OTAKU ENGAGEMENTS: SUBCULTURAL APPROPRIATION OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

by

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At the end of the day, this work is not just about fans of anime and manga, it is about otaku of all stripes, and it has been a pleasure getting to know you, whether it was in person, online, or simply reading what you wrote and watching you interact with others.

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ABSTRACT

Even as contemporary youth are encouraged to become familiar with information technologies (IT), the impacts of those technologies on their well-being have been the subject of increasing concern. Youth subcultures heavily engaged with IT have often been portrayed as victims of alienation, as having abandoned traditional values, and/or as being more likely to commit acts of violence. This study seeks to characterize and demystify a youth subculture of extreme/obsessive enthusiasts known as otaku who are heavy users of information technology and are focused strongly on the acquisition and trade of elite information.

Otaku culture was initially identified and defined in Japan, but is now international in scope. This dissertation, looking primarily at American otaku in the United States, examines the history of the otaku concept as it evolved in Japan and abroad, focusing especially on otaku-related discourse amongst English-language speakers and writers. In order to develop a firm sociological understanding of otaku and to make sense of the interpretive flexibility surrounding the otaku concept, a framework of analysis defining otaku is presented. Based on that framework, an ethnographic study of American otaku who are fans of Japanese animation and comics was designed and conducted. The results and conclusions of that study are presented, along with new theoretical understandings of otaku in general and their place in society.

On a larger scale, this work examines some of the information/identity strategies that are being employed by individuals in response to Postmodernity and the rapid technological changes that are a product of our information society. More specifically, it asks two major questions:

1. How do youth subcultures, otaku in particular, differentially engage technology and science as a means of identity/information management?
2. How are otaku a resistant subculture (especially as "reluctant insiders")?

These questions are addressed within the domain of Science and Technology Studies—the field in which this dissertation is being submitted.

1. Introduction

1.1 The otaku imaginary

A young man in his late teens, who we will call O, sits alone in his dark bedroom in a suburban house. His parents are at the local shopping mall, a place he hasn't visited in over a year. But O is neither lonely nor antisocial; he just has better things to do. His room is illuminated only by the three computer monitors that allow him to absorb the information he has been seeking out on the internet. At this moment, he is ecstatic that he has uncovered a new historical detail about the production of his favorite animation cartoon from Japan. (He has the entire series copied off of television, sent to him from his Tokyo contacts, but he hasn't actually watched the show in years.) O proudly goes to a web forum where he meets his acquaintances— other seekers of similar information. He posts a snippet of this new elite knowledge on the forum, and provides a link back to his own Web site where interested readers can find out more. Others on the forum challenge his claims, but he defeats them with the strength of his patiently collected evidence—rare scans of original animation cels. Still more people express their awe and admiration for this piece of work well done. Privately, some people have begun to contact O, seeking to establish trades for information and rare merchandise. For a little while, at least, O is at the center of attention within a vast social network of connections. He is the man of the hour within this underground information economy. O is an otaku.

What I have written above is a brief illustration of my personal concept of what it means to be an otaku. Otaku subculture, originally identified and labeled as such in Japan in the early 1980's, has remained difficult to pin down. Early on, the term 'otaku' was used to describe the subculture of animation (known as *anime*) and comics (known as *manga*) enthusiasts in Japan. Beyond the notion of otaku as simply being anime and manga fans, however, there have been numerous, often contradictory ways that otaku have been characterized by various segments of Japanese society over the last two decades. Otaku have attracted non-Japanese attention as well, and they have been studied, mimicked, ridiculed, romanticized, etc. by people in the English-speaking world who have become interested in this Japanese (sub)cultural export. Influenced by Japanese conceptions of otaku as being obsessed animation fans, technological fetishists,

avid collectors, and/or antisocial outcasts, but informed by American attitudes toward geek culture, individualism, and lay expertise, representations of otaku by non-Japanese have been equally varied (and contested) over the last 15 years.

This dissertation will examine the history of the otaku concept as it evolved in Japan and abroad, focusing especially on otaku-related discourse amongst English-language speakers and writers. Given the current fluidity of the otaku concept, I will present a framework of analysis that can be used to meaningfully study otaku culture. Based on that framework, I conducted an ethnographic study of otaku culture (anime otaku, in particular) in the United States, and the results and conclusions of that work will be presented here, as well as new theoretical understandings of otaku and related subcultures. The work may also suggest possible policy alternatives for those sectors of society most affected by subculture (education being one major example). All of this work surrounding the study of otaku subculture was done within the context of larger questions regarding youth and identity, asked within the specific domain of Science and Technology Studies—the field for which this dissertation is being submitted.

1.2 My history as an otaku

At this point, I would like to take the opportunity to discuss my personal background as it relates to this research. By doing so, I will explain some of the personal motivations informing the intellectual reasons why I pursued this particular line of inquiry. When we choose intellectual endeavors to engage in, the choices we make are not self-evident. They do not emerge fully-formed, and are not the inevitable result of any objective data or observations. These choices are motivated by personal factors, specific emotional attachments to certain types of questions that have uniquely personal meanings that come from our own histories. While the work in this dissertation can be appreciated from a number of perspectives different from my own, I believe the reader will benefit from a better understanding of me, the author, and where I am coming from. Furthermore, such discussion will allow me to dive right into questions of reflexivity.

Making my personal history a part of this work is not done lightly. As I am introducing my personal history here in the introduction, a brief discussion of the issues surrounding that (self-insertion) is worth mentioning at this time.

In his theoretical work on fan culture studies Matt Hills (2002) examines some of the difficulties involved when the scholar is a fan him or herself. The issues of objectivity, distance, rigor, and (over)enthusiasm are in play in all academic disciplines, not just the study of fan cultures. Few scholars will criticize a scientist who is a "fan" of science or even a "fan" of the model organism he or she is studying. Social scientists who study sexuality are not typically asked about their own sexual orientation, as such information is private and not considered relevant to the academic discourse. Most people are accepting of the fact that many feminist scholars happen to be women. Yet, Hills is correct that there exists a certain amount of suspicion when it comes to scholars of fandom who are also fans. The very enthusiasm that defines fans (itself derived from 'fanatics') explicitly undermines the objectivity of the scholar-as-fan, or at least the perception of objectivity.

I would emphasize *perception of objectivity* as being the key issue here[1]. As with the other fields of study I mentioned, it is expected that scholars will be enthused about the work they do and the subjects of their research. While a certain amount of methodological care, restraint, and self-examination is expected of all scholars, so too is a certain amount of passion, and no scientist of any stripe is expected to figuratively become a robot in service to the imagined gods of objectivity. The social and intersubjective nature of the scientific community provides the opportunity for argument, persuasion, and refutation, eliminating the need for personally heroic feats of dispassionate objectivity. If scholars were expected to be completely objective at all times, no need would exist for a robust scientific community. Isolated and atomized individual scientists working on wholly unique projects would be enough to provide all of humanity's knowledge. Discourse to solve problems would be unnecessary; all

[1] Hill, too, acknowledges that "Academics are not resolutely rational" and that "Academic knowledge is not always meaningfully 'testable'". (Hills 2002: 21).

knowledge would be received knowledge. Such a vision of epistemology is clearly fantastical, and so too is the myth of individual objectivity.

Even if we accept that perfect personal objectivity is a goal we can dismiss, what are the benefits of including autobiographical details into a dissertation? The dangers are obvious. Beyond what I already mentioned regarding the conflation of personal involvement and a lack of academic rigor, there is a sense that autobiographical writing in scholarly works is self-indulgent, possibly to the point of being vain and embarrassing.

Citing Doty (2000: 12), Hills writes:

> For Doty, the problem which remains is how to pull off the trick of merging fan and academic identities without 'coming off as embarrassingly egotistical or gee-whiz celebratory' and thereby 'losing the respect of the reader/student'.

In thinking about what is gained, however, I typically refer to Langdon Winner's discussion of the issue in *The Whale and the Reactor*:

> Where does my personal interest in these topics come from? Why have I chosen to approach them in the way I have? These are not questions scholars usually ask. A legitimate fear that one's work will be dismissed if it is afflicted by "subjectivity" leads many people to write with as little personal character or self-reference as possible. The "I" vanishes from the written page altogether. Personal experiences and judgments, even those relevant to the topic at hand are scrupulously avoided...But it seems to me that writers owe their readers something more. To be self-reflective, self-critical about the substance and method of one's thinking can help resolve puzzles that readers have about a work and its relationship to their own sense of things. (1986: 166-167)

In addition to opening my thought processes to the reader for the sake of his or her understanding, there is another important reason why personal context needs to be part of this dissertation. While the research described in the following pages falls within the realm of social science, and therefore science more generally, the work is not wholly reproducible in the normal sense of scientific experimentation (in the laboratory, especially). As my work is the result of field research and analysis of changing and sometimes ephemeral discourse, it can be viewed as a study of particulars—looking at people, events, and conversations as they existed in particular places at particular times. As such, it is impossible for the work to be entirely replicated in the sense that laboratory

experiments can be replicated. That said, however, many descriptive facts I will mention can be checked independently. The reader may also judge my choice of field sites, the relevance of my sources, and the strength of my data as a whole. Furthermore, the reader is also expected to judge the strength of my analysis, the accuracy of my interpretations, and whether or not my arguments are logical.

The most significant irreproducible particular of this research project is myself, the researcher. As such, this dissertation is very much the product of my worldview, my research style and strategy, and my personal biases regarding what counts as important information. Presented with the same data, it is certainly possible (even if it is not desirable) that a different researcher with a different background would come up with conclusions different from my own. Such interpretive flexibility (combined with all the particulars that make up this research project) does not necessarily invalidate my findings, or make them generally un-useful, however. In Science Studies, this general epistemological situation is addressed by the related concepts of 'standpoint epistemology' and 'situated knowledge'. These concepts were introduced to answer the long-standing question regarding whether or not it is possible to have different (but equally valid) forms of science (and knowing in general), whether or not there is a single best vantage point (e.g. method) from which knowledge is to be acquired. The general sentiment in Science Studies is that no single best vantage point exists, and that all perspectives have something to add to the bigger picture of human knowledge, even if some perspectives are better than others at answering certain questions for specific purposes[2]. That said, however, I do not take a stance of pure ontological relativism, nor do I expect that readers will do the same. Contradictory theories and conclusions are *not* necessarily compatible even according to standpoint epistemology. Competing knowledge claims can and should be judged against each other according to the merits of their respective data, interpretation, and analysis.

In this dissertation, I offer you, the reader, a picture that I have painted from my own standpoint, featuring knowledge from where I am situated, and even if it is not a

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[2] We can assume that some epistemological positions are closer to ontological reality than others, even if we can never be entirely sure which ones are which, though progress of knowledge (if that's our goal) is possible via trial and error and memory.

perfect picture of the world, perhaps it is different from what you already know and will therefore enhance your understanding or cause you to challenge assumptions, whether they are yours or mine.

1.2.1 The author as anime fan

The details of my background that are most obviously relevant to this work are the ones concerning my history as an anime and manga fan. Without hesitation, I am proud to admit that I am a veteran anime and manga fan, and my interest in those media prior to beginning my official PhD research on otaku was more than just casual. What follows is a jargon-rich "fandom profile" (that I wrote in addition to my academic profile) for the Anime and Manga Research Circle[3] mailing list that I created in 2002:

> Lawrence "Lawmune" Eng
>
> My earliest anime-related memories are of watching Science Ninja Team Gatchaman on American TV, and Space Battleship Yamato and Captain Future on Taiwanese TV. Like many of my generation of anime otaku, I became a devoted Robotech fan during its run in the mid-80s, paving the way for my interest in the early US anime and manga releases of the late 80s. I have been part of the anime club scene since 1994, being an active member of the Cornell Japanese Animation Society (where I was an executive board member, newsletter staff writer, fundraising committee head, and club historian), the Davis Anime Club (newsletter editor-in-chief), and most recently Animerathon (assisting with the weekly Anime and J-pop radio show) in Troy, NY.
>
> I also enjoy the convention scene, having attended a Robotech convention (in 1986?), Anime Expo '96, Otakon '97, San Diego Comic-Con '98 (as a dealer and member of the press), Fanime Con 2000, Fanime Con 2001, Anime Expo 2001 (as a panel host), Otakon 2001, Anime Expo 2002 (as a panelist), and Anime Expo New York 2002 (as a panelist).
>
> As can be seen on my website, I enjoy writing about anime and maintain a detailed serial experiments lain resource called 'thought experiments lain'. Some of my lain research has been featured in Kawaii magazine and the Serial Experiments Lain – Ultimate Fan Guide published by Guardians of Order,Inc. I used to post messages to rec.arts.anime.* and was a senior member of the now defunct Anime Grapevine community.

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[3] The Anime and Manga Research Circle is an informal organization of scholars from around the world who study anime, manga, and their associated fandoms: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/amrc-l/

> Although I have been away from the centers of the anime fan scene for several years now, I can still sometimes be found on IRC. My favorite anime include To-Y, serial experiments lain, Otaku no Video, and NG Knight Lamune & 40.

That type of profile contains the typical sort of information that American fans expect when dealing with other fans[4]. For example, in addition to my full name, I mentioned my internet 'handle', or nickname, which is Lawmune (based on my own name combined with that of a somewhat obscure anime character from a 1980's children's show). I stated some of the anime shows that got me started as a fan of the medium, immediately allowing other fans of my generation to identify themselves with me, and to allow fans not of my generation to place where and when I am coming from.

Even more importantly, I discussed my entrance into anime fandom, immediately distinguishing myself from the isolated anime watchers/consumers who do not interact with other fans. Like people in academia often do, I mentioned my organizational affiliations and my roles in each, and then I listed the fandom events I attended.

Within fan cultures, people have different ways of expressing their fandom, different specialties as it were, and mine happens to be writing. In my profile, I mentioned some of the places where I have written or had my work featured, including one of my more popular anime-related Web sites, some traditional paper publications, and internet forums—a common place where anime fans communicate with each other online. Finally, I mention that I have not recently been active in the anime fan community, but can still be found online, and I also list some of my favorite anime so other fans can get a sense of my tastes.

Although non-fans might not be able to tell, my profile marks me as being a decently-accomplished old-timer in the anime fan community. Based on what I wrote, fans can assume that my name is not known far and wide amongst anime fans in the

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[4] In *Cultures of Computing* (1995: 10-21) Susan Leigh Star discusses the way that geeks online present themselves, their interests, and their place within the larger geek community using a specialized "Geek Code". While it is not widely used within the anime fandom community, there also exists an "Otaku Code" that serves a similar purpose. As the latter was written by someone who knows me, I am actually one of the few individuals mentioned by name in the "Otaku Code". See http://www.arikatt.com/users/wolfie/otaku.html

English-speaking world, but in specific locales and niches within anime fandom (such as regarding the *serial experiments lain* anime), people will know who I am and what I have done.

As far as my fandom goes, I still consider myself a fan of anime and manga, and if anything, my research into the various phenomena surrounding fandom have only strengthened my interest in anime, manga, and their fans. When people ask me why I am a fan, the answers I give are somewhat typical. I enjoy the storytelling, the artwork, the animation itself, and the fact that the Japanese creators have a unique vision that is informed by their own culture, but is strongly influenced by American visual culture as well, resulting in rich and stylized stories that are both familiar and refreshingly different at the same time. There is also a level of nuanced detail that is very often present in anime and manga, allowing for and perhaps even encouraging obsessive-type behaviors such as collecting related merchandise, dissecting the particulars of a complex storyline, and/or cataloging the vast number of characters/vehicles/literary references that show up in the entirety of a long television series. These types of behaviors and the shows that encourage them are associated with the otaku aspect of being an anime fan, which I will describe in the body of this dissertation. In summary, though, it is safe to say that one major reason I am a fan of anime (as opposed to some other media), is that it allows its viewers (including myself) to be otaku.

1.2.2 The author as scientist

For reasons that will become clearer as I explain my concept of otaku, it is also important to consider my history as a research scientist.

Like my interest in anime, science has appealed to me since I was a child. The stereotype of Asian parents obsessive about their children's education definitely held true for my family. With both parents being well-educated immigrants, my siblings and I grew up in a strong culture of learning, with plenty of access to books and strong encouragement to study even during the summer months. My mother was a school teacher in Hong Kong, and taught Chinese watercolor painting after she emigrated to the United States. My father earned his mechanical engineering degree in New York City and was a professional engineer all throughout my youth.

Critical thinking was a skill passed onto us at an early age, as it was required for the good spirited arguments about current affairs, problems of logic, or even just household rules that filled our dinnertime conversations. I had (and greatly enjoyed) children's books about science, but they were certainly not my only reading material. My first real exposure to science outside the home came when I was a third grader in South Korea, where my father had been assigned to work for a multi-year overseas assignment. At the closed-off compound intended for the families of the expatriate engineers, we had our own school, playgrounds, community center, etc. Because of that environment, all my friends were children of engineers.

Some of the "cool" kids were also the really smart ones, and their popularity was based on how well they knew about science fiction movies, cartoons, and other aspects of popular culture, and also how knowledgeable they were about science and other 'geeky' subjects. The nature of the engineering project meant that families came to live at the compound at different times, and went back to the United States and other countries at different times. Once, as we were playing and exploring the apartment complexes, some of the kids found a bag that was hidden in an otherwise unused lockbox outside of an apartment building. Inside the bag were numerous books, but the one I remember the most was a beautifully illustrated astronomy book with images of the planets accompanied by colorful pictures of their Roman god and goddess namesakes. I was told by some of the older kids that the bag of books was a hidden parting gift left behind by one of the kids who recently went back to the US. I mention this story because it left an impression on me. It was an early experience of seeing information and knowledge being equated with valuable hidden treasure.

Living in Korea, with limited access to American media, English-language books, magazines, brochures, toys, and videotapes were highly desirable to us kids and treated with much respect. Toys, such as GI Joe action figures, were important, but even more important were the catalogs that came with them, as they were full of information about what we were missing in the US, the things that we all coveted. The experience was probably not unlike the heyday of the Sears & Roebuck catalog.

Being popular amongst this particular community of kids, therefore, depended on having a good knowledge of details and particulars (regarding movies, science trivia,

military vehicles, toys, video games, etc.) The kids who knew the most details dominated the conversations and how we all played. When playing pretend (being ninja warriors, for example), the knowledgeable kids were able to assign the choice roles to themselves and assign auxiliary roles to everyone else. That was my first exposure to a geek hierarchy, one based on knowledge as opposed to athletic ability and toughness, which was very different from what I encountered after I moved back to the United States during the fourth grade.

