

Getting a complex idea across to people who need to know: Fanworks as open source cultural goods in a hybrid economy

ハイブリッド経済におけるオープンソース製品としての同人物

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Topic

Fanworks – fan fiction, fanvids, fan art etc. - used to be exchanged only in a “gift economy” that was seen as separate from the “market economy” of commercial cultural goods. Today, however, fans and media companies are increasingly blurring the lines between these two by attempting to commercialize fanworks in what some have called a “hybrid” economy.



Problems

Among stakeholders in fanwork (fans, media companies, policy-makers), serious tensions persist about what form such a “hybrid” economy should take. These tensions and uncertainties have sunk almost every attempt in Europe and North America to commercialize fanworks in a way that's acceptable for all stakeholders. Some issues:

- Media companies and/or rights holders look down on fanworks, and believe they should have legal power to decide what is allowed and how fans are compensated
- Some fans consider the “gift economy” sacrosanct and (unavoidable) commercialization bad on principle
- Policymakers and open culture activists working on highly relevant issues like copyright reform have little or no knowledge about fanworks, although most “remix” works they discuss are probably fanworks

Solutions

1. Explain fanworks as the “cultural goods” equivalent of a well-known existing hybrid economy that works, that of open source software

- Open source software (OSS) is the best existing example of a gift and a commercial economy working together
- Like fanworks, OSS is created by volunteers (in theory) but also commercialized without harming the gift ethos of the creators
- Non-fans know that OSS works
- Putting fanworks next to OSS lets fans argue from within a framework that others accept as legitimate

Gift economy	Hybrid economy	Commercial economy
Volunteers code for free	links	Companies sell services, support
Fans create for free	links?	Companies sell fanworks and services to fans

2. Prove that this works by raising awareness of an existing hybrid economy for fanworks, the market for fan manga (dōjinshi) in Japan



- Japanese fans do not only exchange self-made manga in a gift economy; they also sell them at stores and at massive conventions (see left)
- Media companies make no direct profits but consider dōjinshi free publicity, a source of innovation, and a nursery for young talent
- Printing companies and stores profit directly
- Fans pay taxes on income from dōjinshi
- The market for dōjinshi is estimated at several hundred million euros

3. Push this message to stakeholders effectively

What are the audiences that could use this info?	What can or should this research offer them?	Where does the info need to go to reach them?
Fans	Inspiration for how to commercialize fanworks without harming fannish gift economies	Twitter, Tumblr, dōjinshi, Wikipedia, other fan-specific resources
Rightholders	Proof that allowing commercialization of fanworks does not harm bottom line	Online and offline trade publications, various online sources, ?
Policymakers	Basic awareness of the topic and its relevancy to policy issues like copyright reform	White papers, various online sources, ?
Academics	Info on dōjinshi system that is only available in Japanese	Open access journals, academic blogs, Wikipedia
Open culture activists	Understanding of how fanworks fit into open culture	Relevant blogs, Wikipedia

Results

Making easily adaptable text

- Research published online as it happens, with comments options
- Modular text created with Semantic Mediawiki
- Modular text can be reordered or changed for different audiences
- Modular text can be repurposed as other output that audiences find useful, such as glossaries or lists of people and companies

→ Issues: very complex to use

Pushing that text to audiences

- Copy info to resources audiences use (Wikipedia, Fanlore wiki)
- Create buzz with social media
- Establish contacts within different audience communities

→ Issues: building an audience is time-consuming. Publishing tools for reaching several networks at once (eg Sendible) are somewhat useful but have many limitations

Conclusions

Direct contact with stakeholders is essential for making research count, and digital tools allow this, but the time investment for an individual researcher is still often unacceptable. Possible solutions:

- Improve networking tools for engaging with several disparate audiences at once?
- Improve tools for modular publishing of texts?
- More help from university PR departments for researchers who have to reach audiences that are not easily cultivated online?

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