger field. That projects are pervasive across the field speaks to their normalization and integration into users' expectations for digital INMSs.

Regulation

Underlying the field of digital INMSs is a logic based on maintaining balance. To preserve balance, most private trackers employ regulatory features, which usually include ratio requirements and community manifestos, the former serving to maintain an equitable relationship between material uploaded and downloaded and the latter outlining the explicit rules and ethos of the community. Both of these features vary from site to site, but they universally exist to shape the contours of a field (Johnson 7) by establishing the rules of behavior and position agents in relative positions of power to one another. Furthermore, these features fall under the social rather than technical categorization

because they are arbitrary standards determined by human actors that are measured and enforced by technical protocols.

The concept of ratio is integral to the logic of private trackers and is one of their more restrictive social components. Put simply, ratio is the colloquial term for the ratio of uploaded data as compared to downloaded data; the higher one's ratio is, the more data one has shared. Ratio is also a component of BitTorrent-based INMSs that straddle the line between market and non-market exchanges. On the one hand, ratio is based on a logic of the market, whereby resource scarcity exists—either naturally or artificially—to set a 'price' on impersonal exchanges of goods. One expects to spend currency (ratio) and receive a specified good (*e.g.* a movie) in return (Li 20-21). On the other hand, ratio also exists within a non-market logic as a social construct for exchange and can be meaningless for community members who have built up enough ratio within the community. Instead, many users choose to share material for a variety of other, socially-important reasons that will be explored in the next chapter. As Igor Koptyoff explains, non-market exchanges take place "in order to evoke an obligation to give back a gift, which in turn will evoke a similar obligation—a never-ending chain of gifts and obligations" (69). Rather than understand ratio as an expression of strictly market or non-market exchange values, it should be viewed through the lens of hybridity, as a complex social institution within informal networks of media sharing.

Veteran users with high ratios are important nodes in the network as they are circulating a high volume of data and, consequently, these power users are integral to the viability of the network. Most trackers have a required minimum ratio that fluctuates based on how long a person has used the site, the amount of original material they have

uploaded, and the amount of material they have downloaded. For example, *GC*'s "Rules" page lists the following ratio conditions and requirements:

> Download amount: 0-20 Gb. Minimum share ratio: no requirement.
> Download amount: 20-50 Gb. Minimum share ratio: 0.1.
> Download amount: 50-100 Gb. Minimum share ratio: 0.2.
> Download amount: 100-150 Gb. Minimum share ratio: 0.3.
> Download amount: 150-250 Gb. Minimum share ratio: 0.4.
> Download amount: 250-500 Gb. Minimum share ratio: 0.5.
> Download amount: 500 Gb or more. Minimum share ratio: 0.6.

GC clearly outlines user sharing expectations, which are that the more a user has downloaded, the greater the expectation is that they share an equal amount of material. Those who have been active in the community over longer periods of time are expected to shoulder an increased level of responsibility. This system also provides plenty of wiggle room for new users by minimizing the expected level of sharing, such that they should not feel overly pressured to meet unrealistic ratio levels. On the other hand, newer users are understood to have less 'shareable' material from which to build up ratio and are given a sort of data cushion. However, once they have been active members for long enough to have downloaded a considerable amount of material, the expectations to share media increase. Consequently, *Great Cinema*'s tiered ratio requirement system reflects two norms of the community: the expectation of increased media sharing by experienced users, as well as the desire to grow the community by giving new members the time and tools to become experienced users, both of which are normalized through the explicit establishment of ratio requirements. *FD* is less taxonomical in its requirements with the site's Rules stating that users with 10-25 GB downloaded must have a 0.4 ratio and anyone with more than 25 GB downloaded needing a .5 ratio. While there is no universal

ratio requirement across sites, generally it is assumed that a 1.00 ratio or more (*i.e.* an equal amount uploaded and downloaded) is best etiquette. Regardless, the existence of ratio requirements serves to standardize and reproduce sharing as a social process within the community.

Ratios are a necessary social structure on trackers because it builds an activity and health safeguard into the system; by requiring users to upload a requisite amount of material, ratio requirements ensure that media continually circulate. Moreover, numerous studies have found users of peer-to-peer platforms are more than happy to take but not share if unregulated. A study quoted by Oram (*"Peer-to-Peer"*) found that only 2% of Gnutella users shared content while an *Economist* (*"Free Music"*) survey found 70% of Gnutella users (out of a total of 31,000 users) offered no material for download. With regards to BitTorrent, Pouwelse (*"The BitTorrent P2P"*) found only 17% of users remained online more than one hour after their download finished with that number dropping to 3% after ten hours and .34% after 100 hours. A more recent study of *The Pirate Bay* (Andersson Schwarz & Larsson) found only 5.3% of users considered themselves uploaders, suggesting only a small portion of users provide the majority of uploading for the tracker. These studies indicate that left to their own devices, BitTorrent users will almost universally circulate content for as long as it takes to download and then end their session shortly thereafter. The implications are dire for INMSs that would seek to cultivate a community-supported library of niche material, particularly because such user practices limit the viability of a community developing due to the lack of temporal and emotional investment (*e.g.*, the userbase of *The Pirate Bay*) from users. Furthermore, by relying on a small number of users to maintain the health of specific torrents (*i.e.*

sharing material so as to allow others to download it), digital INMSs must have large userbases to preserve their reputation as virtual bazaars where users can find most anything they desire; otherwise, if the number of users shrinks even a small amount, the number of healthy torrents would decrease significantly. Thus, ratio requirements are integral components to functioning private INMSs.

By requiring a specified ratio for users, administrators of private trackers are inherently marking the field as one based on the mutual sharing of data. One can look at the BitTorrent platform as conceived under an ethos of sharing, but the platform itself is agnostic towards the concept, including no built-in requirements for sharing, such as a minimum time remaining online after downloading or a forced uploading option. Ratio requirements invisibly (or perhaps not-so-invisibly) signal to individuals the private tracker that they are using is one based on the ideals of sharing.

Universally applied across digital INMSs, regulatory features allow private trackers to maintain an equal balance of content and activity. As many digital INMSs consider themselves cultural repositories (in much the same way that Jim Lowe and his *Videophile Newsletter* recipients viewed themselves cultural archivists), media stewardship becomes an important attribute of these sites. For example, in *GC*'s manifesto, explicit attention is given to maintaining a healthy library of media by the site refusing to delete dead torrents (torrents which have no seeders). Moreover, the site includes detailed information on the process by which it sustains the health of dead torrents, including: the availability of a reseed request, whereby users who want to download a dead torrent can click a button and the site will notify all users who have previously downloaded the file; offering bonus ratio for users who fill a reseed request;

and providing torrent bumping, a feature that boosts a newly reseeded torrent to the top of the browse page so other users will see it and have the opportunity to download it, thereby invigorating the previously dead torrent. *FD*'s Ethos document is similar in its explicit address of the permanence of its library:

> Here at [*Film Destruction*], we're all about permanence. We want our torrents to last. Whether a torrent was uploaded twenty minutes or six years ago, we want our beloved members to be able to grab and enjoy it in all its crapitude. We accomplish (or at least aim to accomplish) this by a number of means, and those may seem dissonant or counter-intuitive to someone who joins expecting to download a film, seed it for a couple of weeks and then forget all about it. That just doesn't work here.

The ethos of *FD* is built on the foundation of a healthy library of media, such that the Ethos document begins by expounding on the importance of users' continual seeding of downloaded material. The means by which *FD* achieves this goal are very similar to *GC* and other private trackers, including notifying users who have previously downloaded a dead torrent and offering bonus ratio for those who reseed. Furthermore, the site's Ethos hails new users as potentially needing indoctrination into the site's best practices, particularly those who only have experience with general trackers like *The Pirate Bay* (in the paragraph prior, the document refers to a potential culture shock for users coming from such sites). By enumerating the important reasons for sustaining a healthy library of media, sites like *GC* and *FD* take the discursive position of advocates for cultural stewardship in the field of digital INMSs.

As such, the need for reliable, consistent seeders (*i.e.* distributors) is integral. By imposing regulatory standards, digital INMSs provide a catalyst for the circulation of the community's media holdings; this is especially important, as many studies have shown

individuals will not share data unless there is an imperative. In establishing regulations, however, digital INMSs impose restrictions on the ways in which community members interact with the site and one another. Moreover, ratio requirements and manifesto declarations are active behavior policing by site administrators and moderators and function as delimiters for the ways in which individual trackers position themselves in relation to one another and, therefore, serve to define how a field is structured. In this case, the strategies of regulation help reinforce the importance of private trackers as exclusive communities in which members are obligated to share media with one another.

Both functional and social features of digital INMSs are the result of users', administrators', and moderators' expectations; the lived, digital experiences of each group unconsciously impact the way in which various components of private trackers are generated, shaped, and deployed. Furthermore, the functional and social features of private trackers tend to be more or less standardized in their presence. Each case study tracker in this chapter has some form of the features discussed above and the ways in which the digital INMS ecosystem functions is such that each instance of each function would look familiar to someone with experience using digital INMSs. Moreover, the relations and struggles for power between each tracker and the ways in which each feature on the site are developed and standardized within the wider digital INMS field contour the field's boundaries. To map a field, therefore, requires one to understand the accumulation of symbolic capital, its transference to symbolic power, and the exercise of symbolic violence through the wielding of that symbolic power.

Conclusion

To maintain the concomitant authority, individuals with symbolic power exercise symbolic violence, an act which perpetuates the misrecognized natural social order of a field. The violence can be seen in a number of ways in digital INMS communities, including on message boards and IRC channels by insiders socially castigating new users for breaches in decorum; within the manifestos and enumerated ethos sections of web sites where administrators and moderators define the purview and definition of the community; and in the features offered by the site, which restrict user actions to those deemed natural by site creators.

The exercise of symbolic violence is in service of reproducing a specific social reality envisioned by a system created by insiders. Cataloguing the ways in which symbolic capital, power, and violence are accrued and enacted matters because they are the social phenomena at the heart of each digital INMS. Without studying the numerous intersections of power, authority, architectural affordances, and social practices, the structure and reproduction of social hierarchies of each network will remain obscured. Beyond organizing a community designed to openly share media, the social hierarchies of digital INMSs create social realities that privilege individuals who ascribe to the community's dominant taste cultures. In the case of *Great Cinema*, users who appreciate arthouse, foreign, and classical Hollywood cinema are favored, particularly those who have deep knowledge of specific auteurs or international film movements. For *Film Destruction*, community members who enjoy and make meaning of marginalized, low-budget, and critically panned cinema accrue social and cultural capital. By inherently normalizing these cultures of taste through site ethos and manifestos, community elites

engage in symbolic violence by erasing the process behind the establishment of community norms, standards, and tastes.

Where the past two chapters have explored the larger structural components of social hierarchization of digital INMSs, the following chapter will take a more granular approach in examining specific social practices and needs fostered and met by private trackers and use those findings to illustrate the processes of establishing social structures described in this chapter. As Henry Jenkins has noted, the era of new media convergence has shifted modes of reception from the individualistic towards the communal (26). Understanding not only what practices develop, but also how individual users experience them and what benefits those users perceive is an important step in articulating Jenkins' claim that there has been a shift in how media is consumed. Moreover, the following chapter uses in-depth participant interviews to explore how users view the social processes and hierarchies that exist within the sites. In doing so, it argues many users are aware of the deployment of symbolic and social capital in exchange for power, but are largely ambivalent toward the processes.

Chapter Six — "These Weird Little Treasures": Themes of Social Sustenance and Practice in Private, Digital INMSs

By examining the technical affordances and social structures of three digital INMSs, the two previous chapters argued that a specific type of identity and social reality is encoded for the sites' users. Users are told they are: technically elite by having the requisite knowledge to operate and interact with others on a strictly regulated digital media sharing platform; socially elite[58] by belonging to a exclusive, invite-only community; and culturally elite because they are members of a media sharing network that has an explicitly niche, non-mainstream focus. These identities and realities are not solidified, however, as social actors maintain a fluid field by constantly re-situating themselves in different discursive positions, as users who are knowledgeable about particular types of movies or who contribute to symbolically important discourses like administrators and staff. This ever-present struggle between community members for symbolic power and capital manifests itself in the rhetorical and discursive tactics of community members, including taste-signaling, establishing cultural and/or professional credentials (*e.g.* the *Great Cinema* user casually mentioning their position as a film professor), and policing the behavior of other community members, particularly those with less social and cultural capital.

Where the last two chapters took a macro-level approach in exploring the mechanisms that construct and perpetuate specific social structures of digital INMSs, this chapter will look at a more granular level in documenting and analyzing the various

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[58] At least in terms of Internet sociality.

social needs met by being a member of these communities. In doing so, specific social

practices will be cataloged and analyzed in order to illustrate the ways in which social

needs are satisfied within the community. In chronicling the myriad social practices in

which users engage, this chapter hopes to provide a counter-narrative to popular notions

of the exceptionality of digital file sharing platforms like BitTorrent by connecting

contemporary digital INMS practices to those of the analog era like VHS tape traders.

Rather than presenting a new, heretofore-unseen threat to the copyright industries,

filesharing communities like *Great Cinema* and *FilmDestruction* continue and extend

long-established social practices of informally circulating media. A social history of

filesharing that emphasizes the lived experiences and desires of users in the context of

historical traditions of informal media sharing is a valuable tool in the struggle against

ahistorical, anti-filesharing narratives lobbied for by industry groups like the MPAA

(Gantman) and legislation proposed or enacted by governments (*e.g.* SOPA and PIPA in

the United States and HADOPI in France).

Furthermore, this chapter is intended to complement the work done by scholars

like Jonas Andersson Schwarz and Virginia Crisp who examine the political views,

organization, and identity formation of digital filesharers. Where they analyze the ways in

which members of filesharing communities relate to larger systems of distribution and

organization, I take a more grassroots approach and examine how members of the

community view their own relationships vis-à-vis the community itself, as well as the

ways in which their communities fit into the larger field of private, movie filesharing

sites. In doing so, I first explain my methodology for this section, which differs

significantly from previous chapters in that it relies on personal interviews conducted

with community members. Next, I outline four major themes that parallel those articulated within the discourse of *The Videophile's Newsletter*: first, I examine the importance of sharing media with the community, including why and how the sharing structures of the BitTorrent platform, in conjunction with the idiosyncrasies of each network, work to produce specific behavior in users (for example, the free and open sharing of media and bandwidth between users). Second, I explore how users view their own activities as important archival practices with an emphasis on the cultural stewardship that underlies their views. Third, user attitudes toward the legality of their media sharing habits and the attendant ethical justifications are outlined and critically examined, suggesting conflicting and contradictory ways of understanding their own acitivities. Finally, a number of social needs met and practices fostered by private, digital INMSs are catalogued and compared to their analog counterparts.