When I did move back, I discovered that I was somewhat more advanced than my peers at science. Because of my interest in astronomy, my father went out of his way to buy me an expensive telescope. Yet, while I was good at math, the quantitative and mathematical aspects of astronomy and physics did not excite me as I got older, and my interest waned. Starting in junior high school, I began to develop an interest in biology (where my memory of small details served me well). Throughout high school, I focused my academic energies on science and math, and I entered Cornell University as a biology major with an interest in studying plants.

I will not go into too much detail regarding my time at Cornell, except that I continued to pursue my interest in plant biology and worked as an undergraduate researcher in a lab in Cornell's plant biology department. I was often asked why I was interested in plants. My response was typically something like this: "Plants are great to work with, and work with plants is extremely relevant to our society and our planet, where we depend on plants for life via food, shelter, and countless materials and chemicals." In retrospect, I did not really have a strong affinity towards plants, gardening, or even eating vegetables. I liked how they looked, and I liked working with them; plants don't bleed or need to be anaesthetized, they are relatively clean, and they do not move around on their own. The style of botany appealed to me as well. It is a fairly descriptive science, with many concrete and qualitative details to remember, as opposed to biochemistry which involves working with a lot of formulas and calculations, or genetics, which involves a lot of statistics.

I spent a number of years as a PhD student studying plant biology at UC Davis. I enjoyed the doing the lab work, but after two years, I knew my heart was not fully into it. For too long, I had been attracted to the *idea* of science, and also the way in which

science is actually practiced, but having such a meta-interest in science was not necessarily conducive to actually doing the type of research work required for a PhD in plant biology. My long term plan had always been a) earn a PhD in the natural sciences, and then b) get into the social sciences. I never really wanted to be become a professor of biology, or to work in industry as a laboratory scientist. While I enjoyed my time as a biologist, I also led a dual life as an observer of science itself—its institutions, protocols, history, and all the various unique individuals who identified themselves as scientists.

During my time at UC Davis, I decided to take an undergraduate introductory course in History and Philosophy of Science / Science and Technology Studies. That course would be my formal introduction to the social study of science and technology, and it resonated very strongly with me, especially after my experiences working in a research laboratory. When it came time to decide how far I wanted to take my Plant Biology education, I ultimately chose to earn my Masters degree instead of continuing on for my PhD. With a concrete goal in sight, instead of spending three to four more years in Plant Biology, I decided to immediately apply to a graduate program in Science and Technology Studies. I started my STS graduate career at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in the Fall of 2001.

Thus, I began my career of studying what science is, how and why it works (or doesn't work in various circumstances), and how it can be used to better society (while being cautious and aware of its pitfalls). When I started at RPI, I was specifically interested in studying issues regarding the rapid acquisition of information and knowledge, its effects on perceptions of individual self-identity, its behavioral consequences, and its broader sociological effects. Amongst other things, I had in mind ethnographic studies of cultural and subcultural strategies that people have adopted in attempts to make the best of our knowledge-rich yet confusing times. When I started, I was uncertain regarding which topics were considered acceptable to study and had considered doing something closely-related to my previous work in biology. However, after my first year of coursework, I realized I could pursue my intellectual interests in STS while exploring the concept of being otaku. With much encouragement from my mentors and colleagues, that is exactly what I proceeded to do, leading to this dissertation.

1.2.3 The author as otaku

Related to my dual background as an anime fan and research scientist is my otaku identity, and my personal experiences regarding the various conceptions of otaku culture. It is at this juncture where my personal interests are closely tied to my intellectual interests in otaku.

I will begin with the definition of 'otaku' that I first became aware of, which will also allow me to explain how I became interested in that subculture in the first place.

I was first exposed to Japanese culture through its mass media products—in particular, the medium of anime[5], the Japanese word for (and contracted form of) 'animation'. From my early youth to the present, like many others, I have been a consumer of Japan's anime, manga[6], movies, music, and other forms of popular culture, despite the fact I have never lived in Japan and do not have any Japanese ancestry. Of course, any Westerner who has ever bought Japanese electronics or eaten at a Japanese restaurant can claim to be a consumer of Japanese culture, but I consider myself to be a *heavy consumer*, who is also *self-aware* and *reflexive* (hopefully) regarding my consumption—some of that reflexivity arising due to the fact that I view myself as conspicuously participating in a market where I am *not part of the intended target audience*.

The relative heaviness of my consumption might be considered suspect in comparison to most Japanese citizens, but I would claim that my consumption of specific media goods (anime, for example) distinguishes me from the majority and places me alongside that subcategory of Japanese consumers who also have specialized tastes and buying patterns, and are self-aware of those patterns. As I discovered, some of those people in Japan are called 'otaku'.

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[5] Anime as a medium contains a broad range of genres, including but not limited to fantasy, science fiction, romance, comedy, drama, horror, and erotica. While a majority of anime is made for children, there is also a large market for anime made specifically for other demographics as well, the over-30 audience being one example.

[6] Manga (Japanese comics) is a nearly ubiquitous medium in Japan, produced for and read by almost every demographic. Manga accounts for over 40% of all books and magazines sold in Japan. (Schodt, 1996)

A prototypical anime otaku, for example, would know the name of every animator who worked on his favorite show (which is marketed towards a demographic he is not part of), maintains a database cataloging every piece of merchandise associated with that show, tends to buy only the rarer items to add to his already impressive collection of merchandise associated with the show, or avoids cash transactions completely—his most prized possession being a rare unused animation cel smuggled out of a production studio (acquired via a trade with another otaku). He is part of a consumer subculture that exists parallel to the mainstream consumer culture and exists just beneath the radar.

In the *otaku*, as I understood them, I saw something of myself. Here were people (fellow anime fans, for example) who were often described as heavy and specialized consumers of specific media products—people who did not shop on impulse, but inhabited the opposite extreme of the spectrum, obsessive and completely self-conscious in their consumption. The *otaku* were more than just that, as will be revealed in the body of this work, but that was how I first became aware of them, and why they resonated strongly with me.

Otaku are foreign and familiar to me at the same time. At the familiar side of things, I used to clearly belong to what some people call otaku culture, and I have been identified as an otaku by others (and have not felt the need to contest that label). Oftentimes, I do think of myself as an otaku, and I have even called myself an otaku in public depending on who I was talking to[7]. I sometimes describe my own personality and the personalities of my friends as having certain otaku aspects that I consider positive. I have been part of the discourse in which the word's meaning has been contested, and I was personally invested in what people had to say about otaku and had my own preferred meanings that I promoted publicly.

In the years after college, however, I progressively moved away from the centers of the subculture, and I developed a more external perspective of otaku. Even as an insider, I noticed and was a bit apprehensive regarding the flexibility of the word 'otaku', but as an outsider looking in, the term's flexibility and analytical imprecision became even

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[7] Because of the multiple meanings of 'otaku', I would recommend not using the term before knowing how others will respond to it.

more pronounced and suggested broader possibilities than those I had previously considered.

Stepping further outside of the subculture has allowed me to recognize the cultural work being done by the interplay of contested meanings, revealing much about cultural attitudes towards youth, technology, hegemonic culture, and resistant subculture. My analysis of the contradictory discourse (in Chapter 5) suggests yet another way of looking at otaku—not to exclude competing perspectives, but to draw upon all of the perspectives available to create a definition of otaku that will allow us to study and discuss the appropriation of technology and scientific culture by youth who have mostly been underrepresented in studies of science and technology.

Because of my packrat tendencies (otaku tend to be collectors, after all), I can identify the exact night that I became aware of the word 'otaku' and its significance[8]. On April 1st, 1995, the Cornell Japanese Animation Society (CJAS), of which I was a freshman member, screened the first episode of *Otaku no Video* (1991), an anime all about otaku culture in Japan. *Otaku no Video* (translated as "otaku's video" or "video of the otaku") introduced many American anime fans in the 1990's to the concept of otaku, something that they (and I) found very familiar even if we had not put a name to it yet. I should also note that in the weekly CJAS newsletter distributed that night, Tom Jayanama, a veteran member of the anime club, published an article entitled "Just what is an otaku anyways?" that provided in-depth commentary and context to enhance the anime viewing experience. That informative article was the first thing I read about otaku culture, and I owe some debt of gratitude to Tom Jayanama who wrote it, as I have been inspired to study otaku ever since.

Where did my interest in otaku come from, in general? Why did otaku behavior patterns interest me in the first place? Those questions can be answered by addressing my interest in subculture, especially youth subcultures. Like most adolescents, I developed a fascination with cultural rebellion (or resistance, as I would call it now). Despite (or because of) the fact that I was very well-behaved, non-confrontational, and

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[8] I also heard the word in 1991 or 1992 in *Gunbuster* (1988), an anime also made by Gainax, but I did not know its significance at the time.

obedient to authority figures all throughout my childhood and even through college (something I attribute to my semi-conservative Asian-American upbringing), I was always curious to learn about how individuals and groups sought to achieve autonomy and identity in resistance to the various controlling forces of society. Because of my middle-class position, I was less interested in learning about working class resistance and more interested in the resistance that applied to someone like myself, in the middle class. For example, I developed and still maintain an interest in the hacker (and somewhat defunct) cyberpunk subcultures. In late high school and early college, I spent a significant amount of time reading about the psychedelic drug culture of the 1960's and important figures of that movement such as Timothy Leary, who would go on to become an important spokesman of the cyberpunk movement in the early 1990's. Other figures from that time included Stewart Brand, John Perry Barlow, and Mitch Kapor, all of whom became important players and visionaries in the IT world.

Having access to monetary and technological resources (i.e. computers), but not being rich enough to buy everything I wanted to buy, I started to develop some otaku-ish tendencies. In particular, I became very selective about my purchases, conducting a lot of research beforehand (not easy in the days before widespread internet). For the last two years of high school, I was living in Korea again, and like before, possessing difficult-to-acquire American goods or having knowledge about them was an important part of a one's communal identity. As a means of defining myself, I took *things* (consumer goods) very seriously, especially when it came to anime which I was already a fan of.

Few people in the mid 90s knew much about anime, and my being an anime fan was one form of subcultural resistance, even if I did not know to call it that. Becoming interested in things that fall outside of mainstream tastes and the approved world of responsible adults has always been one strategy of youth rebellion and identity-seeking. Some primary characteristics of my foray into such rebellion was that I was relatively well-off, had access to consumer culture (which I was expected to participate in—by my peers, the media, etc.), and had access to technology (which I enjoyed). All of these things contributed to the otaku identity I would later develop more fully.

Earlier, I discussed the intellectual reasons behind my transition from Biology to Science and Technology Studies. On an emotional level, while I have been interested in

subcultures since my youth, I did not decide to make them a primary focus of my studies until April 20th, 1999, the day of the Columbine High School massacre. Watching the story of Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and their victims unfold on television, I was shocked and asked to myself, like so many others, why and how such a tragedy could occur. Dissatisfied by the "expert analysis" offered by the mainstream media, I began to ponder what could have driven the two teenagers (who lived in a relatively affluent community) to commit such a brutal act of premeditated mass murder. A moral panic began to emerge centered on the perceived negative influence of violent movies, music, videogames, and the subcultures surrounding those things. Being involved in subcultural activities myself, I had to wonder whether youth subcultures were really to blame. Perhaps, with some research, one could make an argument that participating in subcultures might (in some cases, at least) actually be productive, and possibly *prevent* such acts of violence instead of causing them.

While I do not address issues of youth violence directly in this dissertation, those issues are still a major motivation for me to present this work. Due to the complexities and variations even within a single subculture, it may not be fruitful to make blanket statements about any given subculture (even otaku) being absolutely good or bad, especially when we factor in differences between young people (their needs, dispositions, etc.). Instead, I will describe specific subcultural behaviors (amongst otaku) in order to highlight and develop useful strategies that can benefit the lives of youth, as well as open-minded adults.

1.2.4 On reflexivity

I feel that my personal history as an anime fan, scientist, and otaku have made me particularly qualified to do this research. Having been a member of otaku communities for so long gave me the necessary skills and connections to carry out my ethnographic work. I do admit, however, that the scope of anime fandom has grown so large in recent years, it was difficult at times to translate my (somewhat outdated) expertise to the newer subdivisions of otaku subculture.

When I officially started this research, I had been away from the centers of anime otaku communities for several years. Even though I was an otaku from the mid to late

90s, some of my early informants had already characterized me as being "old school". On the other hand, my naivety regarding the most current otaku affairs allowed me to keep a fresh and (hopefully) less biased perspective as I reintroduced myself back into the heart of American otaku culture.

I am aware that my political biases regarding this subculture, in terms of having positive feelings towards it, might affect my objectivity. While I do not consider myself an otaku apologist, I do take somewhat of an activist stance, engaging in a modest form of action research. Given that the definition of otaku is so unfixed, there is nothing concrete to defend as an apologist. Instead of taking a reactionary stance in the defense of some codified otaku ideal, I hope to proactively offer up new ways of looking at otaku, suggesting positive aspects of the subculture while remaining mindful of its possible pitfalls.

In this dissertation, I have made a concerted effort to distinguish between the enthusiasm shown by otaku themselves and any enthusiasm I might have as a legitimately concerned and excited academic researcher and theorist of otaku. Furthermore, I have tried to take a critical look at otaku culture without resorting to the negative stereotyping that so often accompanies anti-otaku writings. In conducting my fieldwork, constant self-reflection was required. Staying reflexive proved to be even more critical during my analysis and writing of this dissertation. In the gathering and interpretation of my data, I have had to pay special attention to my own gender (male), class (middle), and ethnic (Asian) identities, and I strongly suspect that readers of this dissertation will benefit from doing the same (regarding their own backgrounds).

A personal concern towards youth and a desire to give them more choices regarding who they want to be and how they want to approach the world is what motivated me to do this work. As an academic expected to produce new insights that potentially challenge the *status quo* for the sake of benefiting society, I have a commitment towards alternative and underrepresented viewpoints. The danger of that, of course, is taking an overcritical stance against preexisting (e.g. mainstream) viewpoints, and giving undeserved attention and weight to novel and controversial beliefs that are not widely held (sometimes for very good reason, from both moral and pragmatic points of view).

To prevent that from happening, I have made it a point to consider the lay reader in addition to academic scholars who may encounter this work. Even though this dissertation is heavily about subcultural resistance, I do not assume on behalf of the reader that the challenged institutions are inherently in need of being challenged. Based on the strength of my data, analysis, and arguments, combined with their own knowledge, readers can make that assessment on their own.

1.3 The structure of the dissertation

The first few chapters following this introduction will provide the background upon which I am basing my study of otaku culture.

Chapter 2 is entitled "Studying Subculture", and in that chapter I discuss the study of youth in general, the study of subculture in particular, and why both are important.

Chapter 3 is entitled "Cultures of Science and Technology". Studying youth culture can be done in any number of disciplines, and the same can be said of studying anime fandom, or even otaku (according to my definition of the term). In Chapter 3, I talk about the unique perspectives to be gained by looking at otaku culture from the specific lens of Science and Technology Studies. I pose and begin to answer the dual questions of "What does Science and Technology Studies bring to studies of otaku?" and "How does studying otaku give us a better understanding of science and technology in society"

I explain my research design in Chapter 4, entitled "Methodology: Studying Otaku in the World".

In Chapter 5, "Defining Otaku", I discuss the various ways in which otaku culture has been described and defined.

Chapter 6 is entitled "The Otaku Ethic" and attempts to define otaku according to a set of guidelines that will allow us to study them fruitfully.

Chapter 7 is entitled "Anime Fandom as Information Culture". This chapter lays out the otaku information philosophy and how it works in practice, using hacker culture (with its own information philosophy) as a point of comparison.

In Chapter 8, "Anime Fandom as Networked Culture", I highlight some of the important networks used by otaku, including historical examples, and the nature of their use.

Chapter 9, "Anime Fandom as Resistance Culture", looks at otaku and their behaviors that can be viewed as resistance.

Chapter 10 is entitled "A New Theory of Otaku". Based on what was uncovered about otaku in the previous three chapters, Chapter 10 attempts to create new generalizations about otaku culture that will improve our understanding of otaku beyond the scope of the Otaku Ethic.

Chapter 11, "Otaku Implications", considers the positive and negative aspects of being an otaku, as well as the role of otaku and otakuism in society.

Chapter 12 is the conclusion. Here, I compare otaku to faith-based communities, discuss the role of otaku perspectives in current IT debates, and consider the future of otaku studies (and my own role in that field).

While this dissertation is intended to be a comprehensive overview of the research and analytical work I have done to fulfill the requirements of a Ph.D. degree, it is nonetheless only a snapshot of a much larger body of work that includes many more interactions, interviews, events, publications, and theorizing that cannot fit inside the scope of a single dissertation whose aim is to answer a relatively small number of research questions. I hope to disseminate the rest of that work elsewhere, in the form of articles, presentations, my Web site, and a future book on otaku that goes into more descriptive detail in addition to summarizing my findings and putting forth my arguments in a publicly accessible way.

2. Studying Subculture

2.1 Youth, Class, and Resistance in America

In September of 2005, roughly the same time that I began to write this dissertation in earnest, Vanity Fair announced an essay contest asking the following question: "What is on the minds of America's youth today?" I thought that question was a particularly good one, open-ended enough to elicit any number of interesting responses, but speaking towards a genuine intellectual curiosity and emotional concern regarding the youth of our nation. I felt very tempted to enter the contest. I did, after all, attempt to answer a very similar question when I wrote my first STS essay (for an undergraduate course at UC Davis, in 1999) on otaku entitled "Where have all our bright-eyed children gone?" Both questions were relevant then, I think, and both continue to be relevant now. I did not enter the essay contest. Instead of 1500 words, I present this multi-chapter dissertation to answer the same question, or at least certain aspects of it. Shorter distillations of the larger work will come later.

In particular academic fields, perceptions of youth have changed over the years. Along with the changes regarding how and why youth are studied, youth culture itself has been changing as well. How significant those latter changes are compared to the cross-generational changes observed in the past is up for debate, but it would be difficult to argue that there are *not* changes going on in American youth. Some of the most noticeable changes are apparently linked to the growing influence of mass media on society, increased access to and usage of information technology, and educational policy. All of these things I just mentioned, though they are certainly not the only things affecting the lives of American youth, have something to do with information. Regarding information, in this day and age, many would agree that there is a lot of it. To quickly answer the question posed by Vanity Fair, "What is on the minds of America's youth today?", my quick response would be "a lot" or "more than ever".

