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Industries, artists, friends and fans: Marketing young adult fictions online

by Leonie Margaret Rutherford

Abstract

The Internet has facilitated the coming together of formerly more separated youth taste cultures, such that literary, screen and graphic fandoms now more readily overlap. Media industries have invested in online strategies which create an ongoing relationship between producers and consumers of entertainment media texts. Using the Internet marketing campaign for Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga as a case study, the paper examines the role of the publishing industry in marketing popular teen literary fiction through online channels in ways that often disguise promotional intent.

Contents

Introduction

The rise of game and digital media studies in both cultural studies and youth literacies research is likely to impress a casual reader with the sense that a stark gap exists between producers and users of digital and print–based entertainment media (see for example: Shaffer, 2006; Gee, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Mackey, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2008). However, as McChesney and others remind us (McChesney, 2000; Beer, 2008), the vertical integration practiced by global media conglomerates has resulted in economic inter–dependence between digital, screen, print media and merchandising industries. Thus "remediation" of entertainment fiction (s) is a structurally central process in the production, distribution and marketing of narrative "properties" within these transmedia corporations.

Entertainment fiction for young adults now spans multiple platforms. Prior to the mainstreaming of Internet applications, the participation of audiences in communities of interest for screen and print narrative had higher entry thresholds. Many earlier entertainment fiction communities were organized according to genre interest (science fiction and fantasy, or romance), and enacted through channels such as zines. Audiences also participated in real world events such as conventions; indeed these offline infrastructures continue to be of importance alongside new media communities of interest.

Much of the discourse surrounding the concept of a new "digital generation" assigns to social media the potential to disrupt prior typologies and hierarchies of knowledge. Commentators have suggested that social media networks lend themselves to more diverse and eclectic tastes, organized around generational and/or local populations and shaped by norms of sociability. Such a premise, followed to its logical conclusion, suggests that Web 2.0 connections, mediating the distinctive tastes of users, should facilitate peer sharing of favourite texts. Challenging the primacy of genre fandoms as a mode by which users learn

about new entertainment texts, social benchmarking might thus eclipse genre–based subcultures in emergent online spaces.

In this paper I suggest that the actions of apparently reflexive social actors are already implicated in, if not totally determined by, the circuit of what Nigel Thrift calls "knowing capitalism" (Thrift, 2005). Ostensibly democratic networks of online youth sociability exist in a complex and complicit relationship with the processes of global media industries.

The online marketing industry has identified the young adult demographic as the major target to be reached by campaigns within social media communities. Industry discourse surrounding the young adult audience is different from that constructed in pedagogic and "gatekeeper" institutions, such as schools, book and film councils. Historically, these have been strong channels for screen and print media knowledge distribution. In the next part of the discussion I outline the ways in which Web applications, together with viral marketing enabled by social media, have been used by trade publicists within the publishing industry. Some of this commercial impetus has attempted to recruit younger demographics to traditionally popular genres, as seen in romance giant Harlequin's development of a social media presence [1].

The influence of book packagers and concept marketing constructs the young adult and children's audience as a trend conscious consumer force. Their goal is to mobilize cross–platform uptake of entertainment fiction artefacts. These young consumers are understood as unlikely to be "heavy" readers with specific genre preferences. Their co–option is predicated on the viral communication of peer trends facilitated by social media. Sometimes referred to as "high concept" or "Hollywood concept" marketing among literary and merchandising agents (Wyatt, 1994), this marketing draws on research on the emotional investment of audiences in visual and celebrity culture. It refers to the notion of a concept, or "hook", to recruit the online demographic through appeals to social aspiration associated with celebrity status. Thus marketing of entertainment fiction relies on the "hook" of a blockbuster trend, in addition to more traditional "fannish" preferences for genre.