Rather than serve exclusively as a platform to distribute media between one another, members of private movie filesharing sites use BitTorrent in a totemic manner, where the sharing of media is the pretense for conversations about movies, technology, and culture in general. Despite the perceived commonality among my respondents, a number of competing and sometimes contradictory viewpoints are held, most numerous in terms of ethical justifications for their media sharing habits. However, what emerges from this chapter is a portrait of two virtual communities predicated on media sharing where members are brought together by a love of movies and television shows, but bonded by shared communion and social interaction. These communities are a contemporary extension and evolution of social formations and practices that emerged in

the 1970s and this chapter builds off previous work on BitTorrent users in uncovering how users see their own actions and place within their communities.

Method

This chapter diverts in its method from the previous chapters. While discourse analysis will be employed where appropriate, most of the primary source material was obtained through personal interviews with members of *Great Cinema* and *FilmDestruction* conducted by the author. In total, I conducted 13 interviews, 12 of which were conducted through audio-only Skype calls and one through email. Participants were recruited through web forums and IRC channels on the two sites with no remuneration offered; all names used are pseudonyms. The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 90 minutes and participants were asked the same general questions in a semi-structured manner. Participants were told the interviews were to determine the social nature of the private trackers of which they were a part. Of the 13 respondents, 12 were male and one was female; all respondents were native English speakers living in the United States, Canada, Ireland, England, or Australia, a caveat to keep in mind when considering applications to other language groups within the community and/or non-English digital INMSs. Participants ranged from the ages of 23 to 40 and 7 are members of *Great Cinema* while 11 are members of *FilmDestruction*, with 5 people active on both sites. It should also be noted that because I am a member of both communities, my experience allowed me to read between the lines, so to speak, of certain responses from participants and ask relevant follow up questions that produced deeper answers.

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed by hand. Afterwards, I read through the transcripts looking for common themes to emerge. Because this project is interested in social needs and practices among specific communities, particular attention was paid to answers that involved social interactions. After general themes emerged in the initial read through, I went through the interviews again, this time marking relevant passages and coding them. I then utilized the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis tool to visually organize and link corresponding coded answers to streamline the process. In accordance with grounded theory tenets, the coded answers were used to produce a theory of latent social processes that occur on private, digital INMSs and this theory is then applied to the analysis of social structures and social reproduction performed in the last two chapters.

On Justification

When unpacking and analyzing rhetoric used by interview participants, simply acceding to their statements without critically examining them—particularly when the subject matter is self-reflexive— is inadequate when approaching objects of analysis from a social scientific perspective. To help unpack *ex-post facto* justifications made by actors in a network, Boltanski and Thévenot have developed a schema they term "regimes of justification," a way of classifying various and sometimes contradictory explanations given by people for their behavior. Their work is based on the notion that "persons must be capable of distancing themselves from their own particularities in order to reach agreement about external goods that are enumerated and defined in general terms" (27). Essentially, the authors suggest that people engage in a number of similar

ways of thinking in order to make sense of the social world surrounding them and to justify their actions.

Critically examining the regimes of justification employed by users is important because, as Michel Foucault has argued, "discourse transmits and produces power" (100-01) and power is something that establishes itself through circulation rather than imposition from a solitary individual ("Two Lectures" 98). When users converse with one another on any communicative platform within the community, they disseminate certain norms and values, which can in turn influence the norms and values of other users. The power in such discourse is augmented by the social and symbolic capital held by individuals, such that those with power in the community play important roles in normalizing and standardizing attitudes and ways of acting in the community. My participants evince such attitudes in their interviews and the values and practices discussed are apparent throughout the community, most notably cyberlibertarianism and a logic inscribed in market ideology. Therefore, the discourse of users in niche communities like *FD* and *GC* helps both establish and reveal normative practices and regimes of truth.

Boltanski and Thévenot proffer six different polities (or orders) drawn from canonical texts in the Western tradition[59] that can be considered when an individual or organization seeks to justify an action: the inspired polity, the domestic polity, the polity of fame, the civic polity, the market polity, and the industrial polity. These different polities have different motivations and goals and, thus, will come into conflict with one another when seeking to justify actions of their members (251). It is important to note that individuals do not personally hold the principles that motivate the different polities'

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[59] The Euro-centric nature of the canon is problematic and recognized by this author.

values; rather, in Boltanski and Thévenot's formulation, polities are the tools or grammar of an argument used to justify individual actions in specific instances. For example, many of my respondents justified their unauthorized filesharing in terms of a market regime, suggesting their activity did not financially impact media conglomerates negatively. Jason, for example, argues that *FD*'s rule of not allowing material released less than a year ago onto the site is beneficial because it allows users to watch movies while still allowing the production companies to make money off of the release. Users like Jason are loathe to consider their actions as based in a logic of capitalism and, indeed, many of them reject the tenets of capitalism altogether; nevertheless, they still engage in a discourse of the market when discussing their media sharing activities, which is not surprising given that the entire "economy" of private filesharing communities is centered around ideals of the market (*e.g.* ratio or the scarcity of invites). Therefore, individuals can be members of different polities depending on different contexts, potentially using the argumentative registers of a specific polity if it proves advantageous to his or her justificatory needs. Boltanski and Thévenot are writing about general sociological principles rather than filesharing specifically, but applying their "regimes of justification" to my respondents is useful in critically examining their responses, particularly when looking at the sometimes contradictory nature of their beliefs

Perspectives on Sharing Structures

As the nominal basis for INMSs, the sharing of media is at the forefront of the communities under study. Where communities like *TVN* trade physical media, digital INMSs specialize in immaterial media, which presents an issue whereby the media being

traded effectively lacks economic value. However, community members obviously place value on the media being circulated and all of my respondents articulated the importance of the community's media holdings for their continued activity on the site. How do users ascribe value to not only the media being shared, but to their sharing activities in systems of immaterial media? What is the social function of sharing for community members?

Don Slater has argued that social formations in settings that lack a nominal materiality (such as the Internet) set into motion 'mechanisms of materialization' in order to establish a normative social order. Writing about IRC channels predicated on the exchange of 'sexpics,' Slater posits that despite the frictionless exchange of material and absence of scarcity, users in the channels under study continually characterized traded media as a valuable commodity by developing rates of (non-monetary) exchange as if they were part of a market (234). Relatedly, Michel Callon has theorized that the creation of materiality is a necessary component for the creation of "spaces of calculation," markets for example (6-12). This drive to commoditize media in a space that is popularly understood as de-materialized was done because of users' desires to impose an ethics of social order. Paradoxically, in their normative drive to develop a sense of social order, Slater found that many users felt a distinct lack of community in sexpic channels because of the emphasis placed on the market exchange of media (242-43).

While Slater's study focused on communities that emphasize embodied experiences (many of the people active in sexpic channels utilize the sexpic market as a pretense for digital sexual encounters), his work is applicable to a wide variety of digital media sharing communities. In my study, every participant understood and articulated their reserved acceptance of the ratio system that tracks the amount of media one uploads

compared to how much one downloads, but many found it little more than a mechanism to maintain community standards and there was little consensus about the ethical value of ratio requirements. Mason, an American male, said he does not personally care if users are not contributing to a tracker by sharing material they have downloaded, but he does see leeching as potentially "disrespectful." Similarly, Christine, a female from Australia, does not care about ratio to the extent that it does not enter into her media sharing calculus. More important to her is the act of sharing movies: "My attitude towards movies is that, you know, someone has made them and they want people to see it. And I think as many people should go see it as possible." Here, we can see the different ways in which users conceptualize the activity of their peers: Mason thinks about user sharing in terms of community consideration while Christine thinks of media sharing in an artistic and exhibition context. Implicit in Christine's answer is the assertion that leeching is not problematic because it is in the service of consuming an artistic vision, suggesting that the community is subsumed by the larger projects of artistic creation and exhibition.

Users also view ratio as a potentially outdated 'mechanism of materialization'. For some, it is an artifact of a different technological and infrastructural era. Ben argues that ratio is unnecessary on contemporary trackers because Internet infrastructure has improved to such a point that most users have good connections, meaning he believes users will always have their BitTorrent client up-and-running and, therefore, there is no need to impose sharing expectations; he also believes that leeching is not much of a problem any more and ratio requirements should be excised in favor of keeping the site 'lean,' espousing the libertarian argument that less regulation makes a market more efficient. However, as a largely passive distribution platform, BitTorrent allows users to

minimize their own responsibility (or, in the entertainment industry's view, their own culpability) in distributing media amongst the network. Jonas Andersson Schwarz interviewed *The Pirate Bay* (*TPB*) users and found a consistent reluctance among individuals to consider their own actions in sharing media as already prescribed by the technological affordances of BitTorrent, suggesting they do not think that the measurement of ratio influences *why* they share files with other users. Instead, Andersson Schwarz notes that users identified normative sharing behaviors as arising from more traditional social organizations, such as collectives and communities that establish "rules of engagement" (157-58). The participants in Andersson Schwarz's study are essentially espousing the same attitude as Ben, where they believe that regulations like ratio are unnecessary for the health and viability of a BitTorrent community because their pre-existing social norms and the advancement of Internet infrastructure condition their social behaviors towards sharing with one another. Ben's beliefs are a good example of the extent to which users have internalized platforms protocols and their effects, such that they no longer recognize the value of such protocols. Despite Ben's claims, large numbers of torrents sit idle waiting to be re-seeded by someone; furthermore, recall the tiny number of users who provide the bulk of seeding activity on public trackers to understand the healthy effect ratio requirements have on private trackers.

Early web theorist Howard Rheingold believes collective goods—such as the free circulation of media—are integral to the social cohesion and sustainability of virtual communities and he outlines three types of collective good upon which virtual community integrity rests: knowledge capital (a sort of collective intelligence), social network capital, and communion (xxviii). Sites like *Great Cinema* and *Film Destruction*

build a body of knowledge through discourse on comment threads, web forums, and IRC channels, but they also do so through the circulation of media. Some users on the sites explicitly recognize the importance of building a base of knowledge for the community for maintenance of not only the community, but for sustaining artistic knowledge in wider, global culture. For instance, Brandon, an American male, views sharing media through the lens of education and self-betterment. For him, keeping hard-to-find or niche material like academic literature or obscure films in circulation is important because it encourages the community to build a body of (communal) knowledge about cinema and other arts.

Similarly, Ian Milligan writes about the ways in which members of the Geocities[60] community would often redirect people interested in learning how to create their own webpages based on HTML to webpages run by users specializing in web design (142). The network effect of directing users to existing collections of knowledge is equally evident within private BitTorrent communities, as the community often has multiple existing help libraries, which are designed to answer any technical or regulatory questions users may have. Furthermore, keeping academic and cinematic texts in circulation ensures their availability for wider audiences should they desire to access the texts. This practice also calls to mind one of the principle ethos of *TVN*: the desire to help one's fellow enthusiasts obtain scarce cinematic or televisual material. Put another way, community members fulfill a social desire for generosity and access to information and media through their distribution of media texts.

Understood in this context, private INMSs function not only as arts communities, but also as knowledge communities, which Pierre Lévy has described as "distributed

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[60] Geocities was a popular webpage publishing platform in the 1990s.

intelligence." (13-17) These are communities where no one user knows everything, but each user knows something and, facilitated by new information communication technologies, allows greater collective knowledge. For example, Jason, an American male, notes that *Film Destruction*'s IRC channel contains a number of users who each have their own specialty genre about which they are knowledgeable, with one user specializing in Italian *giallo*[61], another in Blaxploitation films, and a third with encyclopedic knowledge of Roger Corman movies. Similar to Pierre Lévy, Nancy Baym reports fan communities often generate a form of collective intelligence, whereby fans pool their disparate bits of knowledge into a coherent body for the fandom to share ("The New Shape"). The effect is that a new community member can join the channel and, over time, accumulate a depth of cinematic knowledge to share with the group. Almost like shared expertise, people value each other's knowledge and that knowledge makes the community more valuable.

Circulation of media on INMSs also establishes and deploys social network capital and a number of my respondents indicated that sharing was a way of developing social and symbolic capital in the community. However, the reasoning behind their sentiments ranged from social obligations to self-interest. Anderson, a Canadian male, framed his sharing activity in terms of a social contract, feeling as if it was a "sort of … social obligation or community obligation." This sense of social obligation recalls traditional communal sharing and augments the community's rules. That virtual community members hold ethics similar to physical communities is not surprising, as people grow up in physical communities first. These are spaces where Anthony P. Cohen argues people learn the most significant components of social life outside their immediate

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[61] An Italian genre of thriller and crime films in the 1960s and 70s.

family; it is where one learns what it means to be social (15). Thus, users of digital

INMSs hold similar feelings of communal or social obligation toward their fellow

community members, the only difference is the way in which these feelings are expressed

(*e.g.* sharing one's acquired media and bandwidth with others so they may also consume

it).

More commonly, interview participants articulated their recognition of

accumulated social network capital through observing site-related markers of activity.

This means users recognize the position of other users in the community by seeing how

many torrents they have uploaded, their ratio, and the longevity of their membership. For

instance, Neil, an American male, measures the social network capital of other users

through their "commitment" to the tracker. He takes into consideration their join date, the

number of torrents they have uploaded, the effort they put in to encoding their torrents[62],

and the description of the torrent itself, including listing out technical specifications for

other users to read. In essence, it is similar to gauging a user's personal investment in and

commitment to the community; one's contributions to the community give one status. On

the other hand, Mason judges the social network capital of a user based on taste markers,

including judging the material a user has both uploaded and downloaded. While these

two approaches towards judging other users' social network capital based on site activity

differ in their emphasis, they both articulate an understanding that such capital is relevant

to a user's position within the larger social hierarchy of the community and that such

capital is a necessary component for the health and functioning of the network.

