

## Reality television, fan behavior, and online communities of practice

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I describe participation in reality television online communities as a case of "cultural convergence" (Ito, in press; Jenkins, 2006) across "old" fan fiction and "new" online community practices. The ways in which reality TV fans engage as media producers parallels the ways in which researchers who study other new media such as video games describe the rich discourse, enduring community, and media mixing required to participate in these settings (Ito, in press; Steinkuehler, 2006). I argue here that the characterization of these worlds as *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the dominant analytic framework for online communities, does not fully capture the way learning (and therefore becoming) happens in reality TV online communities and suggest ways to reframe this model. Finally, I propose directions for future research focused on understanding reality TV online fan communities as informal learning environments that require participants to engage in rich cognitive and sociocultural media literacy activities.

### Reality television, communities of practice, and the new media literacy

In this emerging strand of media literacy research, I bring together three different bodies of work – media studies and the culture of fandom (e.g. Ito, in press; Jenkins 1992, 2002, 2006), communications studies with a focus on reality television (e.g. Nabi et al., 2003; Reiss & Wiltz 2004; Thompson, 2001), and learning sciences research around online learning communities (e.g. Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004) - to describe how fans of reality television participate in online learning communities. Much research around online learning communities takes Lave and Wenger's (1991; Wenger, 1998) seminal *communities of practice* theory to characterize learning in these environments. Distilled from extended studies of apprenticeship practices such as tailors and butchers, the central metaphor for learning, and therefore becoming, is a developmental progression from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation over time. Barab et al. (2004) define online learning communities as, "persistent, sustained [socio-technical] network[s] of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history, and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise" (p. 23). While this definition captures the features of reality TV online learning communities, the hierarchical view of learning, movement from legitimate peripheral to full participation, does not capture the way reality TV online communities function, nor does it describe the way participants become community members. A primary reason for this disconnect, I believe, comes from the treatment of literacy in traditional communities of practice as the consumption, critique, and (sometimes) production of text. Ito (in press) argues that new media literacies blur the line between production and consumption, disturbing our traditional conception of legitimate peripheral participant as consumer and full participant as producer. Here, I treat the literacy practices embedded in participation in reality TV online communities as a productive technology-based, multi-modal activity that allows participants to master the design grammar by which messages are effectively communicated across these various media, many of which are non-text based (Gee, 2003; Ito, in press).

While "reality television" has been around since *Candid Camera* debuted in 1948, *The Real World* precipitated a wave of new shows (Thompson, 2001) that comprise distinctive television genre, defined by Nabi et al. (2003) as, "programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur" (p. 304). Early studies of television fandom in online communities (Jenkins 1992, 2002, see also Baym, 1999; Lancaster, 2001) looked at Usenet groups around shows such as *Twin Peaks*, to understand the construction of meaning and the production of cultural artifacts through participation in these communities. These studies, however, could not have possibly predicted the explosion of technological innovation that would result in the creation of online communities as rich and sophisticated as massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) (Gee, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2006), fantasy sports (e.g. Jenkins, 2002; Smith & Sharma, 2005), and learning communities across the k-16 system (Barab, et al., 2004). While the information sharing, text production, and dialoging that Jenkins, Baym, and Lancaster describe are integral parts of these communities, participation in online communities necessarily means participating in social and material practices beyond the comprehension and composition of text,

in both synchronous and asynchronous spaces (Steinkuehler, 2006). Extending the work of Jenkins (2006) on cultural convergence and reality television, I argue that reality television online fandom serves as the prototype for modern cultural fandom and the expression of that fandom through multi-modal online communities of practice.

## **Participation in reality TV online communities**

Along with the recognition that participation in new media television fan communities involves much more than the consumption of a variety of texts comes the need to describe and classify what it means to participate in these communities. Ito (in press) characterizes participation in communities such as these by, “[a shift in] structures of participation in the production/consumption matrix.” Learning in online communities such as these cannot be defined by the traditional dichotomy of production and consumption; reality television show fans are more than just television watchers – they are producers of a participatory cultural experience (Jenkins, 2006). Drawing from models for participation outlined by Ito and Jenkins, I propose two primary ways in which the model for learning in reality TV online communities differs from the often-employed communities of practice framework: 1) the trajectory for learning is non-hierarchical linear and, as a corollary; 2) the tools, venues, and products involved in participation (and therefore becoming) are dispersed. I will provide brief examples of each of before turning to a research agenda that can explore this model for learning in new media literacy environments such as these.