This work specifically focuses on the way in which youth are affected by and simultaneously co-construct the information rich society they live in. The relationship between youth and the information society is still very broad, however. To narrow down our object of study to something manageable, while still speaking to the larger issues, we

will be looking specifically at youth subcultures that are also knowledge-based cultures, where information plays an explicit role.

The most important strand of youth culture studies that informs this work is the Cultural Studies tradition coming out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England.

That tradition, with its extensive studies of working class youth in 1970s England, gives us the definition of subculture that will be referenced often in this dissertation. When I use the word "culture", I am referring to the cultural studies work of Dick Hebdige[9] who also cites such authors as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Roland Barthes in describing culture as a society's "whole way of life" characterized by an invisible and dominant ideology that is ubiquitous, creating a uniform state of hegemony. Subcultures, as defined by Hebdige (and Riesman), are defined as pockets of resistance (against hegemony) within society. Some might consider community service organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America subcultures, but Hebdige's definition specifically equates subcultures with resistant modes of being, and that is the definition of subculture that I have chosen to use. What counts as resistance is difficult to pin down, of course, but Hebdige focuses on the notion of style—such as modes of dress, speech, and consumption, which are not necessarily revolutionary in nature, but serve to make invisible ideology visible, thereby exposing the underbelly of dominant discourse and, perhaps, making it open to attack and change.

Based on such a definition, therefore, a punk in 70s England dressed subversively in black leather heavily adorned with spray-painted-on anarchist slogans and held together by safety pins would be Hebdige's ideal of what it means to be subcultural, and Boy Scouts would clearly *not* be subcultural. Younger generations have frequently adopted new forms of dress and grooming as a way to outwardly rebel against society's notions of propriety. By dressing in certain ways, or having unconventional hairstyles, youth aim to "make statements" about their individuality, and also about the conformity that is often expected of them and typically only gets worse when one becomes a full-fledged adult. But what about subcultures that are not so blatantly visual in their resistance?

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[9] Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: the meaning of style.* London: Routledge

What types of behaviors, subtle or otherwise, do people engage in that would be considered subcultural, even if it is difficult to tell just by looking at them?

Acts of resistance, big or small, can be carried out by anyone. Individuals who resist are not members of a subculture, however, if they do not belong to a group that is coherent—with its own set of norms, organizational structure, and (in some cases) institutional history. Even those who resist in group contexts are not necessarily subcultural if those groups lack those qualities (such as angry mobs with no leadership, established norms, or institutional history). Even if it is not always obvious, coherent subcultures exist in all strata of society, from the very poor to the very rich. In general, we find that the outwardly visible subcultures tend to come from the working class and other marginalized segments of society where their outward identity already places them in the subaltern. The poorer subcultures emphasize the ills of society by further adorning themselves to make their presence more uncomfortably visible, highlighting and opposing the way in which American society seeks to make poor people invisible.

The very rich also belong to their own subcultures, engaging in activities (perhaps to stave off boredom) that mainstream Americans would find difficult to understand or approve of[10], but like the subcultures of the working class and poor, they will not be addressed in this work. Instead, we will talk about the least visible of subcultures—those that exist within the middle class.

Middle class America is typically the model of the American Dream, where one's life consists of a steady white-collar job, a house with a backyard, a spouse and kids, a couple of cars, an annual family vacation, etc. Given the relatively-privileged position of the middle class, why does there even need to be subculture? What is there to resist against? The answer is that the idyllic nature of the middle class is somewhat of a myth. Beyond the fact that the middle class appears to be shrinking and that fewer people who identify themselves as middle class are actually part of it, even actually being in the

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[10] Some of those activities, especially conspicuous and extreme consumption, are described by Judith Goldstein in her article "Lifestyles of the Rich and Tyrannical" (1987), detailing the way in which dictators seek to assert their legitimacy and cultural identity by privately associating themselves with luxury items and publicly imposing images of themselves upon their subjects (i.e. through currency, statues, artworks, etc.)

"modestly privileged" segments of society has its pitfalls. If all poor and working class people in America suddenly moved into the middle class, society's problems would not be miraculous solved. The stratification of society is not the only cause of society's problems. Society's problems, directly influenced by the value systems and policies of the privileged classes, are also a *cause* of the stratification. In other words, mainstream American middle class values contribute to the systemic problems of American society. As a result, there is room for plenty of improvement at all levels of society, and plenty to resist against.

Let us take a closer look at some of the forces acting on middle class America that some feel the need to resist. The phenomena I am referring to can best be visualized in the form of a conceptual map in Figure 1 (see below).

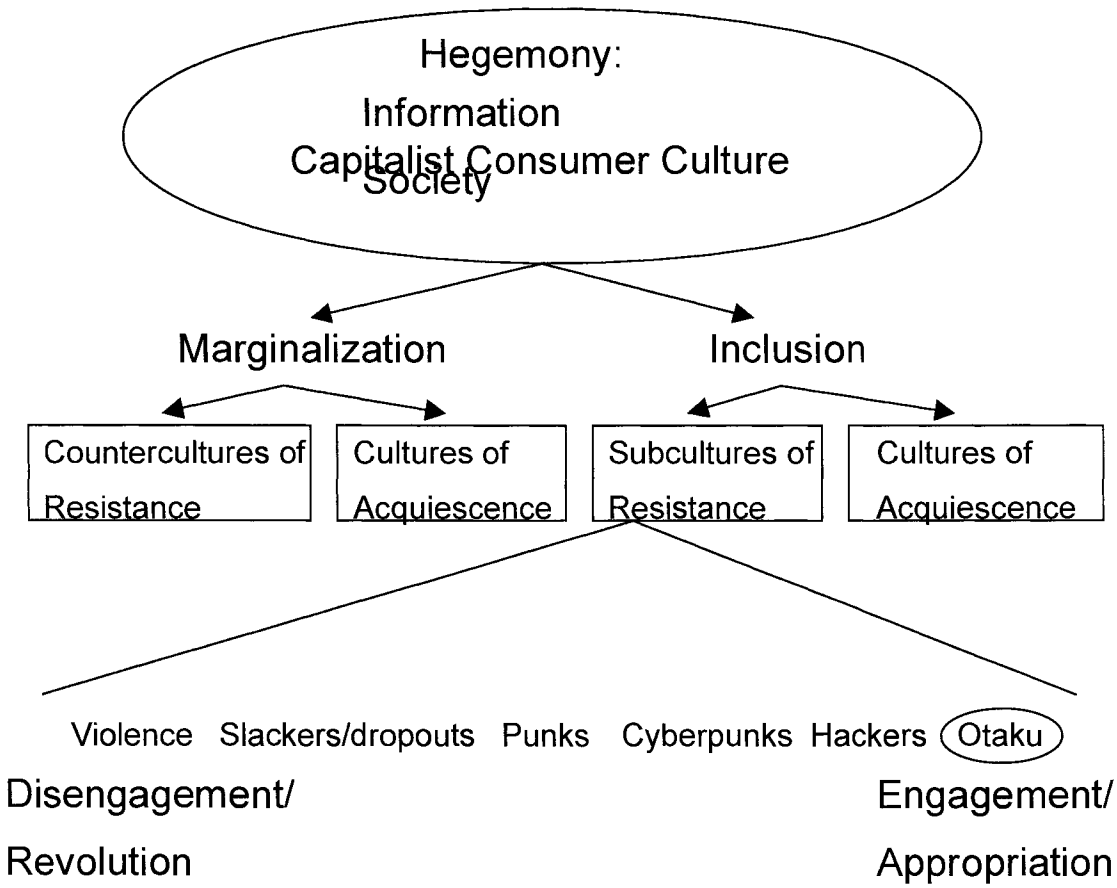

Figure 1: Conceptual Map

When discussing resistant subculture, it is befitting to first describe the hegemonic state of society that otaku and others subcultures are nominally resisting against. At the top of my map in Figure 1, I list under the broad label of "hegemony" two of the large structural factors ("Information Society" and "Capitalist Consumer Culture") that I feel play into the alienation of individuals in society, either by marginalization or inclusion. To be marginalized is to be excluded, left out, ignored by the centers of society, and considered unimportant (except when they are used strategically to benefit the interests of the higher classes). In discussing this category of the marginalized, we frequently include the poor, minority/immigrant/indigenous races that have long been oppressed,

women in patriarchal societies, sexual minorities, and anyone else whose voices are either suppressed or ignored. In the *specific context of the information society and consumer capitalist culture*, the marginalized are not the all-important "target audience". The British tradition of Cultural Studies has tended to focus on such marginalized groups and the forms of resistance they engage in.

To be included means just the opposite. The included are the ones who are expected to drive the information society by being predictable shoppers within a consumer capitalist system. This is the class of people who exist at the privileged centers of society. In this market-driven arena, marginalized people are ignored, but the included are scrutinized, but even more than just being watched, the included themselves are meant to watch and listen intently as members of the target audience. In this category, we include the middle-class—those who have access to technology and other resources, those who have a voice (whether or not they actually exercise their right to speak), and those who are considered important political constituencies and the white-collar cogs of the automaton that is a healthy economy.

It is not very difficult to see how marginalization can result in alienation—that is, loss of identity or positive self-image (or "face" as Erving Goffman[11] might put it). It is more difficult to see how being included can result in a similar loss of identity. Being excluded is a form of oppression, but there is also a different form of oppression (within the same society) that comes from being *included* and therefore subject to a vast array of sometimes unsavory expectations. As 'oppression' may connote direct domination of the underclass by those above them, perhaps a better phrase to use is "social pressure" akin to the peer pressure amongst those who exist within the same social class. This type of peer/social pressure can be illustrated by educational philosophies which encourage conformity and discourage critical thought[12], and the stigmatization individuals have to confront when they decide not to participate in mainstream consumer rituals (or mainstream sexual norms, for that matter).

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[11] Goffman, Erving. 1982. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-To-Face Behavior*. New York: Pantheon.

[12] Such as discussed by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969).

In those arenas where the marginalized are ignored, the included are used by society, which seeks to reproduce itself endlessly[13]. For those in the centers of society who are unaware of or do not care about the alienating power of hegemony, they do not find their class affiliation and the implications thereof particularly problematic. As such, they make up the "Cultures of Acquiescence" listed in Figure 1. For those who *do* feel unwillingly included in a system they do not wholly approve of, however, their only recourse is to become members of any number of "Subcultures of resistance".

In summary, except for those few at the very highest echelons of power in society, most of those who we would call "privileged" have to pay implicit (and often hidden) costs. They are obligated to maintain and reproduce the *status quo*. These costs and obligations, and the consequences of failing to meet them, are qualitatively different from (but not necessarily as weighty as) the costs and obligations thrust upon those who we call "underprivileged" and "disenfranchised". With that said, it becomes more understandable why the American middle class is often a potent site of cultural resistance.

For the marginalized, too, there are "Cultures of Acquiescence" and "Countercultures of Resistance" but that side of the phenomenon will not be discussed in this work. Note that I use the word "counterculture" to describe what may be considered working class resistance and the word "subculture" to describe middle-class resistance. I do this in response to Lave et al. who paraphrase Paul Willis by saying: "No counterculture is possible without the support networks of the subordinated working class. Middle class children may rebel, but they cannot form countercultures."[14]

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[13] It is important to note that there are indeed many social contexts in which the marginalized are not ignored and are indeed used very heavily by more powerful sectors of society. From a basic Marxist perspective, those within the marginalized working class are used and exploited for their cheap labor. While those within the middle class are not exploited in the same way, they are expected to participate in a whole different set of consumer rituals, sometimes eliciting forms of resistance that are different from those enacted by the working class and poor. Those within the middle class are also expected to ignore (or rationalize) the very active exploitation of those within the lower classes.

[14] Lave, et al. 1992. *Coming of Age in Birmingham.* Annual Review of Anthropology. 21:257-82

If not resistant in the same way working class countercultures can be resistant, I would put forth that middle class rebels can manifest their *own* style of resistance through their own *subcultures.*

There are numerous subcultural strategies that can be taken by "reluctant insiders" (a concept I will discuss again when I define otaku less contextually and with more precision in Chapter 6), and I have listed some of those in Figure 1, placing them on a spectrum with "Disengagement/Revolution" on one extreme and "Engagement/Appropriation" on the other. With those terms, I am referring to engagement or disengagement with the technologies and norms of the mainstream hegemonic culture. Disengagement implies more of a revolutionary, anti-*status quo* position, whereas engagement is less explicitly about turning the existing system upside down; instead, it is about using the existing system via appropriation as a form of resistance. The various subcultural strategies (i.e. resorting to violence, becoming hackers, becoming otaku) are not equal in terms of meeting the different needs of the different individuals who implement them. One of my conceptual aims is to discuss the different choices individuals can make regarding different subcultural strategies and the resistant possibilities afforded (or not afforded) by each of them.

As I am highlighting otaku subculture as the primary object of study, I have placed a constellation of terms around "otaku" in Figure 2 (pictured below).

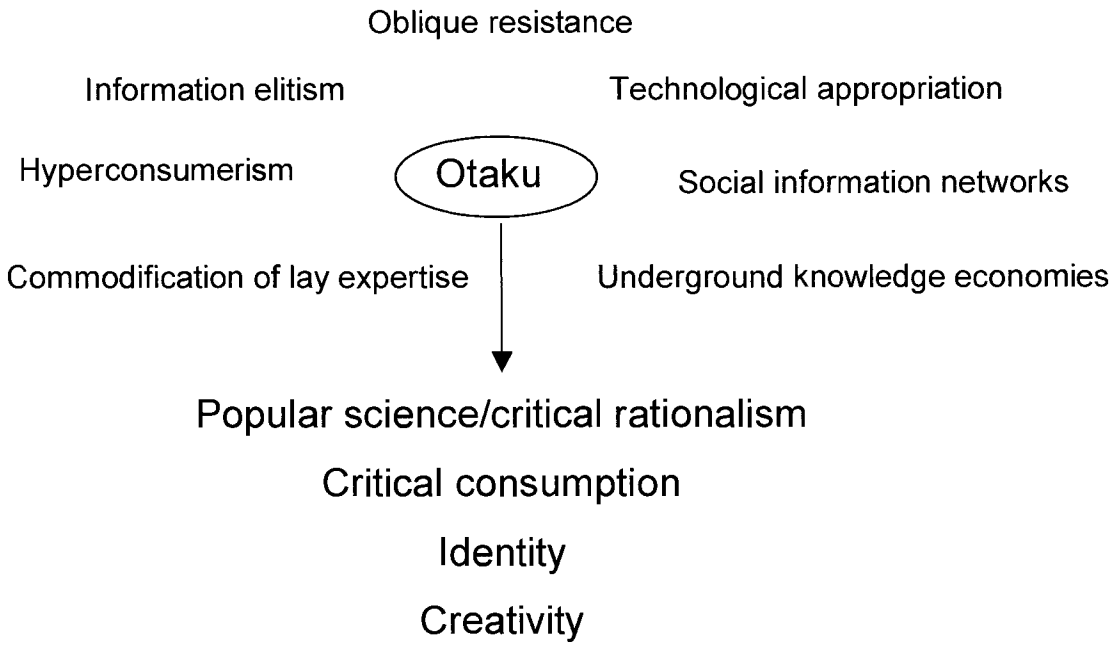

Figure 2: Otaku

These terms represent concepts that inform a) how I decide who counts as otaku and b) what studying otaku will tell us about. These terms loosely illustrate the conceptual framework around which I studied otaku ethnographically.

Finally, you will notice an arrow pointing down from "otaku" to highlight what concepts might be better understood after studying otaku culture. These topics—popular science, critical consumption practices, identity politics and strategies, and creativity and innovation—can all be addressed within the context of Science and Technology Studies, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

2.2 The emergence of a globally-dispersed subculture of consumption

Given that the discussion so far has revolved around American youth and American middle class subculture, one may begin to wonder why I have chosen a Japanese subcultural phenomenon as the basis for studying American youth resistance. In other words, what does a subculture first characterized in Japan have to do with how we live

and understand our day to day lives here in North America, not to mention our theoretical understandings of science and technology? Significant parallels can be drawn between Japanese otaku and the youth culture I studied in the United States. Japanese otaku are primarily middle class non-minority male youth in their teens and twenties, very similar to the "reluctant insider" American otaku who are the subject of this dissertation.

There are additional details of recent Japanese history that coincide in interesting ways with recent American history. For example, both countries recently experienced the euphoria and subsequent crashes of a bubble economy, Japan in the 1980s and the United States in the 1990s. Self-destructive violence perpetrated by middle class youth against other youth has been a growing concern for both nations, with violent media (videogames, movies, music, etc.) often taking the brunt of the blame. Finally, Japan (like the United States) is at the forefront of technology, with widespread computer use, massive broadband adoption, some of the most advanced handheld devices, and an enormously large media industry[15], producing vast amounts of content to be consumed. In terms of information technology, content production, and mass media, it is not a stretch to mention Japan and the United States in the same sentence. When talking about globalization, we frequently talk about American culture colonizing the rest of the world, but Japanese popular culture has spread widely as well. Japanese animation, for example, is broadcast on several continents outside of Asia, including North and South America, Europe, and the Middle East (including Iraq). Furthermore, Japanese pop culture has had some influence on American pop culture for several decades now, and American pop culture has had an even stronger influence on Japanese pop culture for even longer.

The similarities and relationships between Japan and the US mean that their cultural borders are not as fixed as their geographic/political ones, and they are bound to share (inter)related cultural phenomena. As globalization, for better or for worse, extends its influence, entire cultures are constantly being defined, redefined, deconstructed (and

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[15] The Japanese music market, for example, is the second largest in the world after that of the United States.

reconstructed) not merely from the cultural capital that is specific to any given geographic locale, but from *multicultural* capital that is not specific nor affixed to any single location. Manuel Castells characterizes our borderless information society as a "space of flows"[16]. Those who have access to the flow of global conversation at any level are inherently multicultural. Various youth subcultures in Japan are as much the products of American culture as they are the products of their own culture. Likewise, certain youth cultures in America are the products of Japanese culture as much as or more than American culture. The cycles of cultural export, import, re-export, and re-import between nations are so complex, the cultural borders continue to blur. Perhaps it is appropriate that we look towards youth to find these blurry cultural intersections and to examine what they mean.

2.3 The lessons we can learn from the study of subculture

To address the original question of what is happening to today's youth, we will delve into the significance of the specialized worlds inhabited by members of middle class youth subcultures. Studying and describing such subcultures is interesting for their own sake, but what bigger purpose does it serve? As Hebdige described, subcultural style makes ideology explicit that would otherwise remain hidden and implicit (and therefore immune to being challenged). Subcultures, in other words, are lenses with which we can understand culture at large. They force us to acknowledge and challenge assumptions about what counts as "normal" and "mainstream".