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[62] By this he is speaking about the quality of the file, including the file format, the clarity of audio and video, the compression specifications, and a number of other highly technical details.

As the obverse side of the same coin to the way Neil and Mason recognize social network capital, users understand that they can accrue their own capital through similar means. Bill, an English male, succinctly speaks to this when he notes that he does subtitling work "for personal gain" when uploading it to the network. He believes sharing media is important for the community, but unromantically recognizes that his work carries with it communal benefits for himself, including ratio bonuses and increased social standing, particularly among users who do not upload original material. For digital INMSs, social network capital plays important roles in not only creating social cohesion, but also in establishing and perpetuating social hierarchies. Furthermore, sharing media on digital INMSs fulfills the need of communion among community members. One foundational component for the establishment of community is commonality. By this it is not meant that members' shared interests form the foundation of the community (although that is an important social cohesive); rather, it is a commonality of ways of behaving that is the glue that holds the community together (Cohen 20-21). The act of sharing media in an INMS is a totemic symbol that binds members together, it is a major reason they are communing in the first place.

Along those lines, Neil believes that sharing not only leads to a healthy network whereby users can find and acquire files more quickly, but he also liked "the feeling that [he] was helping other people see these movies." Merely sharing media he had already acquired with other people gave him great personal satisfaction, an act that he described as "very important" to him. Christine echoes Neil's belief, describing how when she finds a movie that she spent significant time seeking out, her next thought was to immediately upload the file to *Film Destruction* so that others in the community can acquire it. These

two responses, while not exclusively self-serving, also generate social network capital for users, suggesting a multiplicity of motivations and benefits for sharing media in service of communion with the community. Both Neil and Christine also speak to Constant *et al*'s argument that one of the main reasons for reciprocity online is that providing social and intellectual support is a way of expressing one's personality or individuality while developing social and symbolic capital at the same time (127-128; Wellman & Gulia 177).

Many users on private trackers implicitly value sharing media as a social good, although their reasoning varies. For some users, the value is in building a base of knowledge from which the entire community may draw, effectively forming a distributed network of intelligence. Others see an opportunity to develop social network capital through the act of sharing media with other community members; similarly, many users see the act of media sharing as a valuable method of assessing existing social hierarchies. Still others see media sharing as an opportunity to fulfill a social need of communing with other community members through the shared act of "giving" media to their virtual neighbors, albeit in a relatively detached way. Regardless, the act of sharing media creates social cohesion and serves as a foundation upon which digital INMSs rest, most notably by establishing social practices that keep media circulating within the network, thereby preventing atrophy and stagnation.

Perspectives on Archives

Where *TVN* readers repeatedly contemplated their activities as possible archivists, digital INMS users are less likely to consciously articulate their actions as such, possibly

because of the relatively easy access BitTorrent users have to a large collection of media, as compared to *TVN* readers who had to actively solicit the movies or television programming they wanted. This is perhaps unexpected as the technological and cultural capabilities offered by sites like *Film Destruction* and *Great Cinema*, aided by the BitTorrent platform, seem to allow for enhanced archival activity. Instead of manually taping television programming or movies, replying to or posting an advertisement for the stored media, and physically storing and/or circulating the material, digital repositories streamline the process while allowing for multi-level cataloguing via database (Weinberger 3-10). By performing a simple search, users take advantage of the near-instantaneous results provided by databases to see if the title for which they are searching exists. If the movie has been processed into the network's holdings, users can quickly download it; if the movie is not in the system, they can use the request feature to advertise their desired media. Regardless, the process is much quicker and easier for users.

Similarly, repositories such as *FD* or *GC* can be considered as vernacular archives, which are crowd-sourced and decentralized. Jacques Derrida believes "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation" (4). Derrida is concerned with the role digital technology plays in the constitution of an archive, believing it both humanizes archives by virtue of the speed and viscosity at which information can be transmitted and dehumanizes because of the spectrality of virtual communication, or the remnant traces left that allow for nominally infinite iterability (Lawlor 797-798).

However, Derrida also argues that "nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'" (90) and the users of the digital INMSs under study tacitly agree.

Accordingly, the first major theme to emerge from interview participants is that there is no consensus regarding the archival status of the community. Such a lack of consensus draws parallels to the debates within the *TVN* community surrounding its archival function, although those discussions pertained more to the types of media that should be preserved as opposed to the philosophical language used by digital INMS community members. Within the consideration of digital INMSs as archives, users further particularize their sentiments in terms of personal and collective archives. In other words, some users consider their activity as personally archival while eschewing the concept of the community at large as archival and vice-versa. However, this also raises another issue: to what extent can personal archival activity be separated from community archival activity in the context of a technological and social platform that nominally requires users to share media with one another, a differentiation articulated by a number of my participants.

Most pervasive is the belief that a user's personal media collection is constitutive of archival activity. Participants' reasoning ranges from a desire to have on-demand access to favorite movies and television programming to pedagogical purposes to historical material factors. Brandon notes that he prefers to "organize and keep a relatively clean archive" in case he needs to use it in courses he teaches or as reference material for his research. Implicit in his answer is the assertion that forming a personal archive is a foregone conclusion because he spends time researching the material before he downloads it; if he is downloading it, he has already determined the material to be of

present and future use to him, thus requiring him to catalogue and store the media. On the other hand, Ben says that he considers himself an archivist in two senses: for material he knows he will watch again and material he knows is scarce and needs preservation. In particular he notes his interest in storing Irish media that is hard to find online and is unlikely to receive official digitization. Furthermore, he invokes the idea of cultural stewardship put forth by *TVN* by suggesting he collects and organizes Irish media in case other Irish people have want or need of it in the future. In essence, Ben is invoking a logic of preservation to justify his belief in the archival validity of his activities.

Scarcity of Internet access also motivates personal archival activity, with users Bill and Neil both noting past limited Internet access as driving their media storage habits. Having lived without Internet access for months at a time, Bill would go to Starbucks and download movies and YouTube clips to be able to watch them at home; he believes these experiences have directly led to his current "bad habit" of archiving everything he downloads, although he did not go into detail about his archival process. Similarly, Neil recalls that he had Internet insecurity as a youth, with his sporadic Internet access leading to collecting media to consume at a later time. Both Bill and Neil bring the exogenous issue of Internet scarcity to the forefront of vernacular digital archiving; not only do contemporary conditions influence the ways users behave online, but so, too, do personal histories that are informed by scarcity based on economic and infrastructural contexts, issues that are too often eschewed when considering digital distribution platforms.

Beyond viewing archival practices in a personal context, many members of digital INMSs also view their communities as functional archives. Users enumerate a litany of

reasons for why they feel their particular network serves as a crowd-sourced archive, including desires to preserve culture and create a repository of media that can be shared with other members, recalling similar motivations of the *TVN* community. For instance, Mason is a user who does not feel like his activities constitute personal archiving, yet believes the larger network is constitutive of an archive, particularly because it offers the opportunity to access material for personal or public exhibition and consumption. Similarly, Neil believes private, niche networks offer greater value as archives compared to public sites like *The Pirate Bay* because their selection and holdings are much deeper and there are more members of the community willing to share "these weird little treasures" that are difficult to find elsewhere. Neil's "weird little treasures" are films forgotten or undervalued by mainstream culture; for him, the communities that preserve and protect the films are performing culturally valuable acts and is one of the reasons why belonging to private INMSs is meaningful to him.

The emphasis of niche INMSs like *FD* to dutifully store and distribute "these weird little treasures" fulfills an important cultural preservation role of the contemporary archive and recalls David Greetham's criticism of the British Library for its policy of accepting only those works that have sold more than 50 copies. Here, Greetham is deconstructing the practices of major archives, where determining what to acquire, catalog, and preserve is always being subverted by a "poetics of archival exclusion" (1-28), by an ongoing process of historical, cultural, and political pressures that inherently places value on objects that the archivists find worthy (or think future generations will find worthy) of preservation. However, Greetham believes it is exactly those objects not found worthy of preservation that are most in need of preservation, citing the Gnostic

scrolls consigned to garbage receptacles at Nag Hammadi or the shopping lists of historical figures (28) as exemplary of his principle. Extrapolating Greetham's argument to cinema and television, *Film Destruction* and its emphasis on "trash films" acts as an archive for culture rejected by more official institutions like the Library of Congress or American Film Institute. However, there does exist a sort of counter-poetics of exclusion on *Film Destruction* or *Great Cinema*, whereby popular, mainstream Hollywood films are adamantly rejected from accession to the archive for reasons that parallel the British Library's '50 units sold' policy. In other words, the two communities de-emphasize contemporary popular cinema in favor of the artistic, the international, the forgotten, and the disliked.

One final strand of archival contention that runs through digital INMSs is perhaps the most important one: are these sustainable and survivable archives? As previously discussed, BitTorrent is a platform that offers great opportunities to share the distribution load of media; the larger the number of users sharing a media object is proportional to the ease with which the media object circulates. On the other hand, the health of an individual torrent is reliant upon the community to share it. If there is no one sharing the torrent, it is functionally inaccessible, even if it theoretically exists within the network. These two technical realities translate to two opposing opinions within the networks' communities: those who believe the media shared will be available forever and those who view its existence as precarious. Jason is a proponent of the belief that digitally distributing media objects on BitTorrent necessarily means that "movies will never be lost now." His belief is based on the interconnectedness of multiple filesharing networks on the Internet such that, theoretically, there are so many copies of an individual movie or

television show in existence that there will always be some way to access it. Holding the opposite belief is Brandon, who frequently stores the material he downloads on a hard drive in case the torrent is inactive or unavailable and he wants to watch it again at a future time. For Brandon, the "ephemeral" nature is a very real issue, as his interview was conducted shortly after *Great Cinema* was offline for a month. Such incidents are not black swan events, either, as *Film Destruction* was offline for several months due to continued DDoS attacks from a disgruntled user and *Music Chest* has been shut down altogether because of a raid from French copyright authorities and police.

These instances suggest that while digital archives may have advantages of ease of access, economics, information storage capacity, and relatively democratic accession policies, the Sword of Damocles is ever-present in the form of 'dead torrents,' Internet outages, and network attacks. Indeed, the precariousness of niche networks is perhaps most threatened by the legal grey area in which they operate, hosting both public domain and copyrighted material on servers usually housed in nations that lack the economic incentive or political will to act on the interests of the copyright industries. Such legal issues echo Jim Lowe and his reader's experiences with copyright violations and are shared by many members of digital INMSs to varying degrees.

Perspectives on the Legality and Ethical Dimensions of Media Sharing

When Jim Lowe defended he and his fellow hobbyists' unauthorized video recording practices, he was speaking to the belief that small scale, non-commercial activity would not (and should not) fall under the purview of the entertainment and copyright industries. As he found out, his faith in the system was misplaced and he was

unexpectedly a part of a major moment in contemporary copyright history. The legal concerns shared by the *TVN* have since become a natural, almost mundane part of the experience of members of informal networks of media sharing, particularly since the advent and fall of Napster. Writing about his newly awakened legal culpability in the wake of peer-to-peer litigation, Siva Vaidhyanathan (42) wonders whether or not users of such networks engaged in self-reflexive questioning regarding the legality or ethics of media sharing. I would argue that a significant number of Americans were well-aware of the myriad legal concerns that surround unauthorized media sharing, particularly because of the prominence of the *Sony v Universal* case. However, Vaidhyanathan's observation is well-taken because it is with the high profile *A&M Records v Napster* case in 2001 that unauthorized media sharing became a concern for a very large number of Americans, particularly because the RIAA began targeting individual users for lawsuits and implementing new advertising and public relations campaigns.

As a result of the Napster decision, I take 2001 as the crystallization of decades of concern for individual sharers of media; for most anyone sharing media (particularly on digital platforms), critically assessing their activities in terms of the legal system would enter into their cost-benefit calculus at some point. But how did users conceptualize their activity? Jonas Andersson Schwarz found that despite being generally politically oriented towards communitarianism, most filesharing users invoked discourse that emphasized market principles. However, instead of conceptualizing their activities in terms of benefits or detriments to industrial actors, Andersson Schwarz found that participants conceived of their file sharing in terms of general (economic) benefit to society, but framed their responses in a way that prioritized the consumer over the producer (57). In

other words, users in Andersson Schwarz's study took up the populist position that the rights of citizen-consumers outweighed those of industrial organizations and that their actions represented a net positive for society.

My interview participants espoused similar opinions to Andersson Schwarz's respondents. Universally, they admitted an awareness of the legally tenuous nature of their activity, yet most noted it did not dissuade them from continuing. Furthermore, many respondents argued in favor of the benefits that sharing media offers the nebulous concept of society, with a number of respondents believing that non-commercial media sharing should be de-criminalized. There also exists an acknowledged lack of knowledge of existing intellectual property and copyright law among my respondents, although users recognize that generally their activity is "illegal." Essentially, members of private, digital INMSs take the approach of recognizing the tenuous legal nature of their actions while at the same time minimizing it in their consideration of continuing to share media. Users also articulate a variety of viewpoints that range from viewing their media sharing activity as benign towards industrial economic interests to full-throated libertarianism and advocating for the repeal of harsh copyright protections.

Nearly all of my respondents espoused an awareness of and disregard for potential legal action against filesharers. For example, when discussing the legality of filesharing, Mason notes that he used to be worried about legal action when he was younger, yet is no longer anxious about repercussions:

> "I mean, I did [worry] when I was younger just because when you're 14, you're scared shitless of stuff like that and you don't want to get arrested for downloading children's cartoons. But when you're 24, it's just a bit different. You're just like, 'Hm, whatever.'"

Mason's response mirrors the alarm many peer-to-peer platform users experienced in the early 2000s, when individual filesharers were being taken to court by the copyright industry. However, as that tactic has been relaxed in favor of more structural approaches (*e.g.* lobbying for the passage of SOPA and PIPA or the inclusion of stronger IP protection language in trade bills like the Trans-Pacific Partnership) and users have been relatively unmolested by the industry organizations like the MPAA and RIAA, filesharers have adapted to an environment of reduced-risk. Also implicit in Mason's response is a belief in the inconsequential nature of sharing media, owing in part to the responsibilities that adulthood has brought for him. Similarly, Ben notes that he simply does not think about potential legal ramifications because the possibility of being prosecuted seems so remote. For many users, the threat of legal action is so miniscule as to not meaningful influence their activity. Here there is a decisive break with the opinions held by media sharing communities like *TVN*, which initially believed their tape recording and trading activities would remain unbothered by the copyright industries, but was disabused of it shortly after Jim Lowe received a subpoena to testify in court. In the case of contemporary filesharers, they exist in a post-litigation timeline, yet continue to hold beliefs that their activity is not placing them in imminent danger.