Blockbusters, long tails and fans

Alongside the democratic vision of social media networks populated by reflexive social actors, another popular strand of theory has envisioned new media audiences as romantic individualists. It foreshadows the end to mass culture in the fragmenting of traditional media audiences into ever smaller niche sectors. The economics behind this vision was most notably articulated in Chris Anderson's *Wired* article and book — *The long tail* (Anderson 2004; 2006). Anderson's thesis argues that information and communication technologies, with applications facilitating easy searching, empower users to locate and procure cultural products which are closely tailored to their individualist tastes and needs. The theory suggests that mass taste cultures are destined to obsolescence, and that the production and distribution companies to prosper "will be those who switch out of lowest denominator mode and figure out how to address niches" (cited in Elberse, 2008).

Influenced by Anderson's thesis, when examining audiences for popular young adult literary fictions online, I expected to find less discussion of "blockbuster" texts, and more idiosyncratic sharing of favourite and lesser known titles, facilitated by generational "friending" among users of social media networks. However, my research, which extensively analysed online discussions of *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), Stephenie Meyer's vampire and teen–romance series, revealed more about traditional blockbuster promotional strategies enhanced by viral marketing through selected online channels and applications.

As Anita Elberse (2008) has argued, rather than online fragmentation of audiences eradicating mass consumer behaviour in the circulation of cultural texts, the "importance of individual best sellers is not diminishing over time". Rather than benefiting independent artists, her research (based on purchase of music and video content via online channels) shows that digital communication and retailing may be further strengthening the economic and cultural position of "superstar" artists and blockbuster titles: that is, enhancing the position of a select group of winners.

Elberse's analysis indicates that those users who "consume" more "obscure" content are either (1) heavy consumers, with a great capacity for varied titles — in the case of fiction, these are the heavy readers (or viewers)–or, (2) those who tend to stick to a genre, such as fantasy or romantic comedy. However, she also shows that consumers/audiences for the less mainstream or rarer content also consume the blockbuster titles and they do this more than they do with

rarer material.

The consumption pattern discussed by Elberse is borne out by an analysis of several *Twilight*–related discussion threads on *Smart Bitches Love Trashy Books*, a specialist blog–based reviewing site devoted to discussion of the romance genre (http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com). This site is the focus for a community of fairly dedicated readers of popular fiction in both the romance and fantasy genres. Member comments on two *Twilight*–related posts by one of the blog owners (*Smart Bitches Love Trashy Books*, 2008a; 2008b) compare the *Twilight* books to a large range of other genre texts than is apparent in the discussion threads on the official *Twilight* fan site, or *Twilight* based groups on *MySpace* or *Facebook*. Groups on the two popular social networks overwhelmingly (1) canvass readers' speculations about which supernatural boyfriend the heroine will/should end up with, or (2) circulate information about upcoming *Twilight* related events. However even the "heavy readers" of romance and fantasy in the *Smart Bitches* threads over–represent the blockbuster texts in their posts, even when the "genre" appropriateness of that text might seem to be in question. Similarly, the *Urban Fantasy Land* blog (http://urbanfantasyland.wordpress.com) — a reviewing site, unsurprisingly, devoted to a discussion of the urban fantasy genre — includes the Harry Potter series in a list of Young Adult urban fantasy exemplars (*Urban Fantasy Land*, 2008). The setting of Rowlings' series does not showcase the spaces of a real and gritty urban landscape that mark the conventional tropes of the urban fantasy sub–genre. The mass visibility of the heavily promoted text eclipses traditional sub–genre distinctions.

In their introduction to a collection of essays on fan fiction and Internet fan communities, Busse and Hellekson (2006) document the changes in fan cultures following the rise of social media applications, particularly the influence of "friending" in the circulation of cultural content. Potentially, "friends" recommendation of entertainment fiction titles could arise from several values: idiosyncratic pleasure, erotic or desiring investment in the text's characters and their relationships, and/or a more sub–cultural investment in the text as part of a favoured genre repertoire. Despite these necessary emotional investments in the content circulated, the particular visibility of particular titles remains predictable on the basis of traditional marketing campaigns for publishers lead titles. These marketing strategies increasingly incorporate online components.

