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A Review of Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture

Abstract

Book review: *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green.

Keywords

book review, Online Media, Media Content, Participatory Culture, Emerging Media

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A Review of Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture

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Book Title

Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture

Author

Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green

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Introduction

“If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 1). As we all are aware, technology has caused the media landscape to change: no longer are the days of direct communication to the consumer and content creators the only gatekeepers of information. Instead, media has been shaped through content that may be spread by or engaged with by various audiences. The goal of the book is to help readers understand the media culture’s change into a style of audience participation. The authors examine the history and development of audience engagement in media flow, the implication of this engagement, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced by media creators in a world of spreadable media.

Summary

In the introduction, the authors propose the idea of “if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” (p. 1) and begin an examination of an “emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways” (p. 1). Basically, media “nowadays” are spreadable. One of my favorite quotes from this chapter is, “The decisions that each of us makes about whether to pass along media texts – are reshaping the media landscape itself” (p. 33). The idea of spreadable media helps to put media content into the hands of the consumer who are “receptacles for mass-produced and mass-distributed content: as eyeballs in front of a screen (in television terms), butts in seats (in film or sports terms), or whatever other body parts media companies and brands hope to grab next” (p. 32). This key idea suggests the public is no longer a consumer of media; instead, the public is

responsible for the creation of media and is involved in a participatory culture. Through technology, communication, and networks the public is able to share, create, reframe, or rather, participate in all types of media and messages.

Spreadable Media uses each of its seven chapters to support the argument that media are spreadable. In the first chapter, “Where Web 2.0 Went Wrong,” the authors explain the Web 2.0 structure allows users, consumers, and audiences to become co-creators of content. However, it also argues this structure has led to a fragmented digital culture where not all media is created equal and suggested those involved in the spread of media have a different perception of value and/or worth.

In the second chapter, “Reappraising the Residual,” an in-depth description of appraising media is discussed. The authors have described media appraisal to be measurements used to determine the media object’s value. Media may be appraised when someone decides whether or not media is valuable by spreading, and what is not valuable by not spreading the information. Further, the chapter discussed how media may be appraised in a residual form, or materials from the past, and residual content may become a “prime candidate for spreadability” (p. 97). For example, a residual piece of information may be an Extension document discussing Avian flu. The media may come back to life in a residual form when a case of avian flu is known in the present. People may search and spread this information to provide details and facts about the avian flu.

The idea of value and worth continues in the third chapter, “The Value of Media Engagement,” where previous styles of engagement measurement are discussed. In the past, the process of appraisal or measurement has been based on the appointment-based viewing (where viewers fit a television program into their schedule); however, our culture has shifted into a form of engagement-based viewing (where audiences have the ability to view content at any time from multiple devices and participate in the conversation). The authors explained while survey data and amount of views may have been satisfactory to evaluate how much the program was valued by audience members, the new engagement-based model allows users to view, share, and circulate information about the television program. Therefore, “such changes require a rethinking of popular models of consumerism” where measurement is based upon how a media program may “contribute to the cultural value (sentimental, symbolic) of media products by passing along content and making material valuable within their social networks” (p. 123). The authors suggested a better way to measure the way an audience interacts with media is through the use of the term “multiplier” by Grant McCracken. A multiplier describes the interaction a person has with the media content. Scholars should survey multipliers to determine the amount of engagement or interaction with a particular media.

Chapter 4, “What Constitutes Meaningful Participation,” provides insight into the changing relationship between media content producers and audiences. While audience interaction is necessary to consume media in a participatory manner, not all audience members are participatory to the point where feedback or content is created. A user may participate from simply viewing the media, interacting with the media, to providing new content.

In Chapter 5, the authors discussed “Designing for Spreadability.” Successful creators must understand the strategic and technical aspects they need to master in order to create content that is more likely to be spread. They must think about what motivates participants to seek out information and then share the information. To increase motivation to spread media, Jenkins et al. discuss how spreadable media should be created based on the five following factors: the media must be available when and where audiences want it; portable; easily reusable in a variety of ways; relevant to multiple audiences; and part of a steady stream of material. Content creators must

also be aware of the audience needs as well as patterns and motivations of media circulation and emerging tools. Finally, the authors explained seven types of content (shared fantasies, humor, parody and references, unfinished content, mystery, timely controversy, and rumors) that may allow readers to view content through their own experiences and then share the content.