Another popular response among interviewees was a belief in the benign nature of their activities; because users are sharing media in a way that lacks commercial exchange, they do not conceptualize their activity as replacing a purchase. Rather than acknowledge economic damage to the industry, some users view their media sharing as a continuation of past non-commercial, physical practices. Thomas, a member of *GC*, compares sharing files with loaning a DVD to a friend or photocopying pages from a book at the library.

For Thomas, so long as the transactions remain non-commercial, there is nothing illegal taking place. Similarly, Ben sees no harm in sharing media if there is no monetary exchange, particularly "when it's something like [*GC*] where it's sort of independent and cult films," suggesting that niche media transcend artificial copyright restrictions and should be actively circulated for free. Furthermore, the impulse towards the free movement of culture mirrors attitudes held by the Open Source community, idealized as a system of transparency and freedom of movement and supported by a large, global community (Himanen; Wark). Thus, not only is media sharing benign, but it becomes even less of a legal consideration when the media being shared is of artistic or cultural value for a user, with the free sharing of culture becoming almost a community imperative.

Finally, there is a subset of users who explicitly believe filesharing should not be categorized as a criminal action altogether. As Jordan S. Hatcher found with anime fansubbing communities, often times those engaged in filesharing feel they are helping generate interest in a media text, there is no harm being done and, thus, there should be no legal action taken against the users who are filesharing (565). Anderson, a member of *FD*, does not think of his activities as criminal in nature. He does recognize that under existing legal framework what he is doing is illegal; however, because he is active in communities that emphasize non-mainstream media, he believes that people "deserve to have access to art." Other respondents echo Anderson's beliefs, especially in their articulations of why they choose to share media (recall Christine's explanation that she shares media because she wants others to have access to it). Rather than contextualize their media sharing activities in terms of jurisprudence, it may be more fruitful to

consider them in the framework of ethics, in which a more variegated taxonomy can be developed.

Ethics

While all respondents were cognizant of legal issues surrounding their media sharing habits, they were more interested in discussing the ethical implications of file sharing. In thinking about their activities ethically, interviewees generally defended their media sharing in economic and cultural terms, justifying the sharing of media on the grounds that they are not harming the bottom line of companies and are fostering the cultural enrichment of the community, respectively. Once again users frame their answers in market-based contexts, emphasizing the value added to society or the lack of economic impact on industrial actors. Andersson Schwarz found similar justifications among his respondents, with the three main explanations given for user media sharing activity as: "it's unstoppable;" "the artists/producers don't suffer;" and "it's democratic" (64-65). Taking Andersson Schwarz's work in concordance with my own, there appear to be a number of ethical justifications that transcend individual users and communities and form a way of thinking that exists across digital INMSs.

The first major ethical theme that emerges from my data set is that users do not view their actions as detrimental to the copyright industries. For instance, Jason believes a policy on *Film Destruction* that prohibits the uploading of movies until 12 months after their release date allows the film and its distributors to make a satisfactory amount of money; furthermore, he believes the availability of obscure and niche films on the network promotes the sales of physical copies of movies. However, he also admits "there

are a few smaller independent DVD companies and we do have their stuff and it sucks for them, that they might be losing money, but you know that's not enough to me." In this instance, Jason is invoking a market regime of justification to two different ends: on the one hand, he notes the site is benign in its economic effects, perhaps even positively impacting overall sales for a movie; on the other hand, he admits with seemingly first hand knowledge that the site harms smaller film distributors. Furthermore, this suggests that Jason has some knowledge of the economic systems of cinema, including distribution and exhibition windows. Similarly, Bill acknowledges the impact filesharing has on labor in the film industry, admitting he thinks his media sharing habits negatively affect the finances of artists, below-the-line labor, and production firms, yet he limits acting on those beliefs to uploading.[63] Such compartmentalization suggests two different regimes of justification at work: market, in terms of the economic logic, and domestic, which emphasizes traditional notions of honor to family, friends, and community. Bill's bifurcated ethical justification suggests that users recognize the potential incompatibility of their ethics on the one hand and their desire to consume media in a cost-effective manner on the other. In other words, these communities are constituted by individuals who are acting within networks that eschew commercial imperatives yet operate under logics of the market, contributing to users having multiple, often contradictory attitudes and justifications toward their media sharing habits.

The second consistent justification for respondents' media sharing activity is a commitment to freely sharing culture among community members. Over half of my interview subjects explicitly articulated a desire to share, preserve, and catalog, in their

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[63] He only uploads material that he has downloaded; he no longer uploads original material he has in his possession.

view, culturally important works of art. This ethical point of view would fall under

Boltanski and Thévenot's civic polity, which is characterized by an emphasis on the

collective good. For the purposes of file sharing justifications, equality of access is the

most salient component of the civic polity. Brandon expounds on this principle when he

explains his desire for there "to be less of a concern about how easily accessible material

is" and instead for the community to re-create the offline act of sharing music or food

with others and the resulting positive feelings, meaning he prefers users to emphasize

communal feelings associated with sharing media rather than a strict concern with media

access. Furthermore, Brandon admits that on a personal level he wants to share every

piece of media he has and, likewise, desires to have access to any form of media at any

time. Access to media becomes a structuring value of the community for many users and,

once again, a market polity creeps into a user's justification for unauthorized filesharing,

although this time it works in conjunction with a civic polity.

While most users may believe they are justifying their media sharing activities in

a unified manner, closer examination reveals a plurality of reasoning, some of which are

contradictory. What emerges from my respondents' answers is a sort of tri-partite

network that works to balance the interests of the collective and the individual while

eschewing the (financial) damage done to the copyright industries, revealing an imagined

understanding of the media industries as a collection of corporate actors who both benefit

and are damaged from the individual needs of a community that views itself as a

collection of media connoisseurs. In doing so, respondents employ multiple and, at times,

conflicting polities in what Boltanski and Thévenot term 'regimes of justification.' The

resulting discursive portrait is one that emphasizes the desire for shared pleasure through

social interaction while espousing, to a lesser extent, a Hobbesian position of negative liberty vis-à-vis authoritarian intervention from the copyright industries, law enforcement, and the judicial system.

Perspectives on Social Needs and Interactions

All of my respondents believed that the filesharing networks of which they are a part function as communities. However, each respondent gave slightly different accounts as to how they believe the networks constitute a community. Some cited unique social activities like the joke competitions run on *Film Destruction*, the collaboratively developed Master of the Month projects on *Great Cinema*, or the polls that run on both sites. While such social activities are important parts in the creation and sustenance of a community, they are mostly top-down endeavors, practices developed and deployed by administrators and moderators of the sites. In keeping with the bottom-up perspective employed throughout this chapter, I am most interested in the ways in which regular users interact with one another, develop grass roots social practices, and satisfy social needs. In my respondents' accounts, there emerge four social characteristics between regular users of private, digital INMSs: a general fulfillment of the need for social interaction and companionship; a specific satisfying of the desire to converse about cinema; the explicit or accidental dispensation of knowledge; and performing labor for the community as a pseudo-gift giving practice.

Communion and Companionship

The most common social need fulfilled by private, digital INMSs is the need for communion and companionship. This is a need that is fulfilled by most virtual communities and is not surprising, as Howard Rheingold noted close to 25 years ago that support, sociability, and communion—essentially, community—are basic tenets of virtual communities (361). Thus, most of the social needs fulfilled by physical communities are also satisfied by virtual communities. However, according to my respondents, the reasoning behind such social and emotional fulfillment in the communities under study is particular to private BitTorrent networks. For example, Brandon explains that he notices an inordinate amount of gratitude expressed by users towards an uploader in the comment thread of a film that has been long sought after. He goes on to clarify:

> There seems to be an interest on the part of mainly users and, in particular, the community as a whole to stay as positive as possible and even if they're negative about something, to kind of keep that negativity contained within themselves. It's not something that's gonna be directed at another user or maybe even the film, but just sort of make a recommendation to how this could be improved or what they would hope they could see in the future as opposed to saying that this is awful and it should burn to the ground.

For Brandon, a community like *Great Cinema* is one that is defined by its positive response to any effort provided by individual users. If there is an issue with an upload, users will actively mitigate expressing displeasure, instead working to develop it into constructive criticism. The consideration of social cohesion by most of the community minimizes acrimonious relationships from developing[64]. Fellow *GC* user Ben echoes Brandon's response, noting that *GC* has more of a community than other film torrent sites

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[64] It should also be noted that *GC*'s rules explicitly prohibit 'flaming,' the act of maliciously criticizing other users.

because people are genuinely appreciative of not only the obscure material in the site's

library, but that someone has taken the time to rip and upload it to the network.

Where a community of positivity exists around *GC*, *FD* has a more playfully

aggressive one.[65] Jason, a moderator for *FD*, describes his community in terms that, on

their face, appear to be derogatory and inflammatory; however, reading between the lines

one detects a deep appreciation for the community and its users:

> Well there's a lot of psychos and probably a bunch of basement dwellers, but overall, I
> think it's cool … The IRC community is pretty good, it's pretty much … the same group
> of regular idiots all the time … We just talk about our personal lives. It's like, 'What are
> we having for dinner tonight?' Or somebody's talking about, like [another user] was
> talking about some car accident he got into like ten years ago. We don't talk about
> movies. We talk less about movies than we talk about other stuff.

By beginning with denigrating users as 'psychos' and 'basement dwellers,' Jason

sets the reader up to understand the community as a deviant one, one that is perhaps

antisocial. However, he quickly pivots to describing the community as 'cool,' a point

further underscored by playfully referring to regular conversation members as 'idiots.'

Rather than take his descriptions at face value, closely reading Jason reveals an affinity

among community members for teasing one another, further supported by his admission

that a regular practice of the community is to "haze" new members by giving them

trouble for their taste in movies specifically and culture in general. Furthermore, that the

majority of conversation involves quotidian matters points to a deeper sense of social

communion among active participants. Speaking to this development of strong social ties,

John, a Canadian *FD* user, describes that he has made "many lifelong friends" and talks

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[65] This is possibly related to the type of libraries the two sites build: *GC* is focused on art films while *FD*
focuses on exploitation and 'bad' films.

to some of them on the phone, recalling Ray Glasser's letter in *TVN*. John also considers all *FD* members "his brothers and sisters in spirit" and that losing *FD* would mean the loss of community and friends, suggesting that he values the social relationships developed on the site more than the site's library.

The accounts of the *GC* and *FD* communities illustrate the diversity of forms of companionship the communities offer their users. Where *GC* is a community characterized by my respondents as one of positivity and expressions of appreciation for user labor, *FD* appears to be a community that is more playfully aggressive, yet more social too. This is not to say that these are the only social characteristics of the site; however, the consistency of my respondents' accounts of their communities suggests that there are nuanced differences in each community, despite the sites' functioning in similar manners. As such, we might theorize that the userbase attracted by each site's mandated generic preference (*i.e.* what types of films are allowed and encouraged to be uploaded) influences the culture of social interactions. While a bit determinist, my own experiences as a member of each site generally affirm such a conclusion, although there are mitigating influences like the clustering of exogenous social acquaintances and the idiosyncrasies of personality.

Talking About Movies

The second social need fulfilled by private BitTorrent networks like *GC* and *FD* is the more specific desire to talk about movies with what one considers one's peers. Most of my respondents described how they either observe or take part in conversations that focus on movies and, importantly, that these conversations are usually unable to be

found elsewhere in their lives. Anthony P. Cohen has argued that the meanings people give to their communities' boundaries are symbolic and indicative of the significance of a community to an individual. Furthermore, because the boundaries of a community are symbolic, they may only be perceptible to the individual and members of his or her community (12-13). For example, as a St. Louisian, when I meet other people I know to be from St. Louis I might often inquire as to what high school they attended. This carries a complex set of social meanings to people from St. Louis, but would appear to be a relatively inconsequential question to someone from Atlanta or Kansas City. Moreover, individuals can be members of multiple communities and, generally, the more granular the community, the more important it is for one's identity (*ibid*. 13). Thus, while a member of *FD* or *GC* may be a fan of cinema in general and have outlets to fulfill the desire to talk about movies with coworkers, neighbors, or family members, they may not have a conversation partner to discuss their preference for niche arthouse, foreign, exploitation, or classical Hollywood films.

For example, *GC* member Eric, an American male, prefers to have intense conversations about movies and has trouble fulfilling this desire, even when he worked at a video store. However, on *GC*, there are people that are willing to engage in debates with him and challenge his opinions, a component of movie discussion he wants. As Christine describes it, the community is comprised of "more serious movie watchers" and offers a hardier pool of potential conversation partners for people like Eric. Furthermore, digital INMSs host a variety of communicative venues, including movie comment threads, discussion forums, and IRC channels, diversifying and particularizing the ways in which users can converse. By providing a rigorous platform for debate, *GC* allows Eric

to exercise a part of his identity that usually lays dormant. In this way, private INMSs offer highly specific forms of social sustenance for desires that may otherwise go unsatisfied.

Beyond fulfilling unique desires, digital INMSs also serve as discursive platforms of general communion over movies, further strengthening the community's bonds. Kevin describes the communicative ecosystem as equal parts functional and social, with part of the communication dealing with technical/procedural issues of the community like the appropriateness of a specific movie and the other part involving the discussion of movies. However, his bifurcation may not be as stark as he describes it, as discussing the validity of a movie upload is, in fact, part of the discursive process of the community in establishing its identity and culture; the taxonomy of acceptable films on the network is integral to the way the community sees itself, as culture is created and reproduced by people through social interactions rather than external imposition (Geertz 12). Anderson speaks to the community-building process of deliberation when noting the "shared sensibility" of discussing what value can be drawn from *FD*'s library of 'bad films.' Furthermore, when he describes the community as "like-minded," he is not suggesting they agree about what value can be drawn from the films; rather, he is explicitly highlighting the commitment of the community towards deliberation in the service of establishing a continually evolving identity. In a way, Anderson is unconsciously channeling Bourdieu in describing the role agents play in taking up discursive positions within a field to help define that field, particularly in relation to other fields.