Following the phenomenal market success of the *Twilight* series, Stephenie Meyer, like J.K. Rowling before her, is often represented in the media as a "Cinderella" author. Lev Grossman's recent *Time* article reiterates the typical depiction of Meyer as "a Phoenix housewife", an unassuming "natural" rather than a "professional". Grossman retells the story of the dream source of *Twilight*'s masochistic teen relationship: "a young woman was talking to a beautiful, sparkling man is a sunlit meadow. The man was a vampire. They were in love and he was telling her how hard it was to keep from killing her" (Grossman, 2008). This romantic revisionism, denying any professional ambition on the part of the author, is consistent with the thinking of contemporary trade publicists. Tracy van Straaten of Scholastic, has been quoted as saying "part of the trick to marketing books to teens online is that the most effective results seem to come from the coverage that appears most organic, viral and uncommercial in nature" (Sellers, 2007).

While online marketing will only represent a part of the promotional budget of a pubisher's lead title, there has been an increasing trend to strategies aimed at targeting the teen market through Internet channels. Marketers may design a site, send books to bloggers with specific interests, produce podcasts or video book trailers and author interviews to be hosted on official book or fan sites. Video interviews are frequently linked to the book's page on Amazon and other online retailers. Publicists also organize chat sessions with authors on their *MySpace* pages, using pre–collected questions from readers. In the case of Stephenie Meyer's first novel, *Twilight*, Little Brown Young Readers (a subsidiary of Hachette Livre), created an official Web site for the series, including video interviews for the book with the visually appealing author.

Children's and young adult authors have historically been proactive in promoting their own books to the target demographic, traditionally via offline events such as visits to schools. The artist's Web site with a blog as the front page is now the norm, designed to create a personal and ongoing social relationship with the reader. Like many other writers, Meyer also set up her own *MySpace* presence, ostensibly in response to friends' queries as to whether she were responsible for the numerous Bella and Edward fan pages that had sprung up. The author's self–promotion paralleled the industry campaign to build lines of communication with the fan base.

As the quote from Scholastic's publicist illustrates, the lines between user–generated fan sociability, and industry–generated social marketing are blurred. Such overlaps demonstrate the informational circuit of what Nigel Thrift calls "knowing capitalism". Audiences/users gain information about narrative remediations and consumer opportunities related to their interests,

while publishers and media industries garner data about their audience base. Through user feedback, publishing and media industry stakeholders are able to make projections about the viability of merchandising or cross–platform products associated with their literary or screen media properties.

When Little Brown Young Readers redesigned and upgraded the official Web site for the *Twilight Saga* in 2007 (http://www.thetwilightsaga.com), they included discussion boards, a reviews blog, an application to find author media appearances, and an explanded range of images. Applications were added to sustain readers' involvement in the atmosphere of suspense built up around the romantic closure to the series. Fans were invited to speculate on which of the two competing supernatural suitors, vampire Edward Cullen or werewolf Jacob Black, the heroine would choose. The revamped *Twilight Saga* site led with a reader poll on its newly added discussion boards that asked "Who should Bella choose?" (Sellers, 2007). The publishing industry is increasingly using online competitions such as the Bella poll to build reader engagement with their titles. Other examples include fan–contests, competitions involving user–generated video auditions for roles in upcoming made–for–DVD versions of teen titles. Readers are able upload videos of themselves reading for a part (Sellers, 2007). At the time of writing (late September 2008), the front page of the *Twilight Saga* site hosted a poll which asked readers, "What was the biggest twist in *Breaking Dawn*?" (Little Brown Books for Young Readers, 2007). *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008) is the final book in the saga.

Considering this exponential expansion of online sociability and marketing does the idea of fictional genre as an organizing principle of taste cultures seem to be in decline? The blockbuster strategy used to market *Twilight* may be attributed to its appeal to readers of conventionally popular fictional modes: the teen peer melodrama (screen) and the romance. As Juliet Flesch (2004) notes, the adult "mass–market" romance community has traditionally been characterized by a strong lines of communication between publishers, authors and readers. Adult romance publishers, such as giants Harlequin/Mills and Boon, actively and routinely sought feedback about their readers' tastes. As a mobile and transient genre, with a short shelf life for its publications, the mass–market romance relied on social and located communities. The point of sale for the mass–market romance was not just bookshops but wherever women bought daily commodities. The publisher–reader information circuit was always a marketing exercise. Its function was to cultivate a demographic of known book buyers reached through gendered channels of labour and sociability.