That is the general rationale for spending so much time studying niche behaviors and activities. More specifically, in these early years of the 21st Century, we seem to exist in an historical moment where networking technologies such as the internet have made it possible for anyone (with access to those networks) to be part of any number of subcultural communities. Even though mass media and information technology may have some pernicious effects, some of the most meaningful incursions and expressions of resistance against those effects are made by those individuals most fluent with the technology and conversant in the language of mass media.

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[16] Castells, Manuel. 1996. The Rise of the Network Society (The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.

There has been a heightened concern regarding how youth should (and should not) engage with technology, especially information technology such as online social networks which are only now starting to be regulated. Studying otaku and other subcultures engaged with technology provides a novel lens to look at and evaluate technology-related behaviors. In addition to evaluating what such behaviors do for (or to) young people, such studies may suggest strategic ways for adults (reluctant insiders, especially) to engage technology, even if they do not become part of those subcultures, per se.

With recent critical (and overly focused, in my opinion) interest in hacker culture, perspectives on other subcultures are desperately needed in order to a) make informed policy decisions and b) give estranged youth a broader range of healthy strategies for coping with (and attaining happiness within) our increasing complex information society. That is the main practical contribution I hope to achieve with this work.

With that goal in mind, my research sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do youth subcultures, otaku in particular, differentially engage technology and science as a means of identity/information management?
2. How are otaku a resistant subculture (especially as "reluctant insiders")?

The following chapter will discuss how Science and Technology Studies can aid us as we attempt to answer these questions.

3. Cultures of Science and Technology

"Science is a wonderful thing if one does not have to earn one's living at it." – Albert Einstein

There are many ways to study youth, subcultures, and fans of various media. Fandom, although a relatively new object of study, has been actively analyzed by those within many different fields, including but not limited to cultural studies, communications, and media studies. Anime as a medium has been written about extensively (Napier 2001, Levi 1996, Drazen 2002), but American anime fans specifically have not been heavily analyzed[17], though studies of anime itself will often include some discussions of fans and fandom. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, much more has been written about Japanese anime fans. My study of anime otaku is not necessarily the first of its kind, and it probably will not be the last. Nonetheless, I have sought to distinguish this work from other studies of fandom and anime fan subculture, and I did so by leveraging the field I am working in—Science and Technology Studies—and my knowledge of otaku in the United States.

Science and Technology Studies is interdisciplinary in nature, allowing me to draw useful insights and methodological tools from such disciplines as cultural studies, anthropology, and communications. More than just being a disorganized collection of different scholarly approaches, however, STS contains a number of core ideas that makes it particularly useful for studying otaku culture. Furthermore, otaku as objects of study may also improve knowledge within STS itself. In designing this research project, the two questions I repeatedly asked myself were the following: "What does Science and Technology Studies bring to studies of otaku?" and "How does studying otaku give us a better understanding of science and technology in society".

3.1 Fandom studies, STS perspectives, and otaku

This work benefits greatly from previous studies of fandom, as those studies have made fandom a legitimate object of analysis. Seminal work done by such authors as Henry

[17] though I am aware of several works in progress, including research by other graduate students.

Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (2000) have paved the way for other scholars in numerous fields to study the way in which fans seek to create meaningful, proactive, and even resistant relationships with their media of choice, whether it be science fiction television shows, soap operas, or rock bands. The early pioneers of fandom studies contributed heavily to the general area of reception studies by describing fans not just as passive receivers of media content, but active co-producers of it. This was fleshed out via ethnographic fieldwork amongst actual fans to find out how they related to the media and (just as importantly) to each other, forming large and diverse communities of fans.

Back to the topic of resistance, Henry Jenkins made an important contribution by utilizing the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), who wrote about the practices of "poaching" texts (hence the title of Jenkins' book) and bricolage as acts of resistance. Jenkins presents numerous examples of fans using works, creating alternative readings of them, creating their own versions (and sometimes unexpected reconfigurations) of them, and therefore making the works part of their own lives in ways that go well beyond the simple model of active producers and passive consumers of media. In discussing the resistant nature of certain fan behaviors, however, Jenkins and other authors start with the presumption that media fans are inherently marginalized, a presumption that is problematic.

Since these fandoms are heavily populated by young (under 30) individuals, it makes sense to think of their behaviors as being childish/childlike attempts to gain social power in ways that they are otherwise unable to in other aspects of their lives. Children, after all, by virtue of their youth, are inherently marginalized. Portraying fans as having a childlike lack of power is further exacerbated by the fact that some of the media content that fans fixate upon is indeed intended for children.

While it is also true that extreme fannish obsession with the products of popular culture in the mass media may lead to ridicule and other forms of marginalization, one needs to consider that this marginalization often happens *after the fact*. In other words, although media fans become marginalized because of their activities, they may not have been part of marginalized groups to begin with. I would argue that most media fans (especially otaku who are routinely fans of things that are not widely available) come not from marginalized groups, but are insiders who have a lot of power and access to

resources. These media fans, therefore, are usually part of the middle class elite of American society. While poor and working class media fans certainly exist and become fans because they lack social power in general, we cannot ignore the legions of middle and upper middle class youth, young adults, and even young professionals who embrace "low-brow" mass media and popular culture fandom. Why do these individuals willingly place themselves in a marginal position by becoming fans? What do they have to gain? Are they a subculture enacting resistance?

Socially active scholars in STS routinely study those who exist in the subaltern, the underrepresented and dominated members of society. When discussing media fans amongst my STS colleagues, therefore, it felt disingenuous to talk about them (the fans) as being subjugated populations. Having been an anime fan myself for so long, and observing the people around me, I could only conclude that anime fandom consists of a lot of well-adjusted and societally well-situated people. Nonetheless, I still recognized them as being subcultural and manifesting resistance, which is why I consider otaku to be "reluctant insiders". Science and Technology Studies, with its consistent emphasis on the social context behind phenomena, is a useful lens with which to analyze the reasons behind why people become otaku, and the broader implications of what that means for society.

Academic studies of anime fans in particular have been few and far between. Popular books describing anime fans have mostly been generally descriptive in nature. Other, more focused works have looked at specific parts of anime fandom, such as the creation and distribution of fansubs[18], and fans of specific subgenres of anime (Penley, 1995). Others have looked more closely at how Americans view anime as being products of Japanese culture, i.e. the way in which American fans use anime as a gateway to learn more about Japanese culture in general, or how some fans consume anime as a rejection of their own countries' popular culture. Far outnumbering studies of anime fandom are studies analyzing the content of anime itself, such as specific anime titles. Those studies

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[18] See, for example: Hatcher, Jordan S. "Of Otakus and Fansubs: A Critical Look at Anime Online in Light of Current Issues in Copyright Law", (2005) 2:4 SCRIPT-ed 551 http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/ahrb/script-ed/vol2-4/hatcher.asp

often provide cursory explanations as to why (American) fans find those works appealing.

A common emphasis in studies of fan activities is the way in which fans engage in alternative reading practices—interpreting works in novel ways, and then going on to reconfigure existing material to create derivative works that often contradict or challenge mainstream perceptions of the originals. Much less discussed, however, are the knowledge communities that make up anime fandom[19] (and how that knowledge prefigures a certain kind of consumption activity amongst otaku). Even though fandoms are usually portrayed as being creative subcultures, that creativity is necessarily preceded by a large body of knowledge and information that exists within the fan community. How information flows within fan communities deserves to be studied for its own sake, and not just in the context of the canon that serves to frame fan creative works. STS, especially its science studies core, is well-suited to elucidate the intricacies of fandom information networks and knowledge communities.

3.2 Otaku as STS model organisms

In the biological sciences, model organisms are those species that are chosen to be the ones most extensively studied, with the presumption that studying them will result in new insights that generally apply to other species as well. Model organisms are chosen because they are easy to work with, and the data one acquires from studying them is likely to be of general, as opposed to specific, interest. Important model organisms in biology include *E. coli*, *Arabidopsis thaliana*, *Drosophila melanogaster*, and the prototypical laboratory rat (*Rattus norvegicus*). Otaku might be worth studying and describing for their own sake, and a detailed and purely anthropological description of

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[19] The work of Mizuko Ito (2004) sought to do exactly that. She studied otaku communities in Japan surrounding *Yu-gi-oh*, a collectible card game with an associated anime television series and manga. In addition to having different research questions, my work differs from hers in that anime otaku in the United States are not the original target audience for anime and related products, and they also consume anime in ways that may be explicitly subversive. Publishers of Japanese collectible card games can reasonably expect Japanese youth to be the primary consumers of their products, and they are also likely to expect (and hope) that those youth will engage in intense collecting practices.

otaku culture would certainly make for an interesting and entertaining read, but I would propose that otaku are even more useful as a model organism for Science and Technology Studies, to answer questions that apply more generally to issues commonly discussed within the field.

In recent years, STS has apparently focused more on issues of technology than of science. In a way, we can conceptualize technology as being the larger of the two categories—scientific practice being one form of technology (a methodology, in this case) created by humankind for the purpose of carrying out some task. Scientific practice done "in the citadel" as described by Downey and Dumit (1997), was more strongly a focus of interest for early scholars in the field of STS, but newer research interests encompassing a broader range of technologies have had a chance to develop over the years. The field has diversified, asking critical questions about technology and society in addition to science and society. Nonetheless, the tools of science studies are still useful, and may be more applicable than ever as the role of information and knowledge in society is being redefined as evolving computing and network technologies continue to change the landscape of the information ecosystem (that middle class Americans inhabit). Science studies looking at scientific activity 'outside of the citadel' allows us to understand scientific life beyond the walls of the laboratory and in the hands of amateurs. In the case of otaku, we can use STS to observe people who are engaging in scientific activity even though most people would not immediately view them as being scientists.

Explaining what science 'is' is far from trivial. It can be defined and justified from a philosophical perspective, described anthropologically, explained sociologically, and/or documented historically. On that note, otaku can also be viewed as scientists in more than one way. David Hess (1997) explains the difference between ideographic versus nomothetic science.

> Ideographic science is the study of historical particulars, as in the natural history of a geological or ecological region, or a historical, textual, or ethnographic study in the humanities/social sciences. Nomothetic science is characterized by the search for general laws. (6)

Otaku, with their emphasis on collecting information regarding their objects of interest might be said to engage in idiographic science. Yet, they also treat information critically,

with skepticism and eyes trained to discern legitimate versus weak evidence. Otaku do not usually deal with "theories", per se, but they do routinely check facts and discard previous knowledge when it is proven incorrect and amend knowledge when new information is available. Even more importantly, these activities are not done on a solely individual basis. As science studies is always quick to point out, science is a social activity, and otaku information practices are similarly social. As such, their informal knowledge communities can be studied in the same context as official scientific communities.

Early writers in the science studies tradition such as Robert Merton (1973) and Warren Hagstrom (1965) sought to explain the behavior of scientists in terms of established (and often unspoken) norms within the scientific community and the motivations and strategies of individual scientists. Their work did much to help us understand what makes scientists tick, but individual differences between scientists were not easily accounted for. There are, after all, any number of reasons that a person may want to be a scientist, and even more reasons behind any action a scientist may make. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar spared us of having to psychoanalyze scientists when they proposed their concept of "cycles of credit" in *Laboratory Life* (1979). According to their model, all scientists participate in the game of science in order to gain credibility, not necessarily for the purpose of ego-building, but in order to continue as a successful scientist with access to the necessary resources to do his or her job. In other words, scientists engage in scientific activities within the scientific community in order to keep being a scientist. Similarly, we can say that otaku engage in otaku activities in order to keep being otaku. This is useful and prevents us from having to understand every particular motivation behind why a person would want to become an otaku (or a scientist), and focus instead on tangible otaku activities.

My work is inspired by both traditions, however. I *am* interested in why a person would want to be an otaku (or a scientist), and I also want to describe what otaku actually do (that is similar to what scientists do).

In describing what otaku actually do, this work is even more inspired by *Science in Action* (1987), also by Latour. In that book, he goes into great detail describing the various ways that scientists become successful such that their work becomes factual, and

the work of their adversaries becomes artifactual (meaning, open to doubt and controversy). In the realm of technical literature, for example, any given author of any given paper seeks to advance his or her position and to fortify it against attack. The author does this by carefully choosing which citations to include, which ones not to include, which ones to cast doubt upon, and which ones to support. In other words, the author places him or herself into a network of social relations, establishing as many allies and weakening as many adversaries as possible. Papers are fortified by having clear lines of induction, being logically consistent (to direct the reader towards inescapable conclusions), and including complex diagrams that make dissension even more difficult.

Perhaps the strongest measure of a paper's competitive fitness is whether or not it is cited by future papers. One of the recurring themes of *Science in Action* is that the status of any given idea (or invention) depends on what later individuals do with it. A paper that presents a brilliant argument (that is also fortified against attack and calls upon numerous allies to back it up) has no worth in science unless it is read and referred to by others. For a scientific paper, there is no worse fate than being ignored. In the best case scenario for any given paper, many future texts cite the paper's ideas without reservation, and the ideas become "fact". Oftentimes, however, the ideas are modified unpredictably as they pass through multiple hands with various disparate interests.

The most notable characteristic of these "fact-building" strategies described by Latour is the strong social dimension inherent in all of them. Facts are created through the mobilization and (the subtle or not-so-subtle) control of collectives in a vast network of associations. These collectives consist of both people and non-human resources. In this context, the notion that science can be practiced productively in isolation seems less likely. It seems difficult for isolated scientists and lay people to directly create facts and develop scientific credibility without the support of a large and strong social network as well as monetary and hardware resources.

Latour's description of science strongly coincided with my experiences and observations within otaku culture, which is also highly competitive as individuals seek to establish themselves and their works as obligatory points of passage when it comes to information. Otaku also rely on strategic social networking and the highly conscientious

utilization of various resources (including money and technology). *Science in Action* is more than just a treatise on science as conducted by officially accredited scientists. It can also be read as a handbook for anyone interested in the persuasive creation and dissemination of information, which is what otaku culture (as I will describe in more detail later) is all about.

In Science Studies, we typically do not focus our efforts on studying the "great men" (and women) of science in hopes of learning sublime lessons that they can impart to the rest of us. Instead, a broader perspective is taken that looks at science in action on the everyday level, ranging from the actions of the most respected principal investigators at national research centers to the lowliest undergraduate technicians doing benchwork for the very first time. Science is studied as a social institution, but not just as a sum of its parts, and the discrete interactions between individuals are important as well. Using that as a model, my study of otaku culture does not focus on individual super-otaku. Otaku at all levels are part of my analysis, as well as otaku culture as a larger social institution.

Finally, otaku studies within STS may contribute to new strategies that bolster the public understanding of science. Much of the rhetoric surrounding the public understanding of science revolves around how well citizens (such as children) are able to understand and be conversant in scientific facts. Using otaku as a model of science outside of the citadel, however, we can broaden the discourse surrounding what we mean by scientific literacy. More important, perhaps, than encouraging citizens to memorize scientific facts and concepts, they could instead be educated on how to engage in research, participate in communities of knowledge, and how to exercise their critical faculties, all things that otaku do regularly even though the knowledge they deal with are not "scientific facts" per se. Some within STS have chronicled ways in which lay experts have made interventions into the scientific establishment[20], but by studying otaku, we can analyze the way in which scientific practices are used by experts of "non-scientific" things such as the content of popular culture[21]. While scientific facts are important to the

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[20] Epstein, Steven. 1996. *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

[21] Popular culture, therefore, can also be used to teach important scientific skills.

functioning of technological societies, so too are the social institutions (formal or otherwise) that do science, as well as the philosophy informing science as an epistemology, e.g. how scientific "methods" can be applied broadly to all human endeavors that involve the acquisition and sharing of knowledge.

3.3 Anthropological engagements with technology

Otaku studies also has something to offer the technology studies side of STS. Within the field, the disciplinary approaches used to study issues of technology have included history, sociology, economics, and politics. Anthropological studies of technology use, producing ethnographic descriptions of technological cultures have not been uncommon, but have focused mostly on medical technologies, and less on the technology use of subcultures.

While social theory and the philosophy of technology are important conceptual frameworks around which we can think about technology, if we are actually concerned about how people use and are affected by technologies *on the ground*, theoretical understandings are useful but insufficient. In some writings, technology use is described as an example or illustration of a theoretical argument, such as Langdon Winner's discussion[22] of Robert Moses's bridges being an example of artifacts having politics. Sometimes, technology use is described in a historical context, such as in Jennifer S. Light's "When Computers Were Women[23]". On the other extreme, technology use is sometimes described without reference to any theory or policy suggestions at all, such as in James Fallows' discussion[24] of the M-16 rifle. Fallows' analysis is certainly useful to inform the policy-making process, but he does not explicitly suggest policy in the body of his article.

STS-informed anthropological fieldwork looking at recent or current technology use by subcultures has not been prevalent, and is not always used to inform new conceptual

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[22] Winner, Langdon. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics". *Daedalus*. 109(1): 121-136.

[23] Light, Jennifer S. 1999. "When Computers Were Women". *Technology and Culture*. 40(3)455-483.

[24] Fallows, James. 1997 "The American Army and the M-16 Rifle". *The Social Shaping of Technology*. Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman, eds. Buckingham, Open University Press: 382-394.

understandings[25]. By seeking to better understand everyday technology use by all sectors and classes of society (something that marketers have already begun to do), academics can better suggest and design new technologies that serve moral "quality-of-life" interests that go beyond capitalist "bottom-line" concerns.

There are many technologies that are worth studying. This work specifically hopes to contribute to analyses of users (e.g. otaku) of information technology (including mass media products). Ethnographic studies of technological cultures and subcultures may shed light on the individual behaviors and attitudes of those within those cultures, and further insights on how technology is used will better our understandings of how we want to design and use technologies in the future. Studying subcultures in particular can provide interesting and novel insights on how technologies are (and can be) used in non-mainstream, unintended, and (ideally) progressive ways, in addition to revealing the hidden constraints placed on users by those technologies.

Along those lines, I should note that this work draws much inspiration from the work of Ron Eglash and his colleagues who have described various ways in which groups appropriate technologies, counteracting the intended one-way flows of technology (and therefore social control) between producers and consumers, and those who have power and those who do not[26]. His model focuses on marginalized groups who appropriate technology in order to gain social power that is otherwise denied to them. When I came across that model, my initial instinct was that otaku are also a marginalized group that appropriates technology, but I later realized that most otaku actually come from an initial position of privilege. This dissertation hopes to expand the model to include acts of appropriation by 'reluctant insiders', allowing us to remain cognizant of the fact that the power centers of society are far from utopian, and those who inhabit them may also feel the need to change the *status quo*.