More simply, users of private, movie filesharing sites parallel the *TVN* community in their appreciation for communion with other authentic movie lovers. Comparing *GC*

and *FD* with public sites like *Kickass Torrents* or *The Pirate Bay*, Neil notes the genuine

discussion of cinema and the technical quality of the rips on the private sites contrasted

with the spam and impersonal replies of public networks. Similarly, Thomas describes

the conversation between users regarding movie preferences as "very open and honest,"

suggesting there is "a bit of trust involved" in disclosing what are important social and

cultural markers in a niche movie community, echoing Zygmunt Bauman who describes

the colloquially understood meaning of community as a place where "…we can relax—

we are safe … In a community, we all understand each other well, we may trust what we

hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback" (1-2). With

virtual communities like *GC* and *FD*, a space is offered where individuals can feel safe in

discussing what are relatively intimate and important facets of their identity with other

like-minded individuals.

However, just like many face-to-face communities, there are struggles that occur

in the social interactions of members and not every member feels comfortable at all

times. In particular, it can be difficult for newcomers to feel welcome in entering a

conversation. Mason describes his discomfort with interjecting into a community, noting

that an "ecosystem" exists and the difficulty involved in disrupting that ecosystem when

one is unfamiliar with the social and behavioral norms. Furthermore, Kevin characterizes

it as potentially "an unhealthy, insular" community where users reinforce each others'

beliefs and are reluctant to accept outsiders. For some users, the level of familiarity

between established community members can serve as more of an obstacle to fulfilling a

social need than facilitating its satisfaction.

Despite misgivings from some respondents, the majority of my participants expressed positive feelings toward the role their community plays in satisfying a specific desire to rigorously discuss (niche) cinema. For them, sincere movie discussion exists to further strengthen the bonds of the community through communion and the sharing of mutual interests. A corollary to genuine discussions of cinema is the accumulation and dispensation of shared knowledge of the community in a way that characterizes the discourse as not only emotional, but also pedagogical.

Learning from the Community

As Pierre Lévy has articulated, virtual communities offer the potential to aggregate knowledge in such a way that the combined knowledge of the community is easily disseminated and implicitly diffused. At a macro level, the body of knowledge built by a community's users benefits the community in a reciprocal way by building cultural capital, making it a highly desirable community to join, thus increasing the number of users and adding to the collective knowledge. At the micro level, users are able to explicitly ask for information they want or learn from the accumulated body of knowledge that is scattered throughout the community. Functionally, the transmission and diffusion of knowledge takes several different forms, including: the establishment of site wikis; forum megathreads devoted to specific topics; user-led questions and answers; movie suggestions; movie information included on a torrent's page; news posts; technical

knowledge and FAQS; and miscellaneous knowledge scattered throughout forum posts, IRC channels and individual torrent comment threads.[66]

Overwhelmingly, my respondents view the ability to learn from others in the community as a positive component of their site membership. Moreover, the most commonly cited benefit users receive from the community's collective knowledge is insight into new movies, television programming, and music to which to watch and listen. As Jason notes, users are very open to sharing information, particularly when it comes to their favorite media. The eagerness to share information of the community is a common response from my interviewees and can be seen in how consistently quickly requests are filled, with Anderson noting that it "…gives the impression that everyone on [the site]— not individually, but collectively—has a huge breadth of knowledge and has a ton of passion." The discussion and suggestion of new media to consume are examples of explicit knowledge transmission; implicit knowledge transmission occurs at a similar rate, but can also take place in more oblique ways. For example, Ben recalls exploring user profiles to see what other movies they may have uploaded or downloaded; this is a particularly fruitful practice if one discovers a shared taste with another user.

While my respondents articulated a somewhat narrow sense of the knowledge transmission that occurs on sites like *GC* and *FD*, hidden in their answers is a better sense of the scale of learning that occurs. No user explicitly mentioned learning about technical aspects of ripping and encoding media, but a number of them discussed noticing discussion of and explanations for such activity. Passive exposure to technical issues will not only generate notable levels of learning in an individual, but will also continue to

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[66] By this it is meant any unconscious dispensation of knowledge by a user (*e.g.* a user including any kind of trivia or production information when talking about a movie).

build a collective body of knowledge for the community. Furthermore, including

paratextual information about movies like trailers, movie reviews, and production notes is

inherently part of the upload process, as users are expected to include accouterments to

the file they upload. Such information is explicitly pedagogical as it gives other users

more information about a subject and recalls different value-adding practices of *TVN,* like

including extra taped material on a recording or submitting extra information about a

movie or television program to be published in the newsletter.

User Labor and Gift Economies

While user-generated knowledge is of benefit to other users and the community as

a whole, it is also the result of a chimeric mixture of user labor and pseudo-gift giving

practices. To generate and collate knowledge in a community, users need to devote their

own time and resources and forms of labor on digital INMSs can include: searching for

trailers and informational extras (similar to DVD extras); scanning articles from

newspapers and magazines or pages from books; capturing and uploading screenshots;

seeking out production stills and promotional art; devoting time to typing up informed

opinions or production histories; and creating how-to guides and FAQS, among others.

All of this digital labor is done without remuneration; instead, it can be thought of as a

form of a gift economy, although that term is complicated by technical protocols and

social customs inherent to private filesharing networks.

Digital labor is a relatively contested term, with scholars debating what

constitutes digital labor and where value is created. For those interested in platforms that

support virtual communities, particular emphasis is placed on the role users/consumers

play in generating economic value through unpaid digital labor (Fuchs; Scholz). In this view, users become laborers because their social activity contributes to user retention and interaction with a specific platform, or, as Tiziana Terranova puts it, the creation of value becomes "more of a process than a finished product" (47). However, much of the research devoted to digital labor focuses on monetized platforms, even the work done by fan labor scholars like Karen Hellekson emphasizes labor in the context of its relationship to commercial industry (113-116). The purpose of this portion of my project is to outline a variety of practices that should be considered as digital labor and constitutive of a pseudo-gift economy, to offer a way to think of digital labor outside the bounds of commercial industry, and to demonstrate the emotional and social value such labor holds for community members.

One of the most time-consuming forms of digital labor on sites like *GC* or *FD* is serving in an administrative capacity. Two of my respondents participated as moderators on each site and both spoke of how it felt like a social obligation to accept the role. Eric remembers that he was asked to serve as a moderator by one of *GC*'s administrators because he had been asking a series of formatting questions specific to the Mac platform and the administrator soon recognized Eric's proficiency. Because he had been receiving help for a number of months, Eric describes how he felt an obligation to reciprocate and work in the service of the community. At first he described his enjoyment of serving as a moderator as "enthusiastic;" however, after answering the same question over the course of several months, he began to dislike his role. This anecdote is particularly evocative that the activity of users on this site is labor; it is at times repetitive and can be ultimately unfulfilling. Nonetheless, Eric's initial enthusiastic attitude toward providing service to

the community is indicative of how many users feel about devoting their time and resources. Jason serves in a similar capacity and explains wanting to contribute to the healthy functioning of the community as his main motivation, although he makes no mention of the negative impact his labor has on his mental well-being. Both respondents note, however, that a motivating component of their labor is an increase in status. Rather than being financially remunerated and in addition to perceived social obligations, users like Eric and Jason perform labor for an increase in social and cultural capital. When taking into account their motivations and gratifications, we can eschew the Procrustean task of fitting their activity into financial frameworks and instead focus on the emotional and social economies in which they participate. Doing so takes their perspectives into account rather than subsuming them within a larger superstructure that does not enter into their thought process.

The other major digital labor that occurs on the networks under study is fan-created subtitles, or fansubbing.[67] Often, there will be movies uploaded to the networks that have not been released outside of their domestic market and lack English (and other common languages) subtitles. Usually there will be requests from a user(s) for subtitles in a specific language that other users will then fulfill; other times enterprising users may take it upon themselves to create subtitles in different languages. Regardless of the process, it is one of most widely appreciated practices on the networks, second only to the fulfillment of movie requests. Neil notes that the aspect of *GC* he most values is the productive work of fulfilling subtitle requests, more than the uploading of original

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[67] A quick note: The fansubbing under discussion here differs from the more ubiquitous fansubbing related to anime and manga communities, where different fansub collectives compete to get the fastest and most accurate translation out for recently released television shows, manga, and movies. These collectives are very much about building personal (collective) prestige rather than fulfilling the needs of a community (Condry 202-203).

movies. This is because usually movies that are uploaded are legitimately available, although they may not have subtitles in English and the distributor has no economic incentive to do so. However, with the labor of the community, he is able to not only watch the movie, but he can understand its dialogue as well.

Consequently, many of my respondents likened digital labor as a sort of gift. For example, Ben characterizes the filling of requests as "a group of people just helping each other out" and Neil describes other users thinking "I'm uploading this for you." That every respondent noted the prevalence of users thanking one another for their labor indicates that the conception of the media distribution system within the community is one that resembles a gift economy. However, how valid is the application of the term 'gift economy' to the networks under study? Mauss, one of the authorities on gift economies, makes sure to carefully define a gift as something that is not just given freely (1), but given with an expectation of future reciprocation by some in the community, or, in fact, may be the repayment of an already-received gift, what Malinowski calls the 'counter-gift' (81). Furthermore, gift economies are sustained by social obligations to adhere to gift-giving practices, such that a refusal to reciprocate can lead to an individual being ostracized from a community (Mauss 11). Gifts, therefore, are not given out of a sense of benevolence or altruism; they are the result of a set of social norms that exist to sustain a particularly type of economy.

Scholars that have written about gift economies in relation to filesharing tend to emphasize this principle of social obligation. For example, Cenite et al have noted that community norms influence users of music filesharing networks to upload new material and purchase music they enjoy (206). However, Jonas Andersson Schwarz points out the

problematic components of arguments that take filesharing to be a monolithic activity

(59). Networks like *GC* and *FD* would fall under the aegis of (pseudo) gift economies

because of the social obligations to reciprocate in sharing, but a network like *The Pirate*

Bay has no such obligations in place. Thus, contextualizing the communities in which the

term gift economies is applied is important.

The term 'pseudo-gift economies' is used here because the communities under

study are based on technical platforms that inherently differentiate them from traditional,

face-to-face communities. While it is true that social obligations to reciprocate the given

gift of movies, television, or music are strongly reinforced within the communities under

study, there is a confounding technical factor. With the BitTorrent platform, each 'gift'

can be exactly measured by the network and included in the calculus of determining if an

individual is appropriately reciprocating. If a user falls below the arbitrary threshold

established by the community (ratio requirements), he or she is banned from the

community. The parallels between ratio requirements, banning, reciprocation, and social

ostracization may seem analogous (Ratio requirements : Reciprocation :: Banning :

Ostracized), but they are not due to the degree and precision of measurement and

consequences. Such a difference is important when considering private filesharing

communities in relation to traditional gift economies and is the reason the term 'pseudo-

gift economy' is employed.

Whereas digital labor in the context of virtual communities on Facebook or

Twitter is rightfully discussed in terms of market economies and capitalism, digital labor

on networks that have little concern for industry, monetization, and copyright should be

thought of as motivated by emotional and social capital. Similarly, when thinking about

gift economies in relation to private filesharing networks, attention should be paid to the subtle but important differences in terms of measurement of reciprocation and enforcement of social consequences. It is this gap between traditional gift economies and those that exist within private filesharing networks that meaning can be given to the digital labor performed on the networks. Because gift economies in communities based on the BitTorrent platform are more alienated from traditional gift economies, digital labor performed acquires greater meaning for those who perform and benefit from it.

Conclusion

Above all, users of the digital INMSs under study value their networks because they are social spaces. They are spaces where users can satisfy a variety of social needs through: the sharing of media; conversing with other users about myriad topics, including quotidian concerns and highly specific cinematic subjects; learning from and teaching other users about movies, television, and music; and performing service and providing digital gifts for their fellow users. In short, my respondents unanimously described the digital INMSs of which they are a part as communities.

Users trust one another, not only to keep their unauthorized filesharing as clandestine as possible, but also to provide them with information and informed opinions about the media they consume. Moreover, users cite the fact that the networks constitute a community as a major reason why there is such a high level of trust between users. This is not to say that all users are friends with one another or even that they feel comfortable speaking with a random user; instead, they point to the delineated social structure (*e.g.* the well-defined roles of moderators and administrators) and crowd-sourced components

of the site (*e.g.* the ability of users to comment on individual torrents) as reasons why

they feel comfortable trusting the media uploaded by other users as well as their opinions

and knowledge of movies, television, and music. If a file is malicious, corrupt, or

otherwise not-as-advertised, the community will swiftly call it out, as Anderson notes.

Furthermore, if someone is posting incorrect information about a movie, other users will

correct it. Finally, opinions can be safely debated with minimal fear of trolling or flaming

due to the strict guidelines in place and relatively active moderation.

This chapter has shown that private, movie filesharing networks like *Great*

Cinema and *Film Destruction* engage in four practices shared with the analog INMS *The*

Videophile's Newsletter: an emphasis on sharing media between users; a desire to archive

material, sometimes motivated by a concern for cultural stewardship; debating the legal

and ethical aspects of their media sharing activity; and fulfilling social interaction and

companionship needs. Sometimes the motivation of my respondents differs from those

espoused by *TVN* members, for example my interview participants placed a greater

emphasis on debating the ethical implications for their activity than their legal concerns.

For many of them, the illegality of their actions is a reality of which they are aware, but it

does not trouble them. Instead, users of these sites justify their actions by citing the lack

of financial harm to the entertainment industry and their commitment to the free and open

sharing of culture and information.

