

## **Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media, pt. 2**

“Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media ‘Audiences’”

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Podcasts remediate older aesthetics and commercial practices while incorporating the capabilities of networked technologies. Podcasts like *Welcome to Night Vale* and other "modern radio dramas" use a variety of business models including older practices such as single sponsorship, distribution windows, and merchandising; while also implementing the newer social network based funding options like crowdfunding, donation based subscription, and special live events to finance programming. How then are new media texts repurposing traditional models in such a way as to leverage the system while also rebelling from it? Is crowdfunding or fan funding a potential break from consumer practices, focusing instead on fan “gift economies” as a legitimate model for creative work as economic labor? How does this relate to the traditional concepts of audiences, fans, and fandom and their “purchase” of and interactions with media texts? Are fans now official co-authors of the canonical text? What does this imply about convergent media and the creative process?

The audience directly funding through donation or voluntary subscription fees is kind of “gift” or “moral” economy, in which fans acknowledge the cultural worth and pleasure a text provides and directly compensates the artist in appreciation and hopes of additional content. This variation of “gift economy” is popular in funding podcasts, web series, and other convergent media content. Audiences and producers rebel from traditional media industry practices by relying on “gifts” to support each other financially and artistically, creating a utopian economy through sharing. However, the “gift” or

“sharing” economies as a method of financing is becoming hybridized to finance new media texts like podcasts, blending the “gift” with “production.”

The hybridization of the gift economy with more traditional capitalist models leverages both fan and production labor to facilitate the success of transmedia programming like podcasts, web series, and webcomics. For this hybrid gift economy to be considered "moral," transparency is required. Therefore, the most successful audience/production partnerships are those that clearly defined expectations for both sets of collaborators. Generally, the “rules” or “guidelines” are clearly and publicly stated (usually on a social media platform) by both sets of content producers (original IP owners and the audience). These guidelines outline what is considered a consumer good, who can share profits in the sale of those goods, and to what percentage. Through this transparency, there is an active give and take between "production" and "audience" over the economic boundaries of the text (and audience) as a commodity. Notable examples of this hybrid economy are fan co-production of official merchandise (ex. *Welcome to Night Vale*), and fan produced marketing (*Carmilla*).

By accepting direct fan financing, and incorporating fan works directly into the production and marketing of programming new media independents are opening up a different relationship with audiences, one of open collaboration in the creation of the text. This collaborative model provides a sense of audience “ownership” traditional media outlets like film and television often find chafing, or disruptive, but for many new media formats, particularly podcast or web series that use serial drama, this collaborative models id found to be lucrative both creatively and financially. Of course, the collaboration of audiences and production is only possible because convergent texts are

moving towards transmedial worlds and away from succinct stand-alone storytelling, thus allowing a flexible environment for formal and informal audience co-authorship. For serial narrative podcasts and web series, programs on the fringe of the convergence media landscape, we can see a move towards often official and certainly implied informal fan/creative co-authorship of the transmedia world of the text. Further, the boundary between the imaginary world and the real world becomes blurred or even fractured as audience interactions with the text and each other become canonical to the text.

Using social media platforms like Tumblr, and Twitter podcasts and web series expand the world building through audience interactions, whether this is through direct dialogue (asking questions), the incorporation of fan works as canonical either through merchandising or marketing efforts, or extension through fanon (fan fiction, headcanon, etc.). Though none of these audience behaviors are new, convergence media's acceptance of and official collaboration with fans is, and it is changing the relationship audiences have with these texts, and ultimately all media texts.