The teen romance, while also dependent on recognizable series "packaging" for recruitment of readers, has also been exponentially aided by a move to online networks for female sociability. These channels open connectivity to the culture industries, to the marketing of women's labour, and to increased participation in both consumption and production. However, the historical association of the romance with women's domestic space and labour should not obscure another salient element. The marketing of young adult fictions has also increasingly been aligned with the cult of celebrity.

Fan clubs and celebrity authorship

Writing of the music industry, its artists, and their intersections with online fandoms, Paul Théberge argues that "superstar performers ... are back in the limelight, bolstered by an "almost daily barrage" of Internet–based hype and promotional material [2]. Not just the music industry, but the culture industries more widely, have recognized that the Internet constitutes a mass medium which offers organized processes for intervening in the producer–consumer relationship. Industry, artist initiated, and artist endorsed fan clubs and sites have emerged as vital elements in this relationship. As Théberge explains:

> Online fan clubs have taken on a new dynamic, marked
> by the appearance of a more direct form of dialogue
> between artist and fans, and a more regular, even daily
> ability to connect both artists with fans and fans with
> one another, fan clubs are now regarded as a new kind
> of "community" by some and a new source of revenue
> by others. [3]

Fan clubs are thus about more than individual celebrity, having a place for emotional investments by fans and goals of financial rewards for investment for the industry. Stephenie Meyer's appearance is wholesomely sexy while radiating down–homey domesticity and authenticity. Her screen presence and performance "talent" early marked her as potential

writer–celebrity. Little Brown Young Readers' campaign to promote Meyer's saga as a teen cult sensation included a *MySpace* launch for the lead title. The publicity campaign was designed to organize interactions between the artist, and the industry channels for her publications, in such a way as to "intensify and prolong their relationship" (Théberge, 2005). The official Web site (http://www.thetwilightsaga.com) includes video interviews with the author talking about her characters, and a geographical event finder referencing author appearances or other offline promotional events. A Playlist application arrays music media for each of the first three novels. The official industry site offers limited potential for contact with the artist, and primarily functions to foster promotion of the books and anticipation of new commercial releases [4].

Like many film celebrities before her, Meyer has been able to us the participatory potential of the Internet to negotiate considerable public control of her image. Resisting the stylistics of the original industry site, she engaged her brother Seth to build her own site (http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/):

> I got started in [Web publishing] when Little Brown put together a Web site for Twilight ... . It was beautiful — very dark, romantic, gothic — but not me at all. I worried readers would think I dressed all in black and wore blood–red lipstick. But I'm this big geeky person. My brother put together a rather meandering Web site that was a better representation (Maughan, 2007).

Though www.stepheniemeyer.com has now been upgraded and professionalized, the first iteration was more amateur–like in its design. It constructed a persona for Meyer as a "geeky" personality. The Web site exemplified the erosion of the boundary between public and private self, between consuming fan and producing author. Meyer's projection of herself has been domestic rather than "professional": more like a fan fiction writer than a commercial author. She has described herself as a "storyteller" rather than a "writer", one with an investment in what the fan fiction community refers to as "shipping" — the "pairings" of her own fictional characters. This persona provides a stark contrast to the overtly commercial and proprietorial text–owner, J.K. Rowling.

The author's own site, and the *MySpace* presence she created have always been more narrative–based, using blog entries in the quasi–confessional style traditionally employed by journal writers. This has the effect of a ritual sharing of information (personal, taste preferences, beliefs and enthusiasms) to invite a particular kind of ongoing communal relationship with her fans. With the regular promotional events in her schedule, the Internet sites invite social bonds which can be enacted in online and offline contact. The fandom has now become so large, that third parties now manage day–to–day interactions on the *MySpace* site and stepheniemeyer.com, with less regular contributions from Meyer herself. However the offline events increased in scale in the promotional lead up to the release of the fourth title in the saga (*Breaking Dawn*) and the November 2008 release of Summit Entertainment's film adaptation of *Twilight* (2008, directed by Catherine Hardwicke).