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[25] Andrew Ross's "Hacking Away at the Counterculture[25]" (1989) is a good starting point for framing an ethnographic analysis of hackers, one example of a technological subculture.

[26] Eglash, Ron, Jennifer L. Croissant, Giovanna Di Chiro, and Rayvon Fouché eds. 2004. *Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Cultural Invention*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Other fields (such as Communications and Cultural Studies) have made IT users their objects of study, and STS (with its nuanced perspectives on knowledge communities and technology) also has much to offer that line of inquiry.

4. Methodology: Studying Otaku in the World

This dissertation is the result of a long-term two part study, consisting of a) a discourse analysis, and b) participant observation / ethnographic interviews.

Because of the ambiguities surrounding the word 'otaku' and otaku culture itself, it was necessary to first look at the broad discourse surrounding otaku culture in both Japan and the United States. Since this dissertation focuses on American otaku, I concentrated mostly on English-language discussions and portrayals of the subculture, including popular Japanese works that were translated into English. English-language analyses of Japanese otaku are of great importance because otaku were first identified as such in Japan and popular understandings of Japanese otaku have greatly influenced American conceptions of otaku. By now, however, it should not be surprising that conceptions of otaku are highly cross-cultural; there is no such thing as a purely American or purely Japanese definition of otaku.

For the most part, I looked for sources that were commonly available, had a discernible impact on how otaku have been actually viewed (as opposed to fringe opinions that have not visibly affected mainstream perceptions of otaku), and attempted to provide unique insight on the subculture (since most descriptions of otaku tend to focus on the same few details). As mentioned in the introduction, I have been following discourse about otaku since the mid-1990s, but the focused analysis began in 2002 and continued until 2006. The analysis that follows in Chapter 5 is the result of analyzing over 1000 Web pages related to otaku, including descriptive articles, editorials, discussions on Web forums, news reports, personal Web logs, and podcasts, along with a smaller number of books, magazine articles, and videos. Over a 4 year span, I attempted to track all interesting and unique discussion in the English language that mentioned otaku directly, was related to otaku without referring to otaku by name, or was indirectly related to otaku. Understandings of otaku have not stabilized, so I have had to keep track of the otaku-related discourse even up until the writing of this dissertation, and there is certainly more work to be done as otaku continue to evolve in the public eye (maybe even as a result of this work).

Mining the discourse for what I considered to be the essence of what it means to be an otaku, I formulated the Otaku Ethic, which I lay out in Chapter 6. The Otaku Ethic

provided a necessary heuristic, allowing me to define otaku before going out and studying them in the field. In terms of field sites, I used a form of multi-sited ethnography that allowed me (whenever possible) to study the same individuals and groups in both their face-to-face and online environments. Internet research was a crucial component of my study, as otaku use online networks heavily and such usage sometimes makes up the bulk of their social activity. As much as possible, I followed the people from physical sites to the virtual spaces they frequented, where I continued studying them and found new subjects at different locations, at which point I moved back offline to study those new individuals and groups face to face.

Some of the research sites I planned in advance included various anime clubs and fan communities such as the Cornell Japanese Animation Society, anime conventions such as Otakon in Baltimore, Maryland, as well as internet communities such as the forums found on Animegrapevine.com[27] and Animeboards.com[28]. Offline clubs are informal and regular meeting places for otaku, making them especially appropriate for this study. Anime conventions were especially interesting research sites because they are places where otaku, regular fans, and members of industry congregate. Online communities were the best place to meet and observe otaku on a daily basis, since anyone with internet access can participate in those communities even if they are geographically removed from other anime fans.

As the research progressed, I also visited other sites that were unplanned, such as other anime clubs, smaller gatherings such as those organized by Meetup.com[29], specialized gatherings such as anime-themed costuming parties, internet chat rooms, and other anime conventions not listed above. Because I publicized my research on the internet and had a chance to give talks on otaku, people interested in my work also approached me to be interviewed. All told, I have spoken in depth with over 100 individuals, mostly anime and manga fans of both sexes, varying in age from 14 years old to over 30, as well as some members of the (Japanese and American) anime industry, a handful of teachers who shared their perspectives on otaku, and other people who had

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[27] http://www.animegrapevine.com

[28] http://www.animeboards.com

[29] http://www.meetup.com

opinions on otaku. On a more casual basis over the last decade, I have interacted and participated along with even more otaku both on and offline. I have found it fruitful to use my own experiences within otaku culture in the 1990s in order to make comparisons between the various forms the subculture has taken over the years.

This work is not a pure description of the daily lives of specific otaku or specific otaku communities. Instead, I have attempted to provide a more general analysis of the deeper meaning behind otaku culture in America as a whole. Detailed descriptions of specific otaku, their daily lives, and individual opinions will likely be the subject of other (possibly non-academic) publications.

Another interesting aspect of conducting fieldwork to study otaku is that the online interactions between otaku blurred the lines regarding what it means to conduct interviews, what it means to be a participant, and what it means to track discourse around a subject. Web forums, for example, allowed me to ask questions and probe members on certain topics without necessarily interviewing them one-on-one. Of course, that was not a substitute for formal interviews, but it did allow me to see how people publicly responded to certain queries and how their peers responded to them. In addition to facilitating an interviewee-interviewer dialogue, using Web forums to talk with otaku allowed me to facilitate dynamic group discussions where individuals spoke to each other in addition to me (the researcher).

On Web forums, one is often considered a participant if one contributes posts, but I found that I did not always have to do that to feel like a member of the community. In my earlier experience within anime otaku culture, I used post quite heavily, and for some of the Web communities I frequented as part of my fieldwork, I did attempt to post more regularly in order to get a feel of how that form of otaku interaction works. However, I also frequented several other online otaku communities where I did not post often (or at all), but still found it useful, especially considering that a very large number of people who visit such communities also do not post (and are therefore known as "lurkers"), preferring instead to read what others have written. Participating in some of these communities, therefore, is not altogether and necessarily that different from engaging in discourse analysis, whether as a researcher or as a fan.

In addition to participating with otaku, interacting with them, and analyzing discourse about them, I also studied otaku artifacts—namely their technologies of communication, such as print publications and Web sites. Otaku tend to publish much of their fandom-related material online in the form of Web sites, and an analysis of those Web sites and how they relate to each other formed a part of my study, especially in reference to otaku appropriation of scientific methodologies and rhetorical strategies (i.e. gaining allies and discouraging enemies).

4.1 Description of field sites

My primary research sites included various anime clubs, online communities, and large conventions.

4.1.1 Clubs and fan communities

Otaku can very often be found within local community gatherings of fans, e.g. at fan clubs. Not all "fans" of something are otaku, but all otaku can be defined as fans. Different anime clubs, for example, will have varying numbers of otaku amongst its members. Instead of automatically breaking up a group of people into two discrete sets (non-otaku and otaku), I established a spectrum of characteristics (based upon the Otaku Ethic) by which I could identify otaku behaviors. Those who I clearly identified as otaku I studied as such, but even those anime fans who were not as otaku-ish could be studied in terms of their specific behaviors and also in contrast to the hardcore otaku. Those who called themselves otaku were not necessarily considered otaku according to my definition of the subculture, though I was certainly interested in why they called themselves that. Those who did not call themselves otaku but who I *did* consider otaku were also of interest to me, especially if they deliberately chose to reject that term[30].

[30] When interviewing my anime fan informants, I made an effort to let them decide whether or not they wanted to be referred to as 'otaku'. Most did not have a problem with the label being applied to them, as long as it was clear I was not using the word in a derogatory fashion. Some were careful to specify what the word meant to them so as to avoid being associated with the negative connotations surrounding the word.

Anime clubs I have interacted with (in varying degrees) include the Cornell Japanese Animation Society, The Davis Anime Club, Animerathon (in Troy, NY), the Rensselaer Japanese Animation Society, the MIT Anime Club, the Albany Anime Meetup, the Upstate New York Cosplay Society, the Anime Gamers Alliance (at Suny Albany), and the anime club at Ohio State University (who invited me to a convention they hosted). During the course of my fieldwork, many of the anime otaku I met were affiliated with their own local anime clubs (not listed above).

4.1.2 Internet communities

With the widespread availability of internet access within middle-class America, otaku use that medium heavily to communicate with each other, often forming full-fledged online communities. For some otaku, online interactions make up the majority of their socialization behavior from day to day. As such, to study otaku ethnographically without studying their online interactions would be vastly incomplete. Also, observing and participating in otaku online conversations allowed me to understand how otaku present themselves in a communication medium that is very fast but allows for very careful construction of identity that lasts well beyond the immediate moment.

Online anime otaku communities I have frequented include rec.arts.anime, rec.arts.anime.misc, Animegrapevine.com, Gainaxpages.com[31], Animeboards.com, AnimeOnDVD.com[32], Animesuki.com[33], Animenewsnetwork.com[34], and Animenation.com[35] amongst others. All of these communities, with the exception of Anime Grapevine (as will be discussed in Chapter 8), are completely open to the public.

4.1.3 Conventions

Conventions are fan gatherings where otaku can be found. They are places where fans from disparate geographic locations can get together and share their interests through a

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[31] http://www.gainaxpages.com/

[32] http://forums.animeondvd.com/

[33] http://forums.animesuki.com/

[34] http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/bbs/phpBB2/

[35] http://animenation.net/forums/

variety of activities, making them ideal research sites. Industry professionals also attend such conventions to sell their goods and to discuss their products with fans, making conventions an excellent place to study otaku/industry interactions. Conventions are also places where otaku (who sometimes prepare for long periods in advance) can 'strut their stuff', increase their reputations, sell their goods, make new contacts, acquire new goods and information, and strengthen affiliations. Conventions (either one-day or multi-day) take place all year round across the United States. Some of the anime conventions I have attended include Anime Expo in Anaheim, CA, Otakon in Baltimore, MD, Anime Weekend Atlanta in Vinings, GA, FanimeCon in Santa Clara,CA, Genericon in Troy, NY, and Anime Punch in Columbus, Ohio.

At conventions, I specifically sought out otaku who either occupy the role of social nexus—maintaining and building large social networks—or who are experts in their subfield of anime fandom. While there are very many activities that casual fans engage in at anime conventions, I focused on the networking, information gathering, and reputation-building activities of otaku.

4.1.4 Japan

While the primary focus of my research is on otaku in the United States, I also traveled to Japan to get a firsthand look at otaku culture where it was first identified. Although I met and interviewed a few individuals in Japan, the main purpose of the trip was to study American otaku as they visited the homeland of the media they so adored. In February of 2005, I traveled with an American tour group (hosted by Pop Japan Travel) of 15 individuals (plus a guide) and we visited several otaku hot spots in Japan, such as Akihabara, as well as more traditional tourist attractions in Tokyo. The trip also included a visit to Studio Pierrot, a major Japanese anime studio. Although I thoroughly enjoyed the trip as an otaku visiting Japan, the primary purpose of the visit was to observe and interact with the other American otaku on the tour. Like myself, most of them had never been to Japan before, so it was interesting to see how they approached the foreign culture whose mass media products they so readily appropriated.

5. Defining Otaku

5.1 Reflections on discourse

Otaku subculture might be said to be self-generating, in that it creates its own representations of itself and has its own internal norms, but all subcultures exist within and in reference to larger cultures. It would be a mistake to ignore the broader cultural contexts which play a significant role in generating the otaku, both by providing something the otaku subculture can react to (or resist against) and by providing mainstream definitions of the subculture that can be selectively mirrored, appropriated, and/or resisted by members or would-be members of that subculture.[36]

I performed a critical discourse analysis of a large number of sources that have one aspect in common: they discuss otaku in way or another. The end goal was not to have merely reiterated isolated perspectives, but to have drawn parallels between them while noting their differences, creating a map of discourse and then finding ways to improve the richness of that map. As linguist Alfred Korzybski[37] reminds us, however, the map is not the territory. It is important to note that this chapter is not a study of the otaku themselves, only the discourse about them. At best, it is the study of idealized and abstracted otaku. The discourse is both 1) a product of how the otaku (intentionally or otherwise) have made their mark on society and 2) a product of society using the otaku, real or idealized, for its own ends.

At this point, we need to make some distinctions between 'description' and 'definition'. This chapter and the following one are not seeking to describe otaku subculture as much as it is attempting to define it[38], much as the discourse surrounding otaku is also defining as much as it is describing. Furthermore, second-hand description is weak and no substitute for actual ethnography. A thick ethnographic description is not

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[36] Douglas Rushkoff, for example, in the PBS Video *The Merchants of Cool* (2001) depicts media megacorporations appropriating youth subcultures and selling manufactured representations of those cultures back to the youth who then mirror or resist them to create new subcultures, which are then reappropriated by the megacorporations in a positive feedback loop.

[37] Korzybski is most well known for having invented "General Semantics", introduced in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933)

[38] Again, I am creating a new definition without explicitly invalidating other competing definitions.

possible, however, until the culture to be studied has been defined. We cannot describe what the otaku are like until we have decided who counts as otaku.

For those scholars in science studies, this issue harkens back to old debates within the philosophy of science regarding the demarcation of science (seeking to define what counts as science before studying the scientists and related social phenomena) by Karl Popper versus Thomas Kuhn's more descriptive work[39] (looking at what scientists do in order to decide what science is). This dissertation favors the Popperian approach. For the purposes of discourse analysis, it makes sense to study everything that calls anyone otaku, but to study the otaku themselves as a distinct subculture (as opposed to a diffuse cultural metaphor), we have to move beyond the linguistic flexibility and analytical imprecision of the discourse and more rigorously define and locate our object of study. Definition at some level must come before description. Furthermore, for us to devise the most compelling and culturally relevant definition of otaku, we must take into account the work already done to define them in order to capture the subtle nuances of the co-making processes by which culture and subculture are made.

For the following discourse analysis, I gathered as much material as I could find in the English language that referenced otaku, focusing my analysis on those that provided explicit *representations* of the subculture. Later chapters will be based primarily on my personal experiences studying otaku in the field as a participant observer.

5.2 The early history of *otaku*

We should begin with a discussion the etymology of "otaku", drawing upon the work of Volker Grassmuck in his seminal otaku-studies article *"I'm alone, but not lonely": Japanese Otaku-Kids colonize the Realm of Information and Media, A Tale of Sex and*

[39] See, of course, Thomas Kuhn (1962). For a deconstruction of Kuhn's role in the early history of science studies, see *Kuhn: A Philosophical History of Our Times* (2000) by Steve Fuller and *Thomas Kuhn and the Science Wars* (2000) by Ziauddin Sardar. My own paper "The accidental rebel: Thomas Kuhn and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*" (2001) details further thoughts on the Kuhn vs. Popper debate. See http://www.rpi.edu/~engl/kuhn.pdf

Crime from a faraway Place (1990)[40]. Grassmuck is a German-born sociologist who became a guest researcher at Tokyo University's Socio-Technological Research Department in 1989, living in Japan until 1995, his essays on otaku available on the web since at least the mid 90s. Literally and originally, the word *otaku* means "your house", and more generally it is also a very polite (distancing and non-imposing, as opposed to familiar) way of saying "you". Perhaps the closest English equivalent would be my calling you "Ma'am" or "Sir". In *Otaku no Video*, a fictional anime story about otaku that has been translated for American consumption, Animeigo (the translation company) uses "thou" instead of "you" to translate "otaku" to indicate the term's archaic formality. Grassmuck explains:

> Otaku is a polite way to address someone whose social position towards you you do not yet know, and it appears with a higher frequency in the women's language. It keeps distance. Used between equals it can sound quite ironic or sarcastic, but is mostly meant in the sense of 'Stay away from me'. Imagine a teenager addressing another as "Sir!" (1990)

The historical reasons why otaku are called "otaku" is itself a point of contention. According to Grassmuck's version of the story, and that given by Frederick Schodt (one of the premier American scholars of manga) in his book *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga, Japanese Comics for Otaku* (1996), "otaku" was something the members of fan subcultures called themselves.

> Some informants convey that it was in the advertising world, others say it was in the circles of animation-picture collectors: "please, show me your (otaku) collection." The most trustworthy rumor has it that it first came up among people working in TV and video animation companies. From there it spread to the viewers of animes and the closely related worlds of manga (comic-books) and computer games. (Grassmuck 1990)

Grassmuck theorizes that the distancing effect of using the pronoun "otaku" reflects the nature of the otaku themselves as being emotionally distanced from the mainstream culture and even their own peer group. The basic idea, as I have tried to understand and develop it, is that the word is used to explicitly indicate detachedness from who you are

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[40] Grassmuck, Volker. 1990. *"I'm alone, but not lonely": Japanese Otaku-Kids colonize the Realm of Information and Media, A Tale of Sex and Crime from a faraway Place.* http://waste.informatik.hu-berlin.de/Grassmuck/Texts/otaku.e.html

speaking to. For example, a dedicated and experienced collector of animation cels will have a vast network of connections to aid in his or her search for rare cels. Many of these contacts will only be peripheral acquaintances (as opposed to members of one's in-group). As an otaku's network grows larger, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain close personal relationships with most of his or her contacts. As such, otaku relationships are short-lived, business-like, and not at all intimate. Although it might be considered a bit strange, it is not wholly unreasonable that someone in this type of social setting to call his or her acquaintances "otaku".

Another theory sheds additional light on the history of why and how the Japanese fans called themselves "otaku". Takashi Murakami, the famous otaku/pop artist, cites his friend Toshio Okada, a Japanese expert on otaku culture, in explaining where the usage of "otaku" came from. Okada, Murakami says, links "otaku" to Shoji Kawamori and Haruhiko Mikimoto, the creators of *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross* (1982), at Studio Nue. Kawamori and Mikimoto were students at Keio University when they started working on *Macross*.

Keio is known as one of the more upstanding and relatively upper-class institutes of learning in Japan. In tune with their somewhat aristocratic surroundings, Kawamori and Mikimoto used the classical, refined second-person form of address, "otaku", in preference to "anata," the usual form of address. Fans of the studio's work began using the term to show respect toward Studio Nue's creators, and it entered common use among the fans who gathered at comic markets, fanzine meetings, and all-night line parties before anime movie releases. (Murakami 2001)

Tomohiro Machiyama (Macias and Machiyama 2004) suggests that the use of "otaku" as a form of address amongst anime fans was mimicked from the *Macross* anime directly. Machiyama says that the main character, Hikaru Ichijoe, frequently uses the extra-polite "otaku" when talking to other characters.

