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**Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford & Joshua Green:
*Spreadable Media:
Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture.*
New York, USA: New York University Press. 2013.**

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We are experiencing creative disruptions in the media industry, and while few of us truly understand what is happening or where we are heading, this book provides the reader with a timely overview of some of the many expressions of the new media logics, including examples of creative work, business models, audience behavior, norms and values, legal questions, metaphors for web 2.0 cultures, media research, and intellectual reflections.

‘Spreadability’ refers to the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes (p. 3).

The authors argue that in order to thrive in the coming years, companies must “listen to, care about and ultimately aim to speak the needs and wants of their audiences” (p. xii). Throughout the book, it is demonstrated that producing and marketing products to consumers is not the same as serious dialog with citizens about their needs and wants. For example, most companies keenly protect their copyrights for business purposes while audiences want to use media products in their own creations and share them in a gift-oriented culture, e.g. on Facebook.

The book is like a treasure chest full of ideas for scholars, practitioners, and university teachers. It contains a wealth of case descriptions and analyses from a wide range of communication fields, yet it does not truly provide the reader with theoretical models, final

answers, or quantitative data. Although neither a textbook nor an academic dissertation, it provides an insightful foundation for discussions.

The authors are among the first-movers in the field: Henry Jenkins is a Professor at the University of Southern California, Sam Ford is Director of Audience Engagement with Peppercomm Strategic Communications, and Joshua Green is a Strategist at Undercurrent. The three have previously worked together in the Convergence Culture Consortium (MIT).

In terms of ideology, the authors place themselves firmly within a social responsible media theoretical framework. Some of the concluding remarks are reminiscent of the 1947 report from the Commission on Freedom of the Press: *A Free and Responsible Press*. For example, Jenkins et al. write:

If for many of us, the long-term goal is to create a more democratic culture, which allows the public a greater role in decision-making at all levels, then a key requirement is going to be timely access to information and transparency in decision-making (p. 304).

The authors add that both companies and governments should expect increased pressure to be more transparent and that all citizens must make responsible decisions when sharing material. At the same time, the authors clearly critique the neoliberal rhetoric “that has emerged as marketing and business models take into account an increasingly participatory culture” (p. xiii). In other words, they ask for media to be free and for creators at all levels to be responsible to the rest of society when they exercise their freedom.

The authors encourage all of us to help create a media environment that is “more inclusive, more dynamic, and more participatory than before.” They also ask “governments, companies, educational institutions, journalists, artists and activists” to support a culture in which media products can be shared freely instead of being restricted (p. 305). It is, they argue, in the interest of creators to allow such free sharing – even though it breaks their copyrights - because their media products can only resonate as long as they are shared. To quote the authors: “If it doesn’t spread, it is dead” (p. 293).

Like *A Free and Responsible Press*, *Spreadable Media* is written by academics but based on testimony from practitioners. Many of the core arguments were developed through years of dialogue between three groups: 1) faculty members at the MIT Program in Comparative Media Studies, 2) leading media corporations, and 3) content creators. The project, furthermore, was funded by the corporations (p. ix). The authors encourage further dialogue with the industry:

While great value comes from media studies academics acting as outside cultural critics of industry power and policy, this mode of discourse has historically made engagements between cultural and media studies and the creative industry contentious. Instead, our intervention takes the form of fostering dialogue between industry and academia (p. xii).

The main body of the book consists of seven chapters with different perspectives: 1) the relationship between media companies and their audiences, 2) appraisal of content, 3) audience measurements, 4) meaningful audience participation, 5) designing for spread, 6) media diversity, and 7) transnational implications of the new media landscape.

Media companies and their active audiences often have different sets of norms and values. As a theoretical foundation for this analysis, the authors use historian E.P. Thompson's concept of 'moral economy' and the philosopher Lewis Hyde's writings on the relationship between commodity and gift economies (p. 48) plus insights from others like Marcel Mauss, Richard Sennett, and Howard Rheingold. Companies are warned that it may backfire if they try to profit from the *gifts* they receive freely, such as likes and dislikes on webpages; product reviews; and the demographic data, pictures, and other types of information that users share. According to the norms for gift giving, people expect something in exchange for the content that they share, such as interest, comments, or information. However, some companies treat the data as *commodities* that can be bought and sold in the market, and this creates conflict. Jenkins et al. write:

There is a growing recognition that profiting from freely given creative labor poses ethical challenges which are, in the long run, socially damaging to both the companies and the communities involved (p. 68).

The authors compare commercial use of free labor to misuse of community assistance, and they call on companies to make sure that audiences get something valuable in return for their gifts of free labor. If they do not, then what is now experienced as "playful participation" can over time turn into "alienated work" (p. 65). Companies ought to consider what "moral codes and guidelines" (p. 75) should be included in the social contract between themselves and their customers.

Providing tips for content creation, the authors use communication scholar John Fiske's concept of 'producerly' as a point of departure. Accordingly, spreadable content should be open, with loose ends and gaps that make it possible for an active audience to interpret it in the light of their own experiences. For the same reason, journalistic news writing and scientific papers are seldom considered spreadable. The spreadable media world belongs instead to those who can create content around "shared fantasies, humor, parody and references, unfinished content, mystery, timely controversy, and rumors" (p. 202). Anyone who regularly browses the social media will be familiar with the availability of this type of content and knows how often it is liked and shared, typically with some personal comments from friends. So it is worth learning the tricks of the trade, for instance that many baby boomers feel "enormous pleasure" (p. 203) in watching nostalgic images from their childhood, including toys, comics, films, and commercials. When shared on social media, such material "sparks the exchange of memories" (p. 204) and builds new relationships.

The numerous cases in the book give the reader insight into many different kinds of cultural expressions, including fan culture, soap opera, comics, activism, religious media,

diaspora media, music, video, and commercials, which makes the book useful for a diverse group of researchers within cultural and media studies. The downside to this is that the often-lengthy case descriptions can be a bit tedious to read for an impatient scholar seeking theoretical implications.

Many metaphors are used in connection with the distribution of content on web 2.0. We speak of videos going 'viral', and even though biological viruses make us sick, many of us teach students the secrets of culturally 'sticky' viruses. The Canadian author Cory Doctorow (2008) compares the process of sharing to a dandelion spreading its seeds without knowing where the process will end. *Spreadable Media* has adopted this dandelion metaphor for the book cover (pp. 291-294), but the authors do not feel that the dandelion metaphor captures the conscious human acts involved in spreading content:

However useful Doctorow's analogy may be, it is a metaphor, not a system by which we propose to make sense of spreadable media. The choice over how we deal with intellectual property is ultimately cultural, political, and economic – not biologically hardwired (p. 293).

The book demonstrates the valuable insight that can be gained when professionals and academics co-create. Unfortunately, the reader cannot freely download and share it. All rights are reserved ☺

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