Since the publishing industry has historically spent less promoting children's and young adult books, their authors have relied on personal relationship building with audiences, through school visits, and correspondence with readers. What the Meyer case study shows, however, is the formation of a star persona, largely via Internet channels of relationship building and of celebrity promotion. The *Twilight* saga readership has expanded even more rapidly than Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Its promotion from its outset was wedded to other, non–literary, cultural forms. Little Brown Young Readers' decision to finance a blockbuster promotional strategy for this novel from a first–time author can be attributed to the text's bankability according to the "Hollywood Concept" model. The series conforms to other traditionally lucrative blockbuster formulas in screen, literary and graphic genres. The "teen romance", the teen peer flick and TV melodrama series, and the increasingly popular hybrid which blends the audiences for paranormal fantasy, teen subculture, and romance/melodrama have precursors in cult screen successes such as *The Lost Boys, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel* and *Charmed*.

Participants in overlapping taste cultures are more easily co–opted since the advent of the Internet as a mass entertainment vehicle [5]. The phenomenal growth in popularity of Meyer's *Twilight* series can be attributed to use of online applications and networks to showcase the star potential of the author. The readership is co–opted into an anticipatory partnership invested in the romantic closure of the series — 'Who will Bella choose?' — and in desire for the incarnation of the characters in a teen movie adaptation.

This fostering of anticipation and desire in the audience ultimately leads to what Paul Théberge [6] describes as a "commodity focus to the artist–fan relationship through personal investments in a set of fetishized objects". Character merchandise (t–shirts, posters, online assets) are available via the official industry and author Web sites, as well as the author–

endorsed but fan–organized sites, such as *Twilight Lexicon* (http://www.twilightlexicon.com/). The books themselves are of continuing profitability to the industry, promoted through the cult of celebrity surrounding the author, and increasingly, around the young actors cast in the *Twilight* movie [7]. This celebrity focus results in the recruitment of new fans to the series. Following the success of the first novel, the series was repackaged with an integrated design scheme. The books themselves become fetishized objects. Tying with the release of the concluding title in the saga, *Breaking Dawn*, earlier titles were reissued, their covers boasting advertisement for "new material" in the formula made profitable by the extended edition DVD of blockbuster theatre films [8].

Undoubtedly the publisher and author sites as well as the unofficial pages and groups provide ongoing market feedback to the industry on the popularity of the series [9], and have fed its exponential growth since 2005. Planning of entertainment commodities to capitalize on this market has been swift. During the early years of the fandom online (2005–06), an analysis of the author and author endorsed sites reveals speculation about whether the movie option for *Twilight* would ever be taken up (and who would play the central vampire heartthrob, Edward Cullen). A straight–to DVD film was initially projected, as appropriate to a smaller, niche fandom. As the sales of the later books escalated along with the celebrity–oriented Internet fandom, these modest projects gave way to the financing of a blockbuster teen movie [10], which took over the prime theatre release date previously slotted for the sixth Harry Potter adaptation.

The author, the series and its characters have become celebrity commodities, fuelled by Internet communities of interest, an intersecting, cross–media stardom. Summit Entertainment's official *YouTube* channel for the upcoming *Twilight* movie hosted video interviews with the actors playing the major and minor teen characters along with the official pre–release trailers and posters. Many of these videos were produced by staff of the author–endorsed fan site, *The Twilight Lexicon* (www.twilightlexicon.com).

One of the major promotional events scheduled for the release of *Breaking Dawn* was a midnight book launch concert in New York, which featured some of Meyer's favourite musicians. This event was a hybrid of the musical concert tour, and the convention of film premiere. However, the author was clearly still the primary star of this event [11]. Like the earlier fan site polls (Who should Bella choose?), and the buzz merchandizing of "Team Edward" or "Team Jacob" t–shirts and memorabilia, the event traded on anticipation of the series' romantic closure in the heroine's choice of "ship"/relationship. The opening address of the MC for the evening asked the audience to align themselves with either "Team Edward" or "Team Jacob".