The adherence to a philosophy of open culture is one of the more consistent

themes among my respondents' answers and can be viewed as an evolution of the *TVN*

community's desire for access to pre-recorded material. Instead of articulating a desire

for movies to become available for purchase for private citizens, members of *GC* and *FD*

advocate for frictionless access to non-mainstream culture, with many emphasizing wide dissemination as ideal. Living in an era with services like video on demand and Netflix, it makes sense that the goal has shifted from simply making pre-recorded material available to users for home consumption to allowing the consumer to choose from as wide of a library of movies and television as possible, while at the same time allowing people to watch it near instantaneously whenever they want. What my respondents indicate is that they desire a more grassroots system of distribution, one that allows users to share information with one another without a middleman between them. In this sense, their communities are deviant and contrasted directly with authorized services like Netflix or Amazon Prime Video. It appears the future fight over media distribution will be between legitimate industry and individual users who want a place in the formal media distribution and circulation system.

Conclusion— Informal Networks of Media Sharing: Past, Present, and Future

Throughout this study, we have seen that informal networks of media sharing develop their own deviant uses for technological platforms. Rather than enjoy the ability to time-shift their favorite television shows, early VCR aficionados embraced the device's potential to record copyrighted material and build their own personal media libraries. However, more than just building personal libraries of material to watch whenever and wherever they desire, members of *The Videophile's Newsletter* wanted to share media with one another. From the outset, founder Jim Lowe made this clear: "What I would most like to do is trade tapes with those of you who are willing to keep an eye out for my ways, while I will, of course, do the same for you" (*TVN* #1). Social exchange becomes the linchpin of the community and the relationships that develop between community members are its lifeblood.

Similarly, digital communities based on media exchange also become less about the pure circulation of media and more about the satiation of social needs and development of new social practices. Platforms like Pandora, Last.fm[68], and Soulseek, all relating to music consumption in one way or another, each develop unique social norms and practices: Pandora allows the expression of identity through profiles and shared music playlists; Last.fm offers social networking functionality similar to Facebook or MySpace, as well as music groups that people with shared musical interests can join and

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[68] Last.fm (née Audioscrobbler) is ostensibly a site that records a user's listening habits to provide them with a wealth of data about the music they listen to. However, the site has turned into a general music social network, complete with music interest groups, concert and event pages, and the ability to friend and post on other users' walls.

converse with one another; and Soulseek is a p2p platform that allows users to search each others' musical holdings, but also strongly emphasizes user-created chat rooms that are based on genres or artists.

Furthermore, private, invite-only BitTorrent communities echo the legacy of early videophile communities. Emerging from the free-for-all atmosphere of public BitTorrent trackers like *The Pirate Bay*, private communities like *Great Cinema* and *Film Destruction* emphasize community over consumption. In particular, these digital INMSs have social mechanisms embedded within the very technology that sustains the community that mandate circulation of media. With the ratio requirements and tracking built into the BitTorrent software, these communities can focus on developing social hierarchies and norms and leave the tracking, enforcement, and sustenance of media sharing to the software and ordained community regulations (*i.e.* ratio requirement rules).

It is with these private BitTorrent trackers that we can best understand the ways in which INMSs are connected diachronically. Moreover, using case studies of both analog and digital INMSs allows me to catalog and develop a classification structure of social practices that are present in various forms across INMSs; creating a taxonomy is integral to understanding the ways in which social hierarchies and norms are formed. For example, the prevalence of taste signaling in both *TVN* and various digital discursive platforms (IRC channels, web forums, and individual torrent comment threads) suggests that the establishment of relatively rigid social hierarchies is of importance to INMSs, despite the egalitarian rhetoric of its members.

Furthermore, with such an emphasis on the formation of social and cultural norms and hierarchies, the inclusion of theories about the development of social and cultural

capital is crucial to this study. I have argued that not only must we study the various social formations of INMSs, we must also incorporate the views of our subjects into our research in order to ascertain how community members view their own positionality within the community, as well as their community's position within the larger field of media sharing networks. In doing so, I have used multiple sources and methods, including employing discourse analysis on extant editions of *TVN* and conducting personal interviews with 13 members of *GC* and *FD*. In particular, due to a lack of existing theory regarding social formations of informal networks of media sharing, the personal interviews required an approach that allowed me to find and articulate social phenomena from my participants' utterances; grounded theory provided a perfect method to do so. Therefore, after conducting and transcribing interviews ranging from 25-90 minutes, I coded the transcriptions, looking for themes to emerge. My hypothesis was that there were subtle connections between disparate eras of INMSs, but the results strongly indicated a continuation of social practices and norms from *TVN* to those of the digital communities I studied.

This study is a valuable addition to the field of media sharing practices and communities because, increasingly, private BitTorrent networks are under attack from the copyright industries and law enforcement. As a result of such assaults, more and more communities are being disrupted, either temporarily or permanently. As mentioned in chapter four, *Music Chest* was shut down by French authorities and both *Great Cinema* and *Film Destruction* have had extended periods of downtown due to harassment from law enforcement and hackers. Furthermore, BitTorrent usage has plateaued recently, with Internet traffic routed through BT decreasing in favor of legal streaming services.

Anecdotally, many of my college-aged students say they do not download movies or music any longer, instead preferring to stream their media. Coupled with attacks by law enforcement, such a culture of access suggests a precarious situation for digital INMSs—at least those based on the BT platform. Thus, one of the major contributions of this dissertation is to provide a contemporary account of social phenomena that may be disappearing. These communities are meaningful social spaces for members; they are culturally and socially valuable and need to be documented. Moreover, what studies on private, filesharing communities that do exist do not tell us enough about the sharing within the communities; we do not know how people view their own activities and this is an entry to fill that lacuna.

In doing so, a number of themes that emerged from my interview participants' mapped onto those of *TVN* and it seems inarguable that there are consistent social elements that are present in temporally distinct INMSs. Most prominent across analog and digital communities is an unsettled debate surrounding the community's archival nature. With *TVN*, readers fell into two camps: those who not only viewed their activity as archival, but also as valuable and those who neither saw their taping habits as archival nor saw purpose in creating an archive of recorded television. Similarly, members of private BitTorrent communities stressed archival activity as an important consideration in their interviews. However, instead of debating the existential nature of their community as a collective archive, my respondents gave two general answers that placed their activity as personally archival or communally archival.

Two sides of the same coin, digital INMS members appear to view the archival question as a *fait accompli,* instead choosing to differentiate themselves in terms of for

whom the archive exists. One reason for this shift may be related to new affordances of technology and the attendant ways consumers make use of them. Whereas physical cassette tapes needed to be stored, transported, and traded in order to circulate among communities like *TVN*, digital media is largely intangible (discounting the material hard drives). The intangibility allows users to circulate media without concern for physical transportation or storage space. Indeed, one of the major concerns for opponents of the archival status of the *TVN* community was the onerous nature that meticulous taping presented. Hauling around crates of videocassette tapes was physically strenuous and required a lot of storage space in one's home. Moreover, the cost of purchasing such a large number of cassettes is prohibitive, particularly when one considers the already expensive nature of early VCRs. In comparison, the cost and physical storage space required for a handful of hard drives is minimal. Furthermore, the speed at which media can be circulated in digital communities dwarfs that of VHS tape trading networks. The effective intangibility of digital media, combined with the relative viscosity of physical media circulation work in tandem to make the archival nature of digital INMSs a foregone conclusion in the minds of their users.

This shift in community understanding of archival activity speaks to Derrida's assertion that "nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'" (90). The evolution in archival views is reminiscent of the instability of the term archive, but the new, dominant conceptualization of the always already existing archive amongst digital INMS members suggests that users themselves see a relative crystallization in denotation (if not connotation) for 'the archive.' Perhaps it is more useful to situate the uncertainty of the archive in a personal/collective binary rather than one based on a positive/negative

binary. In doing so, the voices of the users/patrons of the archive are included in the definition, providing agency for participants rather than prescribing their position within the archival network. Furthermore, this study has highlighted grassroots archives that serve as countervailing forces to what David Greetham calls the "poetics of archival exclusion" (1-28) whereby historical pressures and cultural and political institutions ascribe value to the objects found worthy by traditional archivists. Networks like *TVN* recorded and preserved thousands of hours of American culture, including after-school specials, television news reports, and advertisements. Many of these media texts were viewed as ephemeral at the time of their production, but are now viewed as valuable cultural memories; due in part to the efforts of communities like *TVN*, these cultural texts are still available. Similarly, a network like *Film Destruction*, which emphasizes exploitation cinema and other similar culturally-eschewed material, preserves a wide variety of cultural texts that have been historically ignored by archival gatekeepers. Such valuable cultural preservation is another reason why informal networks of media sharing must be addressed and historicized by scholars.

Related to archival debates, also existing in both analog and digital INMS communities is a concern over the role of the community as cultural stewards. With the introduction of consumer grade video recording technology in the 1970s, people now had the tools at their disposal to create a library of television programming. While more official institutions like universities (Hilderbrand 117-156) were meticulously recording some types of television programming (mostly local and national news broadcasts), individual viewers—like *TVN* readers—were also amassing a wealth of television content, including advertisements, Saturday morning cartoons, and sporting events.

Furthermore, the VCR introduced the ability to not only preserve television content, but also context. As Raymond Williams has written, the concept of flow is integral to television in the context of the 1970s; by dutifully recording television programming in its broadcast context (*i.e.* complete with commercials and other television shows included on the same tape), VCR owners offer unique cultural artifacts that allow a glimpse into *how* viewers would have been watching television at that specific historical moment.

In doing so, these users were not only developing personal libraries or archives, but they also began thinking about their activities in terms of cultural stewardship. A number of columns and reader letters deliberated the role and responsibility that should be adopted by highly engaged consumers, with arguments being made that echoed those surrounding the issue of archives. Using his symbolic capital as editor, Jim Lowe advocated for a steward's sensibility, suggesting readers consider the value of recording commercials, promos, and bumpers (it appears that Lowe is an unwitting acolyte of Greetham's). Lowe's position at the top of the social hierarchy lent weight to his argument and many readers voiced similar opinions. However, those with differing views did exist and usually argued that cultural stewardship should be left to larger cultural institutions like universities, museums, and government agencies. Hence, what emerges from early videophiles is not only a debate about cultural stewardship, but how much importance consumers should ascribe to their activities. There is a clear divide in the *TVN* community: people like Lowe feel that individual consumers should take an active role in the preservation of American culture whereas his detractors feel consumers should not concern themselves with such lofty ambitions.

The debate continues to this day in digital INMS communities, although its manifestation differs. Rather than play out in the form of newsletter articles and letters, arguments surrounding the role users of BitTorrent trackers should play as cultural stewards exists in community manifestos/statements of purpose and on individual torrent pages. Most important in terms of community ideology is the official proclamation of the community's status as a site of cultural preservation in site manifestos. *Great Cinema*, for example, proclaims its *raison d'être* as a community that can introduce people to a wide world of high quality independent and global cinema because mainstream, Hollywood cinema is "pervasive" and easily available. In order to fulfill this mission statement, members of *GC* should never delete media they have downloaded from the network. Thus, a guiding principle for the community as a whole is to develop a library (or archive in some users' minds) that holds movies, music, and books that can be hard to find but are nevertheless invaluable cultural resources. The other space where cultural stewardship is marked as important to private BitTorrent communities is within individual torrent threads, usually in the comments section. Here, users will thank the uploader, but they may also recount previous experiences with the movie or television show. When recalling past encounters with the media text, users often frame the memory in positive terms and speak about the difficulty of finding it outside of its original exhibition context. Implicit in these answers is a designated value, both personal and cultural, and a belief on the part of the user that making this text available to a wider audience is important.

Moreover, the implicit belief in the community as a locus of cultural preservation speaks to the shifting boundaries that delimit a community in the larger cultural field. As

Anthony P. Cohen has argued, community identity is demarcated by boundaries and boundaries are established by how individual community members see themselves (12). The communities I study are largely organized around the sharing of media, both physical and digital; however, when looking at digital INMSs, boundaries and identity shift from a general focus on television programming or movies-on-tape to more specific, generic ones. For instance, *GC* emphasizes independent and foreign films, as well as Classic Hollywood cinema while *Film Destruction* has crafted its identity around exploitation cinema and 'bad movies.' What this suggests (although does not prove) is that the ability to more easily share media, organize socially, and converse with fellow community members leads to a more specialized community identity and smaller borders. We can extend Cohen's work into the digital realm by incorporating Rainie & Wellman's concept of 'networked individualism,' the idea that in contemporary society the individual has greater access to others who share her interests at the expense of stronger ties, into community borders and identity, leading to larger communities that are specifically focused on a specialized interest. One way the heightened sense of identity appears to manifest itself is in the acceptance of the role of community as cultural stewards. Because the community knows what types of media are important to itself (as well as what types of media are not important), it is more likely to see cultural value in preserving that media. Thus, what this study has shown, particularly in chapters four and five, is that members of digital INMSs implicitly understand their community as cultural stewards.

A concern for the legality and ethics of media sharing also exists between the analog and digital INMSs, although the focus mutates towards a greater emphasis on ethics inside virtual communities. As a lawyer himself, Jim Lowe devotes numerous

columns to discussing potential legal concerns, as well as news articles about court cases involving home video from other publications in *TVN*. Lowe initially reassures his readers that their activities are protected under the aegis of fair use and repeatedly notes and reinforces the noncommercial nature of their media sharing. Moreover, when discussing the legality of their tape trading, Lowe and his readers consistently couch their rhetoric in terms of hobbyists and amateurism in order to distinguish themselves from pirates and organized crime, both entities that structure their activity around commercial concerns.

As might be expected, the *TVN* community's faith in the copyright industry to allow noncommercial activity to go on unmolested was misplaced and Lowe received a subpoena as part of a court case that would eventually become *Universal v Sony*. Lowe resisted revealing his readership to Universal's attorneys and instead took the opportunity to speak on behalf of the community in denouncing the lawsuit while at the same time offering hope for VCR hobbyists, noting the growing number of Betamaxes sold across the US and the attendant rise in numbers of VCR owners (*TVN* #6). For early videophiles, then, deliberating over the legal protections afforded to their hobby was a very relevant and pervasive issue. Not only was it important to the community because of potential court cases, but it also acted as a social bond. Members realized they were all in the same boat, so to speak, and this legal reality led to an increased sense of community, as can be seen from Lowe's resolute editorial after receiving his subpoena.