In 2003, I heard Toshio Okada lecture at MIT, and he discussed this subject further. According to Okada, at science fiction conventions, otaku from various places (i.e. anime clubs from different schools) would meet each other. Out of respect for each other's clubs, they would refer to each other using "otaku", the extra polite form of address.

Amongst Americans trying to explain the usage of "otaku", several have hypothesized or asserted that the otaku have been called that because they tend to be isolated homebodies, socially inept and never going out (this usage having a direct relationship with the "your house" etymology of the word). For example, in a student paper on the web by Krissy Naudus, for a New York University course called "Language, Thought, and Culture", she wrote:

> The exact reason for the usage is unclear, but such appropriation might be in reference to the apparent isolation of these fans, as outsiders who must find more solitary forms of entertainment and build a life in and around it. They are for the most part socially inept, using passive forms of entertainment to replace the often-difficult task of making friends and interacting successfully with them.[41]

While we may never know exactly why certain youth began referring to themselves as otaku, how the term was first introduced into popular discourse in Japan is more clear. In 1983, the first published report appeared which described the usage of "otaku" amongst fans[42]. Akio Nakamori wrote a series of articles called "Otaku no Kenkyu" (Studies of Otaku) in Manga Burikko, a manga magazine. He called those hard core fans who called each other "otaku" the *otaku-zoku* ("zoku" meaning tribe). His was perhaps the first article widely characterizing otaku as being anti-social, unkempt, and unpopular. In addition to those traits, Nakamori also described otaku as being obsessively interested in the details of a single field of interest, most commonly anime and manga, but anything else that was generally considered useless from a professional perspective, such as computer games or television stars.

Although the members of the otaku subculture called each other otaku, presumably as part of everyday interaction without seeking to insult each other, the popular understanding of the term was a distinctly derogatory one, not dissimilar to disparaging

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[41] Naudas, Krissy. 2000. *Speaking Without Subtitles: The Universal Language of Otaku.* http://members.aol.com/Lampbane/geekspeak/otaku.html

[42] It was the first report according to Volker Grassmuck, anyway. Karl Taro Greenfeld gives yet another story, citing an article that appeared in 1986 (Greenfeld 1994: pp. 271-286).

stereotypes of nerds and geeks[43] in America. Perhaps the "homebody" etymology (or description) of "otaku" espoused by some Americans is an example of that derogatory attitude being reproduced[44].

5.3 The information elites

After the subculture was initially defined in Japan, details of its mode of existence began to be fleshed out. Some considered the otaku to be simply the Japanese version of nerd and geek cultures. Regarding geeks, Susan Leigh Star (1995) writes:

> Geek is slang for a person who is very deeply involved in the technical aspects of a particular endeavour, somewhat akin to a 'nerd'. A computer geek is someone who spends a great deal of time on computing and is often involved in related activities such as reading science fiction. (10)

However, the otaku have also been portrayed as a special or more extreme kind of geek[45], as information elites who pore over vast amounts of detailed and seemingly trivial information regarding less-than-serious things, committing that information to memory and using it as capital for their underground trades--online or in person. Furthermore, otaku seek to develop reputations for themselves; to become 'more of an otaku' than the next guy is a serious concern that is not implicit to 'geekdom' in general. In reference to a 'less elite' otaku, artist Takashi Murakami (who we will revisit later) writes:

> There is a deadly competition among otaku. I guess Miyazaki was a loser because he lacked the critical ability of accumulating enormous

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[43] "Nerds" and "geeks", however, have made a comeback in recent years as computing cultures have become affluent and increasingly influential in American culture. See Eglash, Ron. "Race, Sex and Nerds: from Black Geeks to Asian-American Hipsters." Social Text, 20(2) 49-64, Summer 2002

[44] Another reason why I doubt the "homebody" etymology is that otaku often left their homes to meet each other, whereupon they called each other "otaku", since computer networks (e.g. BBSes) were very rudimentary in the early 1980s.

[45] In this definition, 'geek' would be the more general category of which otaku are a subset. Otaku are geeks, but not all geeks are otaku.

> information in order to survive and win at a debate among otaku. His collection of otaku goods was not so great, either.[46]

In *Man, Nation & Machine: The Otaku Answer to Pressing Problems of the Media Society*[47] (2000), Volker Grassmuck makes a distinction between the otaku and the internet users portrayed by Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen* (1995). Turkle depicts users who take on multiple personalities, operating with multiple windows open simultaneously--exemplifying his or her approach to information and identity management. Otaku, on the other hand, take the opposite approach, and emphasize monomaniacal focus.

> Whereas the multiple dives into the stream and wants to know as much as possible about a lot of things, the otaku seeks out a tiny area about which he wants to know everything. (Grassmuck 2000)

In attempting the origins of the otaku lifestyle/strategy, Grassmuck (1990) refers back to the educational system of Japan:

> The education system, in which the famous 'industrial warriors' are trained, is a generally acknowleged back-ground factor for the emergence of the otaku- generation. "In school", says Yamazaki, "children are taught to take in the world as data and information, in a fragmentary way, not systematically. The system is designed for cramming them with dates, names, and multiple-choice answeres for exames. The scraps of information are never combined into a total view of the world. They don't have a knowledge value, but the character of a fetish."

He continues:

> 'Information-fetishism' is a central term for Yamazaki. The Otaku continue the same pattern of information aquisition and reproduction they have learned at school. Only the subject matter has changed: idols, cameras, or rock 'n' roll.

The text seems to imply that the otaku have become masters of handling and dealing with meaningless and valueless information. "Fetish" is used in this sense to describe that which is (shallowly) symbolic more than (deeply) real. Continuing this line of

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[46] Journal of Contemporary Art, Inc., Takashi Murakami, and Mako Wakasa. "takashi murakami" http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html

[47] Grassmuck, Volker. 2000. In *Man, Nation & Machine: The Otaku Answer to Pressing Problems of the Media Society*. http://waste.informatik.hu-berlin.de/Grassmuck/Texts/otaku00_e.html

thought, leather and lace, for example, are an imaginary and poor substitute for real and natural men and women as objects of desire. Yet, should we separate value and desire? It would seem strange to think that the otaku are obsessed with objects and subject matters they consider meaningless, unimportant, and merely bits of neutral data to be collected and deployed. Such a portrayal of otaku casts them as maladjusted victims of an ineffective educational system that needs to be changed, as opposed to being resourceful survivors of that same (ineffective) system. Instead of being hailed as a possible strategy of positive resistance, otakuism has been presented by some as a dire warning of things gone wrong.

Whether we wish to see fetishism as 1) being full of promise or 2) a dead end, Grassmuck ultimately portrays otaku as being very much interested in the 'value' of things and information, at least relative to their own social sphere. This emphasis on information value comes across in his descriptions of the consumption practices of otaku that I mentioned in Part 1, where the otaku refuse to be normal consumers who buy into media hype and advertising, but are instead hyper-consumers who are often more informed about products than their creators. The value of an object is not defined by mainstream interests, but by their own subcultural community's secret knowledge, norms, and underground economy, where traditional channels of consumption can even be bypassed completely[48], and the modes of consumption are completely different from what was intended (such as when information about a product becomes more valued than the product itself[49]). Beyond mere consumption, the otaku are said to "change, manipulate, and subvert ready-made products" (Grassmuck, 1990). They also produce their own products to be enjoyed and traded as well, another way of becoming more independent of mainstream producers of culture.

Karl Taro Greenfeld, in his 1993 Wired magazine article entitled "The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie

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[48] Such black-market economies often deal in the trade of illicitly copied, pirated, unlicensed, and other goods not intended for sale on the mass market or at all.

[49] Greenfeld, Karl Taro. 1993. *The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds (Otaku to You)*
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.01/otaku_pr.html

Computer Nerds (Otaku to You)" and his 1994 book *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation*, continued and drew upon the work of Volker Grassmuck to bring the story of the otaku to a wider English-speaking audience. His work, in particular, emphasized that the otaku were not dabbling with vast amounts of random context-less information for its own sake, but engaging that mass of information in hopes of finding and/or producing high value information that could be traded for power and influence.

Greenfeld's description of a self-proclaimed otaku named Zero gives us some hints at how the otaku prioritize information:

> He warns other otaku on the Eye Net computer network to be on the lookout for some poser named Batman pushing stale info. For those few moments - as Zero's invisible brethren attentively scan and store his transmitted data - he is no longer a wimp. He's a big gun, a macho man in the world of the otaku...Information is the fuel that feeds the otaku's worshiped dissemination systems... Anything qualifies, as long is it was not previously known. (1993)

Greenfeld also emphasizes it is the otaku's attitude towards information that distinguishes him or her from non-otaku, not his or her object of desire[50].

5.4 Dial "O" for Otaku

In addition to depictions of otaku as being uber-geeks, unconventional experts, and information fetishists, an incident occurred in the late 80s that would change perceptions of otaku forever. Most historical accounts point to what Yale sociology professor Sharon Kinsella calls the "otaku panic"[51], which was triggered by the infamous Tsutomu Miyazaki incident in 1989. Miyazaki (a 26 year old printer's assistant) kidnapped, molested, and murdered 4 little girls. When he was arrested, the police found a huge collection of various anime and manga, some of it pornographic, in his apartment. Being

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[50] As such, one can be an otaku of goldfish, carpentry, etiquette , tennis, etc.

[51] Kinsella, Sharon. 1998. *Amateur Manga Subculture and the Otaku Panic* http://www.kinsellaresearch.com/nerd.html

a hardcore fan of comics and animation, as well as being socially isolated, it was easy to consider Miyazaki an otaku, at least superficially.

The Japanese media picked up on this and repeatedly referred to Miyazaki as an otaku, thereby exposing the term to the public at large. As such, "otaku" became associated with sociopaths like Miyazaki, and in the panic, many in the media tried to blame Miyazaki's deviant behavior on anime and manga. Otaku had gone from being merely weird to genuinely scary.

Not wholly unlike American adult society, but perhaps taken to greater extremes, the postwar Japanese adult society has long had anxieties about its youth culture becoming more individualistic and isolated and less interested in fulfilling mainstream social duty. Sharon Kinsella writes:

> (White) youth cultures in the UK and the USA have, increasingly, been humorously indulged and wishfully interpreted as contemporary expressions of the irrepressible creative genius and spirit of individualism which made Britain a great industrial nation, and America a great democracy. But individualism (kojinshugi) has, as we know, been rejected as a formal political ideal in Japan. Institutional democracy not withstanding, individualism has continued to be widely perceived as a kind of a social problem or modern disease throughout the postwar period.[52]

The Miyazaki incident was both a cause for further anxiety and an outlet for the media to deal with preexisting anxiety via a scapegoat, perhaps, in the form of anime and manga subculture. As a result, otaku in Japan have been regarded with varying amounts of fear and loathing over the last decade, and those attitudes have found their way into American otaku discourse as well, tempered perhaps by American attitudes toward individualism.

5.5 Who wants to be an otaku, anyway?

The word "otaku" was first imported into America when manga and anime became widely available (in English) in the late 80s and early 90s. One important artifact of otaku culture imported for American consumption is a two-part anime called *Otaku no Video* which translates to "otaku's video" or "your video." It is often described as a

[52] ibid

video made by otaku for otaku. Created in 1992 by Gainax, a studio formed by self-proclaimed anime otaku turned professionals, *Otaku no Video* is a thinly-disguised version of their own ascension into the animation industry, a pseudo-documentary about otaku, and depending on who you talk to, a celebration of the otaku lifestyle, a tongue-in-cheek self-parody regarding the excesses of fandom, or a dire warning of what can happen when one takes comics and animation too seriously. If indeed *Otaku no Video* contains an anti-otaku message, the pervasive humor of the piece masks any serious commentary. Any otaku-culture criticisms, if present, are subdued considering that the video was released just two years after the Miyazaki incident. *Otaku no Video* contains no references to child abduction and murder, nor any other abusive behavior on the part of otaku.

Enough American fans latched onto the term, and "otaku" became part of the specialized jargon that frequently develops within fan communities. Some fans who considered themselves obsessive and extremely knowledgeable about their object of interest called themselves otaku to positively categorize themselves as being similar to those information elites portrayed in *Otaku no Video*. Perhaps they identified themselves as otaku because the English language lacks any better terms to describe them. However, debates about how the term should be used, if at all, broke out amongst fans.

Several camps within the American manga/anime fan community emerged from the otaku debates. On one hand, there were those who pointed out that "otaku" has a dark history behind it due to the Miyazaki incident, and that mainstream usage of the term in Japan was negative and derogatory, so American fans should not use the term to describe themselves, lest they consider themselves social incompetents with no lives and/or potential serial killers. Those who held this position often asserted that Americans who called themselves "otaku" were ignorant of its true meaning. Others fans claimed that the Japanese meanings of the term, known or not, were unimportant, and that "otaku" had been suitably appropriated to mean whatever they wanted it to mean; most fans meant it to mean, generically, "anime fan". And finally, there were those who claimed that knowing and respecting the original subcultural (non-mainstream) Japanese definition of the term was useful, and that accepting mainstream stereotypically negative definitions of otaku as being socially inept and/or potential murderers was unnecessary

or even discriminatory. Ignoring the superficial negative stereotypes, but wanting a more potent definition than simply "fan", the otaku became defined by this last camp as elite fans, hardcore and obsessive fanatics with vast amounts of knowledge who could be looked up to by aspiring newbie fans. Like those who wanted "otaku" to simply mean "fan", this last group appropriated the term, not to eliminate all of the Japanese cultural baggage associated with it, but choosing which connotations were the most appealing to promote (often in the name of fairness and anti-discrimination).

Examples of anti-otaku sentiment are not uncommon on the internet, and most of those examples come from the fan communities themselves struggling with and contesting their identity amongst themselves in an attempt to present a respectable face to each other and the on-looking public. Some fans have been looking for a label to categorize unappealing members of their own community, and found that "otaku" fits the bill nicely[53].

One online essay entitled "What is Otaku?"[54] nicely encapsulates some American fans' strong negative attitudes towards otaku. The essay is presented as an informational piece, intended to dispel common American ignorance about mainstream Japanese culture.

> I think that American "otakus" should know exactly what the history is behind what they label themselves. (I mean, I hardly want "otakus" going over to Japan and getting laughed at when they label themselves "otakus", I want them to be laughed at because they're gaijin devils and ignorant of Japanese tradition, hahaha.

The etymology of the word is described, and the essay mentions the "home body" origin of the word's usage. The essay's main emphasis is to point out the various negative perceptions of otaku in Japan as a reason not to adopt the term in America.

> otaku is a person who is completely obsessed on one thing. So much so that this obsession interferes with the person's ability to function in a "normal" life...I doubt many people would fit the Japanese definition of a

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[53] For an example, see: Barlow, Elaine. 1997. "What's An Otaku". http://cronus.comp.utas.edu.au/manga/animeotaku.html

[54] On the Web site: "Cruel Angel's Revolution". "What is Otaku?" http://www.geocities.com/kenyuen1/articles/otaku.htm

> "true otaku", because those people have to be really out of it..."smelly, obsessive, fat, and ugly".

The author goes on to tell the story of the Miyazaki incident in detail as further evidence of the word's dark history. The author even has a section called "The Stereotype" reiterating the negative attributes associated with otaku, but her response is not to challenge the stereotype, but to accept it, closing the essay with an explanation of how she lives a normal life with friends, is busy at college, plays with her dogs...in short, she is a normal fan, but not an otaku, and only people with "no life" are to be considered otaku.

Such an opinion is not an uncommon one amongst American anime fans and other forms of geek culture where the term has crossed over, such as the video game community. Those American fans who have invested time to study Japanese language and culture are often the ones most against the casual use of "otaku" to mean "fan", but also against more specific meanings that have any positive connotations. In arguing their position, they privilege the mainstream Japanese perspectives (as they perceive it) over the fringe perspectives of those in Japan and elsewhere which assert that otaku have been and continue to be a positive subculture.

As I just mentioned, "otaku" has crossed over into the video gaming community as well, but not without controversy. In an article entitled "Don't Call Me Otaku" by Walt Wyman for CoreMagazine.com, an online video gaming magazine, the author again seeks to dispel myths about otaku and remind readers that stereotypically mainstream Japanese perceptions of otaku must be respected and left unchallenged, leaving little or no room for appropriation, and certainly not appropriation to make the term have any positive connotations. An interesting aspect of the article, however, is the way it seeks to dispel the notion of otaku as cultural connoisseurs, as William Gibson describes them (which will be discussed later in this chapter). Wyman describes and perpetuates the otaku stereotypes in order to claim that his culture, the gaming culture which indeed has its "true connoisseurs", is not the same as the dark otaku culture full of people who are:

> seen as miserable, occasionally comical social outcasts (i.e. the guy who is single, 27 and still living with his parents or the girl who says a total of 5 words all through high school). At worst they are stereotyped as dark, obsessive and unstable, like the 28 year-old flight-sim addict who in 1999

> high-jacked an ANA jet, killing the pilot, because he wanted to fly a real plane.[55]

One might expect that gaming culture, which is generally considered one subset of geek culture, would be more sympathetic to the plight of the otaku as a marginalized group being negatively stereotyped. However, as we have seen, it is the fan communities themselves who are exceptionally hesitant regarding the adoption of this term for fear of being stereotyped in the same way. I find myself wondering: when is *not* appropriating a contested term more dangerous than appropriating it?

A similar situation can found in the hacker/cracker debates that began in the 80s and continue to this day. When the American mass media latched onto the notion of the hacker as a computer criminal who broke into systems to steal data or wreak havoc, those within the original hacker culture (which had nothing to do with criminal activity), were adamant that the word "hacker" was misappropriated. Some have tried, with varying degrees of success or failure, to reappropriate the word back to its original meaning, insisting that computer criminals be called "crackers" instead of "hackers" or perhaps "black hat hackers" at least. If "hacker" was not reappropriated, it was feared, then anyone who enjoyed working with computers or was deeply immersed in the computer culture risked being stereotyped as a potential criminal. Proponents of "otaku" are also concerned that letting the mainstream media appropriate the term would result in the negative stereotyping of anyone with more than a casual interest in any subject, especially fringe hobbies such as collecting anime.