## **Trajectory for learning as non-hierarchical**

There are myriad ways of becoming a member of a reality TV online community, all of which require different literacy practices, methods for participation, dedicated amounts of time, and interaction with others. While I have not yet unpacked all of the trajectories for learning involved in participation, some popular forms of participation include: critique; immersion and; “fantasy” play. Critique is likely the most popular form for participation, and is also the most similar to the prototypical structure for participation in online TV fan communities described in earlier studies. Participants engage in critique primarily through a weblog, opportunities for fans to express their opinions and dialogue with one another about the show, the contestants, the judges, and any information relevant to the show. While participating in a weblog is a popular activity for fans across reality TV online communities, it is particularly interesting to look at weblogging across game show-style reality shows with a job search focus, such as the *Apprentice*, *America’s Next Top Model*, or *Project Runway*. The focus of these shows is to choose one person to follow through a series of challenges related to core competencies in the given profession, who is anointed by a group of industry professionals as “the next big thing” in their field. Since competitions are centered on identifying “the best” contestant in their field, weblogging serves as an opportunity for fans to try out and demonstrate their knowledge of that field by sharing their opinions on contestants’ products as well as judges’ choices.

What if, however, as a fan of a reality show, you are more interested in how contestants will fare than in a sophisticated, critical analysis of the show itself? Competitive fandom as a model for participation draws heavily from the world of fantasy sports, where players take on the role of team owner and assemble teams of real-life ball players to accumulate the players’ statistics throughout a season. The *New York Times* (May 16, 2006) reported that 15 million people spend 1.5 billion dollars annually on fantasy sports, creating an active, participatory culture around online sports fandom. The metaphor of “owning a fantasy team,” has been seamlessly and enthusiastically embraced as another participation structure for reality TV fandom. For example, through *fantasysurvivor.net*, participants can earn points by choosing who on the show will win challenges, be voted off the game, be immune from voting, and other in-show categories. As of the writing of this paper, there were 646 independent leagues registered on the website, with a variety of different community characteristics including public or private and free or with charge.

Finally, reality TV has begun to capitalize on the popularity of MMOGs, and particularly *Second Life*, immersive digital worlds where users take on virtual selves. MTV’s documentary-style show, *Laguna Beach*, chronicles the lives of privileged high school students living in a town in Orange County, California. Through MTV’s website, *Laguna Beach* fans have the opportunity to create an avatar within the *Laguna Beach* world, inhabit places the show’s characters inhabit, and participate in virtual *Laguna Beach* events including throwing parties, attending concerts, and shopping (<http://www.vlb.mtv.com>). From these brief descriptions, it is easy to see how the practices embedded in these forms of participation are vastly different, do not necessarily require mutual participation, and all represent reality TV fandom in different ways.

## Tools, venues, and products involved in participation are dispersed

The communities to which these participants belong are not mutually constituted, and not simply because some watch *Survivor* while others are hooked on *The Apprentice*. The three activities described briefly above constitute fundamentally different modes of participation in reality TV fandom. Part of the reason for this is that fans have access to a rich set of media tools, from which they can pick and choose to learn about and from and to use across these different trajectories of community membership. Media tools used for participation include: anytime access to past series episodes, access to “never before seen” footage, opportunities for conversations with show contestants or “characters,” through web chats, web casts, or by their reading online journals. These multimedia tools contribute to the constellation of literacy practices in which fans engage, facilitating their capacity as media producers. For example Bravo TV, the network that sponsors *Project Runway*, (a show focused on the profession of fashion design), gives fans the option of creating their own runway shows, using fashions created throughout the life of the show, from both winners and losers. Using a simple drag-and-drop interface, participants can select clips, music, and special effects, share their videos and rate others’ videos. In this way, fans have the opportunity to “try on” the role of designer, creating a hybrid construction of work from multiple designers, reframing the original work through a fan’s eyes.

## Future studies on reality television, participation structures, and online communities

In this paper, I have argued why reality television represents the prototypical domain for a new media literacy version of fandom and the online communities created as a result. Additionally, I proposed that the *communities of practice* framework for understanding how learning looks in these communities is appropriate, but incomplete, considering the myriad participation trajectories available that do not necessarily mirror the hierarchical movement from legitimate peripheral to full participation outlined in Lave and Wenger (1991) and the literature around online communities. I have begun to describe what these participation structures look like, but this is simply the beginning of a line of research aimed at understanding reality TV online fan communities as prototypical examples of cultural convergence. The strand of participation I have termed “competitive fandom,” seems a fruitful line of research aimed at characterizing learning as consumption *and* production that disturbs the peripheral to full participation hierarchy.

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