Community member concerns as to the legality of their media sharing carries over into digital INMSs, but the way people understand the tenuous legal nature of their activities has shifted. My interview respondents unanimously recognized most of the

media they share is copyrighted and they are breaking both US and International intellectual property laws and treaties. However, my respondents also unanimously expressed a relative nonchalant attitude towards the potential legal ramifications for their media sharing activity. There exists very little public discourse on the criminality of filesharing; what little that does exist is in the form of notes in community manifestos and rules, with the site administrators offering regulations and best practices (such as banning mainstream Hollywood films and movies released in the past year) to minimize the potential interest of the copyright industry in the networks.

Where digital INMS users appear to have internalized the perpetually tenuous legal nature of their media sharing, they have expressed more interest in pondering the ethicality of it in comparison to offline INMSs like *TVN*. My respondents articulated a panoply of ways of thinking about their own activity in terms of ethics. A number of users expressed hesitance to upload material from people they knew personally or professionally, yet admitted they have no problem downloading such material, to say nothing of movies made by people they do not know. Some users feel that sharing movies in the community can actually lead to increased physical and digital media sales, despite acknowledging that some filmmakers have expressed their displeasure with the networks for hosting their material illegally. What emerges from my respondents is a variety of "regimes of justification" (Boltanski & Thévenot) whereby users employ multiple and potentially contradictory ethical reasoning to justify activity they know is (potentially) illegal.

Analyzing these justifications, it becomes clear that all of my respondents think of their activity in terms of the market. There are, of course, other polities included in their

justificatory reasoning (such as community and personal morals), but the omnipresence

of the market in the responses suggests that within the digital media sharing ecosystem,

users have become deeply inculcated within a logic of capitalism. Here, my work extends

that of Jonas Andersson Schwarz, whose studies have found a deeply political reasoning

behind users of public torrent sites like *The Pirate Bay*, but does not offer a way of

questioning why the respondents' answers—many of which employ anti-capitalist

rhetoric—continually inscribe themselves in the logic of markets. I argue that the answer

to this question can be found in looking at the evolution of analog INMSs to digital ones.

Whereas the issue of legality of tape trading was at the forefront for videophile

communities in the 1970s, by the late 2000s, digital communities had been co-existing

with aggressive copyright regimes for a decade. What my respondents articulated was

essentially a normalization of the ever-present threat of litigation for their media sharing

activities, such that, as long as ISPs or media conglomerates did not press charges against

them, they saw no logical reason to worry over it. Instead, they began thinking in terms

of ethics, both personal and collective ethics. Thinking ethically, they were necessarily

forced to consider how their actions affected others, even corporate entities. In

conjunction with rhetoric employed by the copyright industries in their litigation,

sponsored legislation, and public relations campaigns that emphasized the economic

impact piracy has on workers and artists, this new ethical thinking unconsciously

inscribes users into a logic of the market. In this way, historical, legal, and cultural

contexts intersect to create a shift in the ways members of INMSs think about their media

sharing activity.

Communally developing a shared body of knowledge is another pertinent shared social activity; however, the types of knowledge cultivated differ slightly between analog and digital communities. Early videophile networks, for example, placed a great amount of emphasis on building a body of technical knowledge about their VCR apparatus. Every edition of *TVN* included at least one instance of Jim Lowe or a reader offering some advice to better understand the inner workings of the VCR or how to optimize their video recording techniques. Moreover, after the first issue, *TVN* began printing monthly columns devoted to technical Q&A, where Lowe or his readers would submit a technical question one issue and be provided with an answer from a community member in the following issue. For instance, one issue that persisted early in the VCR's life was image distortion on black and white broadcasts when recorded onto color cassettes. An initial fix was offered to call the local broadcast station and ask them to adjust a particular setting that distorted the black and white picture (*TVN* #2). However, in a later issue, a reader provided an 'at home' fix that did not require the questionably effective method of contacting a television station. Knowledge development was always a process and usually done in an *ad hoc* way, fulfilling whatever needs a reader had at the moment.

That developing a grassroots body of technical knowledge was an important part of early videophiles communities is not surprising. Members of INMSs like *TVN* were not A/V engineers working for manufacturers; rather, they were hobbyists who had an interest in consumer electronics but lacked professional training. Thus, where they may have lacked engineering experience, they compensated by pooling their knowledge (mostly developed through trial-and-error) to develop a vernacular body of knowledge

that made sense to the community members and was made meaningful due to the collective nature of its construction.

Surprisingly, scholars studying early videophile communities have been hesitant to describe the collective practices of understanding their technology as a grassroots production of a communal body of knowledge. Joshua Greenberg (21-36), while meticulously describing the practices of hacking and tinkering that the *TVN* community performed, stops short of identifying the production of different forms of knowledge as a grassroots effort performed to satisfy particular needs of community members. This is an important distinction because the ascription of agency hinges on the ability of users to create and circulate their own forms of meaningful knowledge; the types of knowledge, the reasoning behind the development of that knowledge, and the ways that knowledge was created all differ from professional knowledge created by manufacturing engineers. This study's contribution is to clearly identify the production of meaningful forms of knowledge by the community for the community and mark this knowledge cultivation as an important component of informal networks of media sharing.

Where offline communities like *TVN* mostly emphasized technical knowledge, digital communities like *Great Cinema* and *Film Destruction* focus on cultivating both technical and cultural knowledge. Due to the differences in technological affordances between physical newsletters and websites, the body of knowledge and methods of exchange are more robust among virtual communities. Rather than being limited by the number of pages in a newsletter, communities like *GC* allow users multiple avenues of asking for and giving knowledge. For example, an entire forum is devoted on *GC*'s website to technical issues. Topics range from user-generated issues that moderators and

administrators help address to users offering their technical fixes. Additionally, a robust

FAQ exists on all private, digital INMSs, serving as a compendium of technical fixes and

knowledge generated over the community's lifetime. Such manuals are augmented by

threads within the forum devoted to new and unsolved issues; after being addressed,

solutions are usually added to the main FAQ page. Despite an asynchronous model of

communication, digital INMSs offer greater speed and capacity to generate communal

bodies of knowledge than analog networks.

In addition to the creation of communal technical knowledge, communities like

GC and *FD* also develop bodies of cultural knowledge, which would include teaching

others about film history, posting production notes and technical specifications, and

including filmic paratexts like trailers, interviews, and movie posters. Occurring mostly

on message boards and IRC channels, many users will contribute their own knowledge

about film history and criticism, usually prompted by a specific topic generated by other

users, but sometimes with no external impetus. Normally, this process involves the

display of credentials (*e.g.* the assertion that one is a film student or professor or that one

is a connoisseur of a certain type of cinema or director) before the user imparts

knowledge, which can take the shape of either objective information or subjective

criticism. Similar to the ways that video stores can serve as a pedagogical spaces (Beebe),

the discourse that circulates on message boards and IRC channels serves as a sort of

vernacular pedagogy, an unofficial film classroom. While the knowledge generated may

be dubious in its usefulness, the fact remains that users are actively learning from and

contributing to a collective form of intelligence in these networks. Moreover, the

inclusion of paratextual material like movie trailers, posters, and technical information on

individual movie torrents further inscribes users into specific understandings of cinema (Flanagan). The development and pedagogy of cultural knowledge about cinema on private, digital INMSs differs from the analog, hobbyist communities this dissertation examined in chapter one and can be explained by the focus being less on the technical object and more on cinema as a cultural object working in conjunction with the greater discursive affordances of platforms like web forums and IRC channels.

The important underlying process of members of digital INMSs generating such voluminous technical and cultural bodies of knowledge is the opportunity to generate social and cultural capital. While the publication of one's technical knowledge in *TVN* certainly boosted one's reputation within the community, the process for getting published was severely impeded by the fact that Jim Lowe was the solitary gatekeeper (until different editors took over) and the newsletter was relatively short. Thus, only a handful of users actually saw their names published along with their technical knowledge. On the other hand, the social field within digital INMSs is much more open, although still circumscribed by moderators, administrators, and entrenched social hierarchies. Nonetheless, being an active community member and consistently answering technical queries or offering one's cinematic knowledge is one of the most popular ways in which users develop social and symbolic capital in these communities. This study argues that knowledge generation within a community is especially important in ascending the internal social ladder, much the same way that ripping groups in the "scene" scramble to be the first to release a new movie or television episode (Crisp 138-152). Thus, the grassroots development of communal bodies of knowledge is not only

important for pragmatic purposes, it is also an integral component of the structure of social hierarchies and the (re)production of social norms.

Finally, users of both analog and digital INMSs share the same desire to debate and discuss media objects, although digital communities facilitate this type of discourse to a much greater extent. While it may seem obvious, it remains important to understand how and why members of informal networks of sharing want to talk about media technology and texts in communities of people they do not know or have never met. For members of an offline network like *TVN*, the extent to which they could communicate with one another was fully mediated by the newsletter's editor, Jim Lowe. Lowe designed and published the newsletter and, thus, served as the sole gatekeeper in terms of deciding which letters, columns, and advertisements to run. However, Lowe did not appear to be selective in his editing and, generally, anyone who submitted a piece of writing to the newsletter saw it published. An additional barrier to discourse was the extreme lag in time between submission of a piece and its subsequent publication, a process that could potentially take a month or two. Such asynchronous communication makes it difficult to build up a rapport between users, although it was not impossible.

Despite the barriers to engaging in delayed conversation with one another, members of the *TVN* community still found ways to discuss topics of shared interest. Most common were technical discussions that focused on questions from one user and answers provided by another. Another common topic was news about new types of technology being introduced or about decisions being made by media conglomerates concerning the licensing of cinematic properties for home release. Also popular were requests for material by readers, whereby they would submit what movies or television

programming they wanted as well as what they had to offer in exchange. It was this form

of communication that led to some outside interaction between readers, most commonly

in the form of phone calls (Glasser "Reflections"). Moreover, early videophiles would

also gather at informal conventions and tape trading parties where they would bring their

VCRs and duplicate cassettes from one another, in addition to talking about the latest in

technological advances and their preferred forms of media (Greenberg 21-26). These

non-textual forms of communication within the community provide the clearest example

of the social and emotional value provided by the network: members not only have their

technical questions answered and content desires fulfilled, but they are also able to talk

about their niche interests, which are most likely unable to be fulfilled by their traditional

communities of family, friends, and coworkers. These methods of communicating with

community members also differentiate analog from digital INMSs, as the latter very

rarely takes communication "off site."

While digital communities like *FD* and *GC* mostly keep their interpersonal

communication within the bounds of the web site and its attendant platforms, the level

and amount of discourse is much higher due to greater synchronicity in communication

and a larger membership. While the communication that occurs within digital INMSs is

not truly synchronous[69], conversations can take place at a much quicker pace than those

of offline communities like *TVN*. Users can post on message boards or leave comments

on individual torrent threads and (possibly) expect a response minutes, hours, or days

later. Some of my interview participants feel that the community's discursive platforms

allow for their voice to be heard, which produces positive social feelings and increases

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[69] Chatting in IRC channels is a mix of synchronous and asynchronous as users can instantaneously respond
to one another or they can refer back to messages sent minutes or hours ago.

the likelihood they post on the web forums or comment on individual torrents. The increased expectations for response produces a sort of recursive system whereby users are more likely to post and add to the discourse *because* they feel their thoughts will be responded to in a relatively timely manner and by people they consider, on some level, as similar to them. Relatedly, communities like *GC* and *FD* are considerably larger than *TVN* and thus have many more potential discursive participants. Where *TVN* had hundreds of readers at its peak, the virtual communities each have over 20,000 members of varying activity levels. The greater ease with which community members can communicate with one another working in conjunction with the much larger number of members scales the volume of discourse and aides in the satisfaction of the desire to talk about one's niche interests with one's peers.

Furthermore, the increase in the scale of communication leads to a wider variety of topics discussed. Whereas *TVN* mostly stuck to discussing VCR technology and occasionally talking about movies and television, digital communities like *GC* and *FD* have a larger spectrum of interests. Message boards, individual torrent threads, and IRC channels each cover unique, niche topics. Message boards have a number of subforums that allow targeted conversation, such as technical issues, different media (music, literature, and cinema, among others), administrative issues, and general chat. Individual torrent threads generally focus on a specific media text, with users commenting on the quality of the rip, thanking the uploader, or discussing their personal experiences with the media text. IRC channels can focus on administrative or technical issues (most communities have a dedicated help channel) or general chat, usually in the main channel. As one of my participants explains, while users are drawn to the channel based on a

shared interest in cinema, IRC chat tends to focus less on media and more on whatever is going on in peoples' lives at the moment. In a way, these general topic conversations can be an important social lubricant and help scholars understand digital INMSs as "third places," (Oldenburg) social spaces that are neither work nor home but are instead constituted by independently organized groups of people who come to feel affinity for one another via the space.

Thus, the discourse that takes place in digital communities tends to not only occur more quickly and with greater ease, but it also is wider in its scope. The result is more intense feelings of affinity for the community from those who engage in conversation with other members. This "enunciative productivity" of discussing niche media interests and quotidian personal matters serves as a social glue (Sandvoss 60) to increase feelings of affinity and closeness between community members that are geographically dispersed and will most likely never meet each other in a physical setting. By engaging in communication that covers a wide range of topics, members of digital INMSs have the opportunity to not only discuss topics of special interest that they would otherwise be unable to with their personal acquaintances, they are also able to satisfy the very basic need of social interaction and friendship.

This study has argued that people do not use INMSs (both offline and online) solely for media acquisition and exchange; instead, these networks exist to satisfy the social and emotional needs of the community's members in addition to circulating media. Studying the differences between offline and online communities speak to the way that, when provided with more effective tools and platforms, members can take full advantage of them and increase the extent to which their community fulfills their needs.

Furthermore, rather than understand digital informal networks of media sharing as virtual bazaars, scholars should extend Ray Oldenburg's concept of the "third place" onto the Internet and into communities based around the exchange of media. Doing so adds to our understanding of the purposes these communities serve, the ways in which social hierarchies develop within the networks, and how social norms are (re)produced.