A brief survey of the discussion boards of any of the official sites suggests that readers are as likely to have been attracted to the books through searches for information or visuals about other real–life celebrities, as much as via "friend" recommendations, or through searches for entertainment reading matter. In a thread from the official *Twilight Saga* Discussions Board in mid–2008 asking how readers first learned about the series, "Sara" (2008–05–06) posted as follows:

> Well ... for me ... it started wif searching for hot celeb pics ... seriously ... I search for chace crawford's pic ... at photobucket ... then ... I found a quote dat says ... "chace is not that far from edward cullen ... then ... i search at googles ... i saw twilight's book cover ... and about stephenie meyer the author ... I was like a crazy girl who curious bout edward cullen ... n wanna know more bout him ... . I search the book every where ...... but NO STOCK!!!! I lost my hope ... but one fine day ... my friend ... she's a good friend ... she found the book ... n keep it for me ... AT LAST!!!! (accessed 20 September 2008).

'Sara" end her post with the following comment: "if I could marry a book ... it would be *Twilight*". The content of these discussions primarily suggest enjoyment of the romance elements of the saga — the "shipping" or to the chick–litesque erotic investment in the character of Edward.

Conclusion

My discussion of young adult reading communities online indicates that the Internet has become a mass medium for the formation of taste cultures. The culture industries have invested in online strategies which create an ongoing relationship between writers, readers, distributors and publishers. While niche communities exist, with strong preferences for individual genres such as paranormal romance and fantasy, a profile of such readers as "romantic individualists" pursuing esoteric tastes cannot be supported by my research to date. "Heavy" readers, who show familiarity with more esoteric genre texts also read the most promoted blockbuster texts, regardless of strict genre categories, and are likely to over–represent these texts in their online discussions, and thus providing evidence in support of Anita Elberse's conclusions about the longevity of mass consumption behaviours in the Internet era.

The Internet has, however, facilitated the coming–together of formerly more separate youth taste cultures, such that literary, screen and graphic fandoms now more readily overlap. In looking at what might previously have been thought of as the "light" reader of entertainment fiction, it seems fair to conclude that many of these consumers may now be recruited to reading (and participating in non–literary "literacy" activities around print and screen fiction) by means of an initial engagement with celebrity culture. An initial investment in the image of a celebrity performer may serve to recruit readers to a fictional series.

Finally, the role of the publishing industry in marketing popular teen fiction can be shown to use the Internet and social media in ways that deliberately disguise a promotional intent, mimicking the ostensibly non–commercial discourse of youth sociability in online channels. 🅵🅼

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Notes

1. Harlequin also pays commissions to owners of websites and social media profiles who direct users to eharlequin.com. See "Affiliate Program Overview," at http://www.eharlequin.com/articlepage.html?articleId=13&chapter=0, accessed 20 February 2009.

2. Théberge, 2005, p. 486.

3. *Ibid.*

4. The Little Brown site is less "narrative based" and heavy with links to popular Web applications, such as "Cullen family" album on *Flickr*, message boards, and promotional stalwarts such as reader polls.

5. Coppa, 2006, pp. 54–5.

6. Théberge, 2005, p. 489.

7. At the time this paper was written, the movie had not yet had its cinema release. A cameo appearance by the author in the film bears out my argument about Meyer's "star" status as writer.

8. The new material included focussed on the commodity: T–shirt transfers for "Team Edward" or "Team Jacob" fan affiliation.

9. In addition to *MySpace, Flickr, YouTube*, there are numerous *Twilight*–related groups, virtual commodities and related applications online. A search on books and literature in

Facebook groups, lists a number of *Twilight*–related groups (for example, *Because of Edward Cullen, Human Boys have lost their Charm* with, at the time of writing, over 30,000 members (with only rare discussion of literary matters); compare this with the less than 2,000 members for *Facebook* groups devoted to what the industry describes as "literary fiction."

10. The movie rights were taken over by Summit Entertainment in 2007 on turnaround from Paramount.

11. The New York concert was, at the time of writing, available as online video from the official *Twilight* Web site and many of other Internet fan sites.

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Editorial history