5.6 Towards the "Planet of the Otaku!"[56] (otaku in the early 2000s)

There are innumerable instances of "otaku" being used instead of "fan" in a positive manner, either to signify generic fans or elite fans, but there are more interesting positive uses of the term as well. Gainax's *Otaku no Video* (1992) was already mentioned, but it is worth noting that the founder of Gainax, Toshio Okada, left the studio to become one of the biggest proponents of otaku culture in Japan. Okada, affectionately known as the Otaking, has written books about otaku culture and lectured on the subject at Tokyo

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[55] Wyman, Walt. 2000. "Don't Call Me Otaku". http://xengamers.com/sections/columns/5892/

[56] a phrase borrowed from Youmex/Gainax (1992)

University (Japan's most prestigious school), thereby educating the next generation of Japan's leaders on otakuism. He has a Web site in 4 different languages called the International University of Otaku[57], and he has spoken about otaku at anime conventions[58] in the United States. Volker describes Okada's purpose as such:

> he attributed to the otaku a pioneering role in the information society, also at international level. His concern is to establish otaku as a new type of expert who focuses on the style, special effects and signature of individual comic artists. Where Gutenberg-schooled readers detect a story, writes Okada, the otaku first of all refer to the syntactic levels. Their judgement is based on an extensive knowledge of the particular genre allowing them to decode quotations, grasp references, and appreciate nuances.

Due to work by people like Okada, the eventual glamorization of computer cultures in Japan, the mainstreaming of parts of anime culture, and the identification of new youth subcultures for the Japanese adult culture to be afraid of[59], otaku in the early 2000s lost some of its potency in Japan as a dangerous subculture. In some circles, being otaku has even become hip[60]. It is not wholly unlikely that non-Japanese acceptance and promotion of the otaku lifestyle influenced the change of heart with Japan itself. In 2000, for the first time, the Japanese government's Educational White Paper highly praised anime and manga as important Japanese art forms achieving popularity and recognition abroad[61]. Toshio Okada once claimed that he was able to convince high ranking Japanese officials to watch anime (which is considered somewhat low-brow amongst the mainstream adult Japanese population) by exaggerating how influential and popular it was in the United States.

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[57] Okada, Toshio. 1996. "International University of Otaku".
http://www.netcity.or.jp/OTAKU/univ/aisatsu.html#e

[58] Viz Communications, Inc. 1996. "Return of the Otaking: Toshio Okada at Anime America '96".
http://www.j-pop.com/anime/archive/feature/04_gal_999/otaking.html

[59] Including, but not limited to "hikikomori", "jibetarians", "kogals", and "gothic lolita".

[60] Larimer, Tim. 2001. "Staying In and Tuning Out."
http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/ontheroad/japan.otaku.html

[61] On Web site: "AnimeBoost.Network". 2000. "Anime and Manga Ranked as Art"
http://www.aboost.net/home/industry/archives/arc9-2000.shtml

The art world is another arena where otaku have garnered attention in Japan and America. Takashi Murakami, a classically trained Japanese artist with otaku roots, decided to return to those roots and produce popular modern art utilizing and subverting (or perhaps "playing with" is the best phrase to use here) the mass media culture to produce (otaku-esque) subcultural representations of (post)modern day Japan. Referring back to the otaku culture and sometimes in conversation with it[62], Murakami hopes to elevate the status of otaku culture in Japan or at least alleviate discrimination against them[63], proclaiming that the otaku subculture has evolved into a powerful mainstream force ("Poku"= Pop + Otaku) that will produce Japan's most original cultural products[64]. He has also been ambivalent about otaku, sometimes proclaiming he is an otaku, at other times denying it, but he does not deny that he draws upon his otaku past, and his work has allowed otaku to re-enter the conversation in Japan as a contested subculture as opposed to a pre-crystallized one. On American soil, Murakami has achieved recognition from various gallery exhibits he has displayed over the last several years, most notably the "Superflat" exhibit which was displayed at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, California, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and The Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, Washington from May, 2001 through March, 2002. I had the opportunity to visit the exhibit when it was in Seattle. In viewing the exhibit, whose pieces were not altogether that different from otaku products not generally considered "high art", I got the sense about otaku that Volker Grassmuck noted when he said "They are an underground, but they are not opposed to the system" (1990). Or perhaps, it makes more sense to say that the otaku resist without resorting to outright rebellion. In the "Superflat" artworks, revolution themes were noticeably absent, but there were hints of tongue-in-cheek subversion, appropriation, and parody. The atmosphere was light hearted and fun, with no scathing portrayals of oppressors nor sympathetic appeals from

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[62] Murakami has collaborated with Toshio Okada on some his studio's sculpture pieces, and displayed them at otaku events.

[63] Journal of Contemporary Art, Inc., Takashi Murakami, and Mako Wakasa. "takashi murakami" http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html

[64] Cruz, Amanda, Midori Matsui, and Dana Friis-Hansen. 1999. *takashi murakami: the meaning of the nonsense of the meaning.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers.

the victimized. These were the expressions of a subculture who more or less *liked* the mainstream culture they were part of, even as they sought to reshape it for their own, sometimes "deviant", purposes.

Some of the first mentions of otaku in the mainstream American press appeared in reviews of Murakami's exhibits. The depictions were mostly brief; some of them reiterated the fringe aspects of the otaku, while others described them as being youth who were conversant with technology.[65]

In April of 2001, William Gibson, the science-fiction author who coined the term "cyberspace" who has also been known for his speculative observations about Japan[66], published an article[67] in the Guardian Unlimited called "Modern boys and mobile girls" reflecting on otaku culture and its relationship to British culture:

> The otaku, the passionate obsessive, the information age's embodiment of the connoisseur, more concerned with the accumulation of data than of objects, seems a natural crossover figure in today's interface of British and Japanese cultures. I see it in the eyes of the Portobello dealers, and in the eyes of the Japanese collectors: a perfectly calm train-spotter frenzy, murderous and sublime. Understanding otaku-hood, I think, is one of the keys to understanding the culture of the web. There is something profoundly post-national about it, extra-geographic. We are all curators, in the post-modern world, whether we want to be or not.[68]

Gibson's portrayal of otaku as a special kind of post-industrial trans-geographic cyber-citizen (that we are all becoming) opens up multiple possibilities for inquiry. In July 2001, an article appeared in the business section of CNN.com Asia, and was entitled "Otaku: Japan's gadget geeks dictate tech future". The article, by Kristie Lu Stout,

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[65] Drohojowska-Philp, Hunter. 2001. "Pop Go the Usual Boundaries". http://www.calendarlive.com/top/1,1419,L-LATimes-Art-X!ArticleDetail-17117,00.html

[66] For examples, see: Gibson, William. "My Own Private Tokyo". Wired. September, 2001. pp. 117-119 and Gibson, William. 1996. *Idoru*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group.

[67] This article was also meant to promote the release of *Pattern Recognition*, a novel by Gibson which featured characters who were either explicitly otaku or manifested traits that one would recognize as being otaku-like (i.e. obsessing over obscure products and information).

[68] Gibson, William. 2001. "Modern boys and mobile girls". http://www.observer.co.uk/life/story/0,6903,466391,00.html

builds upon Gibson's vision. In addition to portraying the otaku as being high tech connoisseurs, the article emphasizes their power as a consumer force:

> "The otaku are constantly seeking new functionality, new ways of using devices," says Tim Clark, a Tokyo-based analyst at Ion Global. "They are the ones that are the bell weather for each sector. They are the first buyers, the leading edge, the driving force behind the product development."[69]

In early 2002, otaku have appeared in unlikely venues, such as a New York Times Magazine article on the burgeoning Japanese fashion world. Fashion otaku have garnered a certain amount of respect, perhaps because the fashion industry has found a way to milk profits out of the subculture that was previously considered too frightening to even talk about publicly.

> "Every hipster who goes to Tokyo comes back learning two words: kwaii (sic), which means 'cute' and otaku, which means 'obsessive,"...John Jay, who, as the creative director of Wieden & Kennedy advertising in Tokyo, has helped create otaku for Nikes in a generation, explains that "young sneakerologists can tell you the history of any brand, shoe by shoe. And the Levis freaks know their Levis by the color of the thread and the year of the launch."[70]

Another New Yorker article also cites John Jay and gives its own definition of otaku:

> Otaku originally referred to a category of young Japanese men who were fixated on manga—the distinctive cartoon art that is popular reading material for adults in Japan. The word is now used to describe someone with a fanatical interest in computers or fashion.[71]

The fashion otaku in this article are presented as a new breed of consumers whose obsessive tendencies can be capitalized upon by those who control the means of

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[69] Stout, Kristie Lou. 2001. "Otaku: Japan's gadget geeks dictate tech future". http://edition.cnn.com/2001/BUSINESS/asia/07/12/tokyo.otaku/

[70] Spindler, Amy M. 2002. "Do You Otaku?" http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/24/magazine/magazinespecial/24OTAKU.html?ex=1015847839&ei=1&en=1cd514fd353b2558

[71] Mead, Rebecca. 2002. "Letter from Tokyo: Shopping Rebellion". http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?020318fa_FACT

production. This depiction of otaku as ultra-trendy heavy spenders is a far cry from those depictions that portray them as potential killers, and even those that portray them as information elites who eschew mainstream channels of consumption and monetary transactions whenever possible, preferring to trade in more esoteric forms of information.

The otaku had become respectable and somewhat hip in the mainstream American press, but from the way they have been described, the fashion otaku actually seem to be less of a potent consumer force driving trends and more of a customer pool *following* trends. Pulp magazine, published for American followers of Japanese comics and (sub)culture, had an article on the Japanese fashion scene in its May 2002 issue, praising those youth who are involved as fashion consumers:

> But these are only few samples of current young people's trends in Japan. The majority of kids (mostly outside of main city) are perhaps not doing or not getting into anything. Otaku (which means folks who get into their hobbies heavily) used to be on the dark side of Japan. Nowadays otaku actually look healthier than non-otakus in Japan. Maybe because it's because it's always better to have some energy than none.[72]

5.7 The new otaku boom

All of the aforementioned factors (work by otaku spokesmen such as Okada and Murakami, positive portrayals of otaku in the fashion world, early recognition of the potential of otaku in the fields of technology, etc.) that were in play in the early 2000s paved the way for an even larger otaku boom in the mid-2000s, primarily in Japan, but also making an impact on American perceptions of otaku.

Murakami has continued to rise in prominence through his highly publicized and successful collaborations with Nissan and Louis Vuitton. He contributed numerous otaku-culture and anime-inspired designs for the latter company's handbags, which became incredibly sought after and valuable (even though most customers were probably unaware of the otaku context behind the designs). With his increased profile, one of Murakami's life-sized anime sculptures sold for approximately half a million dollars at a

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[72] Evers, Izumi. 2002. "Mondo Tokyo Guide: fashion scene: Shibuya". http://www.pulp-mag.com/archives/6.05/mondo_02.shtml

Sotheby's auction in New York City. In addition, he has had public installations in Grand Central Station and Rockefeller Center. In 2005, he held another exhibit called Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture at the Japan Society in New York City, where he explored the otaku roots of his work and to critically evaluate the role of otaku culture in contemporary (mainstream) Japanese culture. In addition to viewing the exhibit numerous times, I had the opportunity to give several talks at the Japan Society regarding otaku culture in the United States and Japan.

Perhaps the most important development affecting perceptions of otaku in recent years was the release of the *Densha Otoko* story. *Densha Otoko,* which translates to "train man", is supposedly a true story about an otaku who saves a beautiful woman from a drunk on a train. She sends him a thank-you gift, and the poor otaku protagonist is interested in pursuing a relationship with the woman but is clueless on how to proceed. As such, he explains his plight on 2ch (ni-chaneru), a famous and heavily trafficked Japanese online bulletin board, and gets advice from his fellow otaku. The story was published as a best-selling book, and was made into a movie which hit #1 at the Japanese box office. Several manga versions of the story exist, as does a stage play, and a television drama version of the story became very popular[73]. Because of the show and its likeable otaku protagonist, more Japanese people became interested in otaku and began to view them more positively, so much so that cultural commentators viewing the trend were disturbed that such a geeky figure and his otaku brethren could be considered at all worthwhile to Japanese society[74].

It is interesting to note that some within Japan's otaku communities do not approve of the *Densha Otoko* story. As far as author Toru Honda is concerned[75], the protagonist of Densha Otoko sold out, becoming less of an otaku for the sake of a woman. He feels that otaku culture is superior to mainstream culture, and that fantasy relationships with

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[73] Many American fans watched it as well, via fansubs.

[74] See Schilling, Mark. 2005. "Getting to the next stage in life and love". http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?ff20050615a2.htm and Pulvers, Rogers. 2005. "New horizons beckon as Train Man heads nowhere fast". http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?fl20050710rp.htm

[75] See Yakushiji, Sayaka. 2005. "A world of his own: Create, erase, redraw". http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200506040207.html

fictional females are better than real relationships with real women. This, of course, is a somewhat extreme position coming from a particular subset of otaku culture that is not representative of all (or even most) otaku, but that doesn't mean his perspective should be ignored. Perhaps Honda's experience as an otaku is atypical, but it does highlight some of the negative pressures put on youth (in both Japan and the US) that cause them to seek belonging in one or more subcultures.

It seems that Toru Honda is intentionally trying to revive the notion of otaku as being dangerous and edgy. Toru Honda is leading the backlash against popular culture's co-optation of otaku subculture. He wants to be perceived as dangerous, but in some interviews comes off as being slightly comical[76], not really a threat to anyone except maybe himself. Then again, it is possible that many Japanese would indeed find him scary, and other accounts[77] I have read do make Honda seem a bit dangerous. Whether or not he succeeds, he seems to represent otaku culture's last stand against those who would make it mainstream. Honda rejects cute and popular portrayals of otaku culture, portrayals that have no teeth. His strategy appears to be one of distancing otaku from the mainstream by engaging even more deeply with things that are unacceptable to the general public. More recently, another self-proclaimed otaku spokeswoman, Mimei Sakamoto, railed against the current otaku boom[78], citing her displeasure at the way in which a subculture that is obsessed with sexualizing underage girls has become celebrated in the mainstream Japanese media. Unlike Honda, therefore, Sakamoto is an otaku who does not like the current otaku boom, not because it is too sterile, but because it is too dangerous.

Whatever moral objections individuals like Honda and Sakamoto may have, it is difficult to say how much their opinions have being heard (though Sakamoto's comments did generate a firestorm of discussion amongst American anime otaku). In addition to the *Densha Otoko* phenomenon that helped to reconfigure Japanese understandings of otaku (which also caused many American anime fans to reconsider

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[76] See Journeyman Pictures. 2006. "Japan – Generation Z". http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=55894

[77] See Macias, Patrick. "Mass Games". http://patrickmacias.blogs.com/er/2005/07/mass_games.html

[78] See Connell, Ryann. 2006. "Self-professed 'real otaku' rips into 'moe' fetish fakers". http://mdn.mainichi-msn.co.jp/waiwai/news/20060512p2g00m0dm014000c.html

their own understandings of otaku), the biggest factor affecting perceptions of otaku in Japan was the realization that otaku contribute heavily to the otherwise-suffering Japanese economy.

According to a 2004 study conducted by the Nomura Research Institute[79], there are 2.85 million otaku in Japan and they spend more than 400 billion Yen (~3.5 billion USD) a year on their various interests (i.e. comics, computer games, and electronics). In addition to compiling spending statistics, the NRI study sought to more fully characterize otaku (not completely unlike what I am seeking to do here), highlighting for example the ways in which otaku form communities around their interests, use IT to acquire and disseminate information, and how they consume products they are interested in. Yet, although the study says "Businesses should not treat enthusiastic consumers merely as 'loyal customers' but rather study their consumption behavior to find seeds of innovation", it is clear that the innovation they have in mind is meant to produce even more income for those companies. Ultimately, the NRI study views otaku from a very business-minded perspective, explaining to companies the best way to appeal to otaku customers, such as by selling special editions of products and making products that are customizable. In fact, the primary way they define who counts as an otaku is based on their spending habits.

> To arrive at such numbers the researchers had to define just exactly what makes a geek a geek. They settled on this being people who spend almost all of their free time or almost all of their free money on their hobby -- something like 95 percent of time or money, said Teruyasu Murakami, chief counselor at NRI and co-author of the report.[80]

Furthermore, the money-making possibilities of Japanese popular culture have not escaped those within the Japanese government who are currently looking for ways to

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[79] Kitabayashi, Ken. "The *Otaku* Group from a Business Perspective: Revaluation of Enthusiastic Consumers". NRI Papers No. 84: http://www.nri.co.jp/english/opinion/papers/2004/np200484.html See also Reuters. 2005. "Japan's shy geeks boast huge financial clout". http://www.financialexpress.com/latest_full_story.php?content_id=104873

[80] IDG News Service. 2006. "Sizing up Japan's geeks ". http://www.itworld.com/Comp/060126_japangeek/

further support the contents-producing industries so that Japanese animation and other cultural products may be exported to other nations.

Instead of being viewed as scary obsessive outsiders, then, otaku in Japan are increasingly being constructed as healthy (if slightly strange) citizens engaged with (and spending lots of money within) their culture. Does this mean that the otaku can no longer be considered a subculture, and are really just another expression of hegemony? We should not necessarily privilege mainstream definitions; it is likely that "otaku" will remain a contested term for a long time to come, doing different cultural work for different people who have their own values and priorities. From my own perspective, there are more fruitful and interesting ways to define otaku that go beyond how much they spend on their chosen hobbies.

In the United States in 2006, 'otaku' is still a contentious word with multiple meanings. Some people use it proudly, some use it to (seriously or not so seriously) disparage themselves, and some use it to disparage others. Starting in 2003, I had the opportunity to provide some research assistance to a documentary project on anime fandom called "Otaku Unite!"[81] In 2005, it was licensed by a major anime distribution company, and as of 2006 the DVD is now widely available for purchase. Despite the title, the documentary does not try to close the argument on how the word "otaku" ought to be used, but it does portray anime fandom as a vibrant and diverse community of people who are creative and generally happy, and many within that community identify themselves as being otaku[82].

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[81] See Eric Bresler's documentary *Otaku Unite* (2004).

[82] According to polls conducted by Anime News Network, one of the most prominent Web sites visited by American anime fans, 97.8% of the respondents identified themselves as anime fans and 2.2% did not (http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/poll.php?id=93) and 54.4% identified themselves as otaku and 45.6% did not (http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/poll.php?id=94). Two other polls attempted to discern how American anime fans defined otaku: 43.5% said an otaku is "Someone who lives for anime and/or manga and has no room in their life for any non-essential activities that aren't related to anime and/or manga", 30.4% said an otaku is "Someone who likes anime and/or manga enough that it would be a 'hobby'", 21.3% said an otaku is "Someone who likes anime and/or manga enough that it would be their only 'hobby'", and 4.8% said an otaku is "Someone who likes anime and/or manga." (http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/poll.php?id=95). In defining otaku, 50.5% of respondents said "In

As scholars of science, technology, and society, where do we go from here? How can we utilize this discourse to further our understandings of this under-studied and complicated youth subculture? In the following chapter, based on what I consider the most salient aspects of the discourse presented above, I will present a framework around which otaku can be studied in more detail.