While I believe this study's findings can be applied relatively broadly, there do exist a number of limitations with its design. First, all of my personal interview subjects come from a Western, Anglophone culture. Despite making the interview call process open to all members of the web forum and IRC channels in which I advertised, the only respondents were native English speakers. The results can be ascribed to two variables: the relative large number of English speakers and the fact that English is the unofficial *lingua franca* of the networks. First, while *Great Cinema* and *Film Destruction* are home to a wide variety of nationalities and language groups, Anglophones tend to be the most numerous and, thus, are more likely to be part of my response group by sheer probability. Second, English is the unofficial language of the two communities I study and can serve as a barrier for those who have only a cursory grasp of the language, particularly when viewed in the context of having to have a long conversation in English. I expected mostly English respondents, but did not expect them exclusively; that I have a singular language group presents problems to cross-cultural applications of my analyses, though not insurmountable.

A second limitation to this study is the small sample size for my interview participant pool. With only 13 total participants, the amount of data provided is not as great as I would have liked. If more users had participated, I anticipate that a number of

additional themes would have emerged, especially as a number of different social practices are present in one of my interviews but none of the others. Expanding the number of participants would most likely have thickened these lone data points; if not, it would make clear that those unique utterances were aberrations. Additionally, with a larger sample size, users who participate in different activities would have been represented. For example, none of my participants have helped organize the Master of the Month event on *GC*; if I had an interview that covered that topic, more detailed social practices may have emerged. Despite the limitation of a small pool of respondents, I am confident that the depth and breadth of each interview adequately establishes a collection of data from which conclusions can be drawn and analyses performed.

Third, all of my participants were self-selected, which can present problems in applying the data to communities at large. The danger with self-selection bias is that the most engaged members of a population will provide data that will then be applied to the entire population. However, my participants, for the most part, do not describe themselves as regularly active community members. Rather, they understand their place within the community as users who share media and sometimes engage in conversation. A couple of my respondents would fall into the category of regular user and a handful would fall into the lurker category. Essentially, my sample pool has a number of different user types who engage with the community at varying levels of intensity. As a result, I believe my data samples are diverse enough to provide a composite of the entire community. While I would have preferred a method of collecting participants that was not an 'opt-in' process, it was unavoidable with the exigencies of the community.

Moreover, the amount of data generated from a variety of user types in my interviews partially mitigates the limitations of self-selection bias.

With these limitations come opportunities to expand on and add to this study in future research. Scholars interested in cross-cultural applications should consider performing similar studies among populations of non-Anglophones to provide different perspectives. Furthermore, studying INMSs (both analog and digital) that are based on non-English languages might provide a starker point of comparison or it may indicate that language communities of media sharers align in many social practices. Regardless of what such a study indicates, it would thicken our understandings of cultural differences and similarities among informal networks of media sharing.

Future studies might also considering increasing the amount of data available for analysis. That may take the form of more personal interviews, but it may also be the creation and dissemination of a survey to collect data to help quantify the feelings users' have towards their communities. Whereas this study provided qualitative analysis through the personal interviews, surveys issued to the entirety of a community would help fill in gaps in the qualitative data and may provide further research questions to answer with qualitative interviews. Furthermore, running a social network analysis of IRC channel logs and message board posts is a way to enrich the data regarding social hierarchies. Performing a social network analysis within the communities would provide researchers with a better understanding of who is talking to whom most often; mapping that data against qualitative data collected from personal interviews regarding social hierarchies and the development of social and symbolic capital within a community

would allow scholars to make more substantive claims about the impact discursive utterances have within these communities.

Where this study discussed the ways in which members of informal networks of media sharing consider their activity in terms of archives, future research might explicitly study these communities as grassroots archives. This would involve more rigorous theorization and literature review regarding archives in the digital era, as well as analysis of the health of the network's media collection. In other words, studying *Great Cinema* or *Film Destruction* as an archive would require scholars to take a large sample of torrents and look at how many users are seeding each one, the torrent's historical activity, and the rate at which new torrents are added each day. Such work would provide evidence for the argument regarding the viability of these networks as a form of grassroots, decentralized archives. Moreover, such a study should theorize as to the 'ownership' status of the archives: are they a form of personal archives or are they collective archives. Perhaps they are both. Regardless, with the current political climate surrounding the preservation of information (Dennis), research exploring the viability of grassroots, decentralized networks as alternative forms of archives is fertile ground to study.
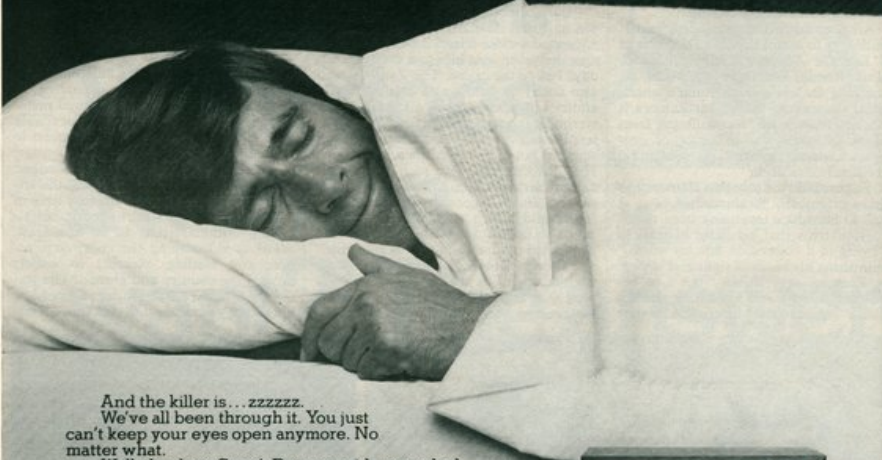
Whatever direction future research takes, it is important to remember that social and cultural practices do not emerge fully formed. They develop in unique historical, cultural, technological, and social contexts and borrow from already existing practices. What this study has shown is that the practices of analog informal networks of media sharing like early videophiles communities survive to this day in digital networks. This is not to say that the practices and social hierarchies are identical; rather, there are clear connections between past and present. The duty of scholars is not only to identify the

practices, but to uncover and analyze how and why they have evolved. To that end, this study has worked to continue in the growing tradition of eschewing digital exceptionalism and instead has endeavored to show that new generations of informal networks of media sharing are built on the foundations of their predecessors.

Appendix

Figure 1.1: The Betamax will allow owners to watch their
favorite shows and awaken well-rested.

Figure 1.2: The Betamax will help owners advance their career.
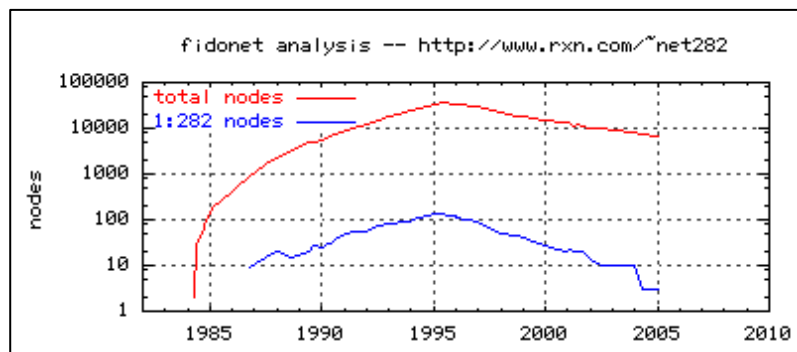
Figure 3.1: The rise and fall of BBS activity.
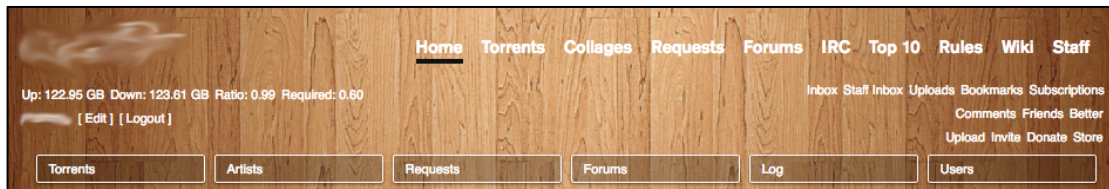
Figure 4.1: The top of *Music Chest*'s homepage.
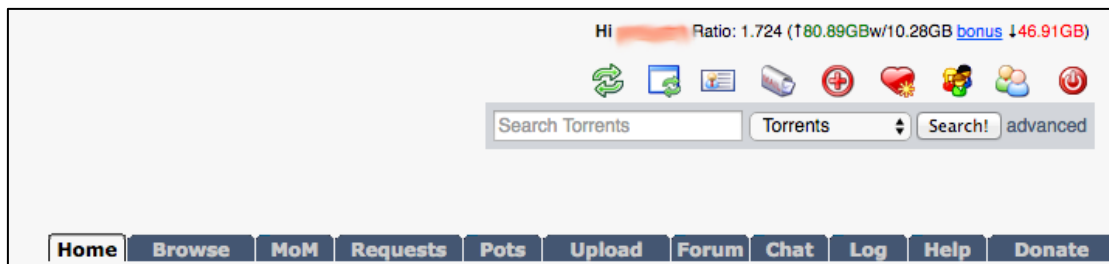
Figure 4.2: The top of *Great Cinema*'s homepage.
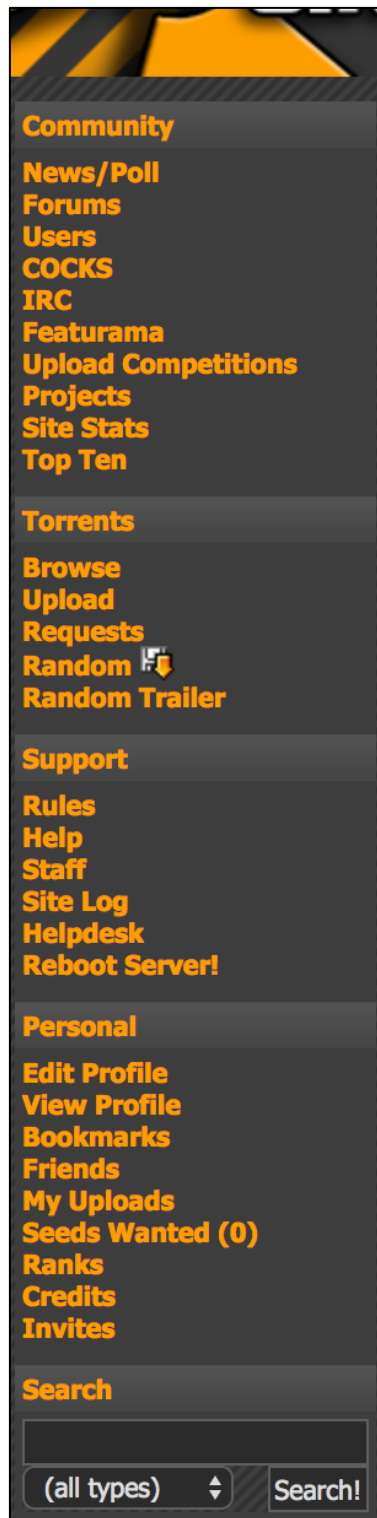
Figure 4.3: The sidebar of *FilmDestruction*'s homepage.

Title	Dir/Artist	Yr	Genres	Flag	Comm num/last	Upper	Added	Files	Size	Got	Sd	Lch
Casablanca	Reza RouyGari	2013	World		0	persepolis	Sep 6 '13	16	99MB	1 time	0	0
Casablanca Subs: En, Es, Pt, Fr, De	Michael Curtiz	1942	Classics Romance		0	Ceyyhun	Dec 31 '14	466	44.75GB	36 times	0	0
Casablanca Subs: Ja	Michael Curtiz	1942	Classics Romance		5 Mar 30 '16	clubhouse	Apr 9 '12	1	5.71GB	69 times	12	0

Figure 4.4: Results from a search on *Great Cinema*

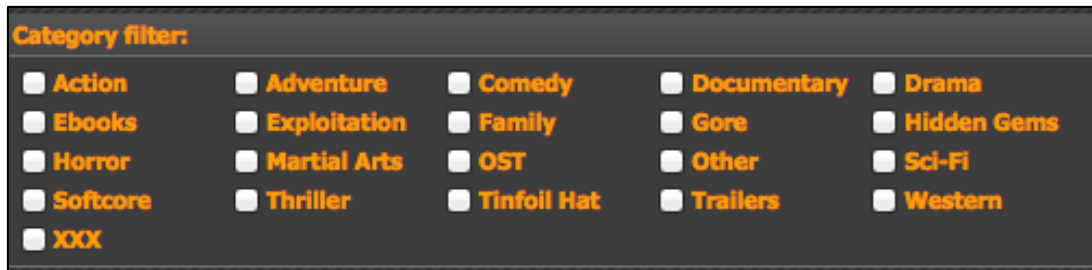

Figure 4.5: Global view of *Music Chest* web forums.
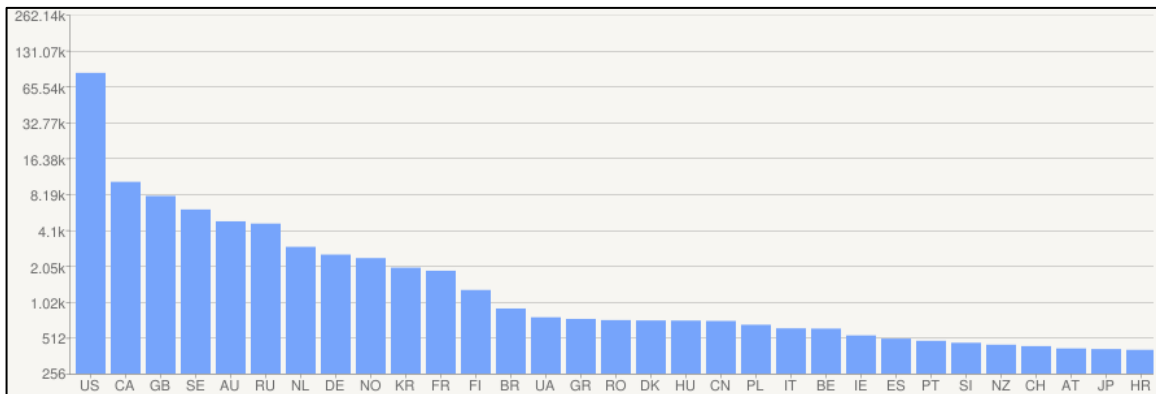
Figure 4.6: *FilmDestruction*'s genre list.

Figure 5.1: This chart displays the number of *Music Chest* users from individual countries.

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