Chapter VIII

Viral Experiences:
Do You Trust Your Friends?

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Abstract

This chapter signals the implications of a shift in production and distribution practices of online advertising in an age of computer network-facilitated participation. It explores online entertainment forms such as games and films that are increasingly being used as an integral part of online advertising strategies to promote goods and services to potential consumers. These “advertainments,” as they are often referred to, exemplify the linkage of commercial goals with cultural texts through creating engaging experiences, initiated by commercial corporations for solid reasons of promotion and profit, enabled by computer networks, and given form by various members of the public.

Introduction

Seven years ago, I was working on a research project that focused on the construction of the Hollywood actor as a popular and public media figure. One of my case studies was the actor Mr. Keanu Reeves who I happened to run into. Or actually, he walked into me...
when I was having lunch in Los Angeles. It was a bizarre coincidence since I had not thought about setting up an appointment with him. It took me about thirty minutes to decide whether I should approach him or not. We ended up talking for a long time about lots of things. Three days later this little encounter was on the E! Online web site:

E! Online: Ted Casablanca’s Awful Truth: 10/22/97 The Eyes have it: Keanu Reeves, grunge central, chatting with a Dutch blonde woman in the lobby of Hollywood’s famous [...], where the decor is as musty as Keanu’s muscles.

It turned out to be my first encounter with the construction of celebrityhood and the magnitude of the Internet to “spread the word.” Keanu Reeves is massively represented on the Internet such as on movie sites, fan sites, message boards, chat rooms, and Web logs.

Pictures of his private belongings are posted, claims about his whereabouts, the books he is reading, girls he is seeing, are denied or confirmed and spread across the virtual community that mainly embraces Keanu’s (often “wannabe”) inner circle and fans. It is no wonder Keanu always finds himself awaited by a crowd of people, be it in a hotel lobby, airport, garage or club. He once said, “It is about getting organized, about being connected.” The introduction of new technologies has had an important impact on the relationship between technological artifacts and the social organization of communication, of getting connected to other like-minded people (“peers”) through communication devices.

**Interactive Audiences**

Digital technologies, especially the Internet, have reactivated debates on 19th and 20th century audio-visual media such as film and television that are seen as points of convergence where technologies, corporations, and people meet (Ang, 1982; Dyer, 1998; Jenkins, 1992). Questions regarding the aesthetic status of new technologically enabled expressive forms such as digital games and Web logs are raised, and challenges regarding the role of commerce in the production of commercial culture are mounted. Digital technologies have made questions regarding originality and reproducibility particularly difficult, and they have blurred the lines among producer, distributor, and consumer to a far greater extent than previous media forms, facilitating what has been termed participatory culture. Since the late-1990s researchers have shown an increasing interest in this linkage between new technologies and publics, looking in particular at the formation of new social collectivities and “bottom-up” redefinitions of cultural practices such as fan fiction, the creation of spoofs (“fake ads”) and modifications (variation on a game) on the Internet. When in the mid-1990s Mosaic and the Pentium chip were introduced the notion of re-circulation initially associated with digital culture by decentralizing computer networks and enabling the peer-to-peer exchange of sound, image, and text, radically changed. The Internet could be used for more than looking up information or sending e-mail. Instead people formed networks, effectively constructing “user-created search engines” for the exchange of music files, games (e.g., KaZaA), and
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www.igi-global.com/article/micro-credentials-nano-degrees-and-digital-badges/129773?camid=4v1a