The sixth chapter, titled “Courting Supporters of Independent Media,” explains how people find your information. The authors describe how there is not one single way for an audience to find your information and provide examples of how many different organizations have targeted media to their audience. While the media market share might be dominated by large organizations such as Apple, Microsoft, or Sony, there is a place for smaller organizations to build shareable media content. The chapter touches on the idea of Chris Anderson’s long tail theory, which describes how organizations need to target niche markets to spread content. Low budget and small resource organizations may increase their spreadability when targeting a niche group because “niche media content may accrue value at a different pace, on a different scale, through different infrastructure, and on the basis of different appeals than the highest-grossing commercial texts do” (p. 238). As agricultural communicators look at this chapter, they may find value in learning how to build a niche market and target media toward it.

The text finishes its argument, in the seventh chapter, of the use of spreadable media in international contexts. The chapter touches on the idea of how spreadability has increased the diversity of ideas; however, not everyone may have access to the information. While spreadable media may not be used in some third world countries or countries with political restrictions, the use of spreadable media transnationally has the opportunity for various cultural perspectives on topics.

Critique

While the text does focus on mainstream media, agricultural communicators can learn how to spread information to their clients or audiences from the various information, examples, and case studies in the text. The text provides a historical foundation of the development of Web 2.0, emerging media, and participatory media. The authors use examples and case studies to document how audiences and the public interact with media platforms and content.

Agricultural communicators must be aware of how an audience appraises or values media. Audience analysis and audience interaction is crucial in telling the story of agricultural communications. By becoming aware of audience appraisal of media content, communicators will be able to understand how different audiences value the messages placed on Web 2.0. Addressing various audience segments and creating media to meet the needs of each audience member is crucial to the spread of agricultural information. In addition, the book lays the groundwork for how communicators should design these spreadable communication messages to meet the needs of audiences on multiple platforms. Jenkins et al. explained how communicators must make their content accessible through multiple places and easily discoverable:

Rather than passively waiting for content to be delivered as in the broadcast days, users are actively seeking out and comparing media on important issues, through search engines, recommendations, video on demand, interactive program guides, news feeds, and niche sites. This is placing pressure on many makers to convert their content so that it’s not only accessible across an array of platforms and devices, but properly formatted and tagged so that it is more likely to be discovered. (p. 170)

For agricultural communications students and scholars, this book proves to be valuable. Not only are numerous authors cited, but the case studies presented of how spreadable media is used on and across different platforms and media provide models for media analysis. Further, it shows multiple opinions and arguments where scholars and students may begin a conversation of the use of spreadable media in a field. In addition to the book, the website, www.spreadablemedia.org, provides an area for discussion and a blog discussing case studies, research opportunities, and articles.

Who Should Read the Book

This book is unique as it was designed to be read by multiple readers: “media scholars, communication professionals, and people actively creating and sharing media content who are interested in how the media industries-and our culture(s)-are changing as a result” (p. ix). By writing the text to fit the needs of various readers, the book provides a unique perspective that allows each audience (scholars, students, and professionals) to learn the importance of developing spreadable media in their communications plans. While specific sections of the book may speak more closely to a specific audience, the book was written to provide an area of common ground of information for each of the audiences and their perspectives. Each type of reader will learn the history and development of our emerging media landscape, the nature of audience engagement, and the elements necessary to create engaging participatory or spreadable media.

For the field of agricultural communication, *Spreadable Media* would be a great resource when developing informational content, creating content that has the ability to converge over multiple platforms, and understanding how to more deeply engage the participatory audience. This book may also be used in agricultural media courses to address how students should incorporate spreadable media into communication campaigns to spread the story of agriculture.

About the Authors

Laura Gorham is a doctoral student at Texas Tech University in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communications.