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addition to being a fan, must know a lot about anime/manga and be motivated to learn more. Ie: A person who studies anime/manga", 34.9% said an otaku "Must have a certain amount of dedication to their fandom (the degree is irrelevant to this question)", 10.4% said an otaku is "Other (something not covered by the degree of their infatuation or the study of the topic)", and 4.2% said an otaku is "Any anime fan" (http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/poll.php?id=96)

6. Reconfiguring otaku

Neither the most negative stereotyping conceptions of otaku nor the most positive but superficial depictions of otaku is very useful for the purposes of studying the youth subculture's relationship to technology and science, and its role as a community of resistance. Otaku have superficially been compared to well-known American subcultures such as the geeks, hackers, and cyberpunks, and parallels between those subcultures have been drawn. Otaku can be distinguished as being unique from those other subcultures, however. The discourse has revealed a complex and often contradictory picture of who counts as an otaku, but certain themes stand out as being particularly unique and worth further consideration.

As Steven Levy described the old school hacker culture from MIT in the 1960s by laying out what he called "The Hacker Ethic"[83], it may be fruitful for me to lay out "The Otaku Ethic" in order to discuss the various features of the subculture that can be used to define them, thereby providing significant avenues of further research.

6.1 The otaku ethic:

1. Information is the most important thing, but information does not have fixed intrinsic value. The essence of information is secrecy; the utility of information comes from its movement.

2. Appropriation is a valid strategy for information management, identity reconstruction, and resistance not only for marginalized groups, but "reluctant insiders" as well.

3. Networks can be utilized for personal (and collective) gain.

6.1.1 Information is the most important thing, but information does not have fixed intrinsic value. The essence of information is secrecy; the utility of information comes from its movement.

While hackers and otaku alike have particular attitudes towards the importance of information, their philosophies differ significantly. Where the hacker community

[83] Levy, Steven. 1984. *Hackers*. New York: Penguin Books. pp. 39-49

believes that "information wants to be free" (or rather 'information should be free'), the otaku culture believes that information should not be free. The otaku are concerned with having *valuable* information, and the value of information depreciates as more people know it.

The otaku conception of information is similar to the formal (if somewhat non-intuitive) definition of information value described by computer scientist Claude Shannon[84], who states that information value is defined as the statistically based difference between that which is uncertain and that which is already known or widely available. According to Shannon's definition, that which is similar to what is already known or is predictable has low information value. When information is freed and widely distributed, therefore, information value is necessarily lost--less elite if you will.

Sharing information indiscriminately serves no purpose for the otaku who instead hoard information and keep it private. However, hoarded information cannot yield more information until it is shared, which is what I mean by the utility of information coming from its *movement*. Information is only shared by otaku when *the net change of information value is likely to be positive*. This positive gain in information is not necessarily instantaneous. Instead, one may gain monetary rewards and/or increased reputation from the initial release of information, and those may help in the acquisition of new information. Hence, we saw representations of otaku not giving things away, but trading and bartering for personal gain. Dogma is not valued in otaku culture, because dogma always refers back to a known truth and is therefore never novel nor high in information value. Other subcultures, including hacker and cyberpunk cultures, treat information guardedly at times, but not as tightly nor as regularly as otaku, and they still say, paradoxically, that they follow the Cyberlibertarian doctrine that information must be free.

Grassmuck and Greenfeld's otaku origin stories are somewhat disappointing in that they point to the otaku's subversive activities, but claim that they are merely replicating the information strategies learned from formal schooling--which emphasized the

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[84] For a summary, see: Goonatilake, Susantha. 1991. *The Evolution of Information: Lineages in Gene, Culture and Artefact*. London: Pinter Publishers.

memorization of context-less data over the analysis of meanings (historical, philosophical, ethical, etc.). For otaku who are wholly concerned with having valuable data with which they can achieve status and influence, it makes little sense to say they are not concerned with the value of the data they deal with. I would like to define otaku as being those who are reacting against the alienating and context-less information deluge of our information society[85], not by running away from the data or by treating it as valueless trivia to be memorized completely out of context, but by engaging it and *creating* meaning, context, and value.

Otaku draw connections between mundane products that others would not bother examining. Otaku frequently debate the significance of media products in ways that even the creators would never have imagined or expected-- yet another example of meaning being created where none was necessarily intended. The otaku achieve information mastery through depth, knowing the deep details of a few things instead of focusing on the surface details of many things, the latter strategy encouraged by an educational system based on the received knowledge of facts.

6.1.2 Appropriation is a valid strategy for information management, identity reconstruction, and resistance not only for marginalized groups, but 'reluctant insiders' as well.

Otaku can be defined as appropriators of technology, whether they are media technologies and products, or information technologies. Studies of appropriation have much to offer otaku studies, but the otaku underscore a need for studying appropriation from yet another angle. Most studies of appropriated technologies have focused on the appropriation of dominant technologies by marginalized groups seeking to establish an identity and voice, and therefore power, at the centers of society. The youth who become otaku, on the other hand, are not generally from marginalized segments of society. On the contrary, they come from rather privileged segments of society. Much has been written on the effects of marginalization and its role in stripping away identity, but identity-loss issues of those who are at the centers of society have not been examined as

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[85] not to mention the adverse conditions of *The Technological Society* (1954) as described by Jacques Ellul.

thoroughly, partly because the subcultures of resistance spawned from within the centers of society eventually tend to become marginalized, masking the fact that they were *initially* insiders who *made a choice* to leave the insider's game.

Hegemony can be alienating in the way it excludes some peoples, but it can also be alienating in the way it seeks to assimilate others. It might be described as a colonization, not of exotic others, but of our own so-called "privileged" youth. For those youth who do not recognize a problem, maybe there is none for them (that they are aware of), but for those who feel alienated by an educational system that breeds conformity, discourages original and critical thought, and encourages the memorization of vast amounts of context-less information, there is a pathologization occurring that marginalization theory may not routinely consider. These youth are not excluded. Instead they are included in a regime they would rather not belong to, and as such, I refer to them as 'reluctant insiders'[86].

Otakuism is just one strategy that reluctant insiders can take. Reluctant insiders can also appropriate technologies to become hackers and otaku or even reject technologies altogether, or drop out of society completely. The 'reluctant insider' metaphor allows us to consider more deeply *why* people become hackers and otaku, etc, and to consider how being part of the target audience can be just as alienating and identity fragmenting as being excluded. Such studies are particularly relevant in both Japan and America in the midst of rising concerns regarding school violence perpetrated by middle class youth, violence being yet another face-saving strategy adopted by reluctant insiders[87].

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[86] This can be contrasted with the term "outsider-within", coined by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) p. 11, which describes individuals from marginalized groups moving from marginal positions into more central positions of power, but who are never fully able to discard his or her outsider status to become a legitimate insider. Just as Collins suggests that "an outsider-within stance functions to create a new angle of vision on the process of suppression", the "reluctant insider" also offers a unique perspective regarding oppression.

[87] See "Social perspectives on school anti-violence policies" (2001) for my perspectives on youth violence, educational policies, and the concept of face as defined by Erving Goffman: http://www.rpi.edu/~engl/violence.pdf

It is not the purpose of this dissertation to claim that any single form of resistance is the most effective one[88]. However, otakuism is a significant alternative to other forms of resistance engaged by reluctant insiders. This resistance is less outwardly political and rebellious compared to the cyberpunk agenda that seeks to overthrow the system, and more insular like the old school hacker culture described by Steven Levy. Although the otaku are not a free-information sharing culture, they are not just a shopping culture either. They are not bound to mainstream markets and channels of consumption. Being a special class of consumers, otaku do not rely on authorized sources of product information and distribution, but have established their own networks of information and trade which also places value on products independently of "suggested retail price". Furthermore, ready-made products are subverted to their own ends, or avoided altogether when the subculture creates its own products which it can trade for other products, money, or other forms of information both within their community and outside of it.

6.1.3 Networks can be utilized for personal (and collective) gain.

In addition to the appropriation of technology, I see otaku as being appropriators of scientific culture, which they may have learned from their schooling experiences. Where science is generally a heavily controlled and government-sanctioned activity, the otaku adopt the social practices of scientific culture in their everyday lives and as participants

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[88] Nonetheless, it is not my intent to close off discussions of what counts as effective resistance. It is useful to compare different forms of resistance to evaluate which ones are most effective at any given time for any given group of people. Once again using Dick Hebdige's conception of subcultural resistance (1979), he defines subcultural resistance (via 'style') as making visible dominant ideologies that would otherwise remain invisible. Subcultural acts are effectively resistant when they problematize dominant ideologies that were previously taken for granted, and are even more effective when those ideologies and the dominant social structure itself are changed as a result of those subcultural acts. Furthermore, Eglash refers to Aiwah Ong's study (1987) of Malaysian factory women that highlights how certain forms of resistance may be *ineffective*, where certain resistant acts may serve to deflect energy and attention away from more substantial and effective forms of activism (Eglash, 2004). Also, acts of subcultural resistance by marginalized groups are not uniformly viewed as positive, as some groups (such as racist organizations) may be marginalized due to their problematic moral stance on a number of issues. With this in mind, evaluation of the effectiveness of otaku resistance will be revisited in Chapter 9.

in an information economy (or ecology, drawing upon the work of Charles Rosenberg[89]). Taking seriously the notion that otaku are implicated in huge social networks of associations (much of that made possible by the development of communications network infrastructures such as the internet), as opposed to the notion that they do not communicate with others at all, I would like to draw parallels between otaku culture and similarly networked scientific culture.

Like scientists, otaku communicate via networks and use complex forms of rhetoric to establish information value and therefore prestige (which distinguishes them from the old school hacker ethic which does not believe in information elitism). Bruno Latour makes the case that scientists cannot be successful without a network within which they can win over audiences and gain allies; likewise, I would assert otaku are also dependent on networks.

It may be useful to follow the interactions between the varied human actors within otaku networks, and to analyze the complex and intense relationships between the otaku and the non-human artifacts that are their objects of desire. Just as the institutional aspect of science gives it authority, the community structures of otaku allow their subculture to engender large scale (and possibly resistant) changes that would be impossible for isolated individuals.

Like scientists, otaku are often in search of factual truths, but otaku are concerned with other forms of information as well. Some information that otaku deal with is judged valuable due to its accuracy, but other information might be considered valuable due its novelty alone. An otaku who produces a new work of art now has information that is valuable *independent of truth or falsity*, as art is not generally associated with objective truth. It would be a mistake, however, to overemphasize that science is only concerned with accuracy and not information in a broader sense. Science studies has long acknowledged that while scientists may seek the truth of something, the choices they make regarding which objects of study they find interesting cannot be decided based on determinations of truth/falsity alone, but depend more on considerations of such things

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[89] Rosenberg, Charles. 1997. "Toward an Ecology of Knowledge: On Discipline, Context, and History" in *No Other Gods*. 2nd ed. Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 225-239.

as novelty, "where the funding is", aesthetics, etc. In the end, the parallels between scientific culture and otaku culture may turn out to be more significant than the differences.

6.2 Where to next?

Referring to the otaku ethic, I should reiterate that I am defining otaku prior to describing them. While I have chosen to emphasize certain attributes over others in my definition, my choices were not wholly random either, as I have had experience observing these cultures from within prior to my officially conducting research for this study. These people (according to the criteria I have chosen) actually exist and can be studied. The naming is not arbitrary either; the people described by my otaku ethic are often called and/or call themselves "otaku".

However, the otaku ethic will most likely *not* apply to many youth in Japan (and elsewhere) who are called or call themselves "otaku". This is a situation that I consider to be acceptable. Ultimately, I am not seeking to contest other people's claims of what makes an "authentic otaku". I might argue, however, that the meaning of the word is a heavily contested domain (even within "otaku" communities), and that otaku "authenticity" could not exist prior to people's arbitrary definitions of "otaku".

I unabashedly offer up my own definition, not in hopes that it will trump all other definitions of "otaku" and become widely adopted by youth cultures everywhere, but for the sake of being able to pinpoint for study a specific group of youth who are engaging in specific activities with a specific set of attitudes, and also to respectfully allow/encourage them to continue using the "otaku" moniker should they choose to do so. For now, the meaning of "otaku" is up for grabs. If the situation changes, however, I have confidence that the subculture I am describing will continue to exist, even if the word "otaku" is lost to them forever.

The fanciful ponderings of American observers of otaku subculture have uncovered tremendous possibility, and otaku communities have been born in America as a result, even if they are mirroring a potentially non-existent referent (as befitting a subculture with a predilection towards hyperreality over realism). In analyzing interpretations of Japanese culture, whether or not those interpretations are totally accurate, we've

uncovered *and helped create* a subcultural strategy that is not implicitly Japanese nor even American, but global in its application, as the conditions that create otaku are not restricted to Japan and America. We can and should find otaku culture in America (and elsewhere) and then study them to see what we can learn about technoculture, youth, consumption, and resistance.

By delineating the otaku ethic, I have created a framework of analysis by which otaku can be studied ethnographically from a science and technology studies perspective, while acknowledging and drawing upon previous frameworks of understanding otaku (as revealed through the critical discourse analysis). In the next chapter, I will begin my discussion of what I have learned after having conducted ethnographic fieldwork, studying actual otaku in the United States. At the end of Chapter 2, I highlighted the main questions I hoped to answer through my research. Here are some additional (and more specific) questions I hoped to address through my research in the field:

1. As a strategy of information and identity management, appropriation, and resistance, how successful is otakuism from the perspective of the otaku themselves?

2. How reflexive are the otaku regarding the nature of their strategies in comparison to other strategies?

3. Are the otaku only a youth culture? Are the strategies employed only useful for a specific age range? Do otaku "burn out" after awhile?

4. While otaku subcultures tend to include mostly men, what is the role of women in such cultures?

5. In what other ways do otaku subcultures manifest resistance against dominant ideologies, such as those regarding realism, dogmatic authority, and sexual norms[90]?

6.3 Summary

Rewording the points of the otaku ethic, I identify otaku based upon their

1. being deeply concerned with having "elite" or novel information (for the purposes of achieving power and status within their community)
2. being a "reluctant insider" subculture of resistance by virtue of their appropriation of technology and science, and
3. having complex social networks that are similar to mainstream scientific networks in terms of knowledge creation, discovery, and dissemination.

[90] For an analogous study of the sexual norms within the free-software/hacker community, see: Newitz, Annalee. 2000. "If code is free, why not me". http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2000/05/26/free_love/index.html

7. Anime/manga otaku as information culture

Using the Otaku Ethic as a starting point of analysis and to frame the scope of my fieldwork, I was able to determine how it (the ethic) actually plays out in practice. What are the nuances behind the information philosophy of American otaku, and how is that philosophy manifested in their behavior? With this basic information philosophy in hand, how do otaku use it within their networked communities of knowledge and practice? The fieldwork I conducted, both online and offline, attempted to answer those questions.

Otaku in America engage in a variety of activities that are informed by a basic philosophy of information. In this chapter and the following one, I will be describing otaku in terms of their IT and media practices/literacy, their systems of value based on novelty and originality, and how those things play out in a networked environment—characterized by heavy and goal-oriented computer/internet usage, participation in online communities, systems of meritocracy and reputation, obligatory points of passage, the recruitment of allies and disruption of enemies, and the social construction of facts, norms, and celebrity. All of these things will be described based upon my personal interactions and experiences within otaku culture and analysis of publicly available discourse within otaku culture.

7.1 Discovering the diversity of American otaku culture

Before describing the landscape of American otaku culture in terms of the Otaku Ethic, it is important to highlight the role of the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted, where I interacted with otaku as individuals. In planning this research, I had hoped to encounter, interact with, and then describe the lives of the most hardcore otaku, paragons of what it means to be an otaku as defined by the Otaku Ethic. While some of the otaku I encountered were more hardcore than others, archetypical otaku like the one I described in the opening paragraphs of this dissertation, living and breathing every aspect of the Otaku Ethic, did not exist (at least in the numbers I expected to find them in the places that I looked). The Otaku Ethic, therefore, serves more of a model to be emulated by those ambitious anime fans who wanted to develop into full-fledged otaku. While I did meet some extremely hardcore otaku (who may or may not be considered 'archetypical

otaku'), they certainly were not commonplace, and I did not want to write a dissertation about such a small number of individuals, especially considering that anime otaku subculture as a whole is so much larger and more diverse.

Although my initial plan was to study the most extreme otaku and then look at less otaku-ish individuals to flesh out the rest of the data, the diversity of anime fans is what proved to be most interesting. Those anime fans who seemed casual about their interests in some ways turned out to be very intensely engaged in other ways. Many intense fans who I expected to be extreme otaku turned out to lead fairly balanced lives, breaking all kinds of stereotypes (my own included) of what an otaku should be like. Those who I identified as being otaku in certain aspects were not necessarily otaku in all aspects of their lives. The initial standard that I set was perhaps too high, but in relaxing those standards a bit, the picture of the subculture that appears turns out to be even richer, with a lot of very interesting individual variation.

For example, on my trip to Japan with the Pop Japan Travel tour, I expected that my fellow tour members, willing to spend almost $2,000 (US) for the experience, would be some of the most extreme, intense, and devoted otaku I would find, and that they would all be of similar personality and temperament. That presumption turned out to be very wrong. The group was actually very diverse, with one tour member being as young as 19 (the minimum age required to be on the tour), and another who was a parent whose child also watched anime. There were 8 men and 7 women on the tour, including several college students, two pharmacists, a medical doctor, a computer applications coordinator for the Florida Department of Education, freelance designers, and other professionals. One tour participant explained to me that he was paying for the entire trip on his credit card. Another had been to Japan a number of times before and funded her Japan trips by purchasing Japanese amateur comics which she would later sell for a profit back in the United States. The tour participants had different levels of anime knowledge, different levels of enthusiasm and devotion to anime, and different levels of participation within the larger anime community. As it turned out, I only considered a few of them to be hardcore otaku, but they were all interesting and encouraged me to revisit the scope of who I wanted to study within the subculture.

One of my most important informants was a woman on the tour known as Pinguino, (at the time) a 26 year old freelance designer and artist living in Hollywood, CA. A veteran and experienced anime fan with a lot of connections and an affinity for technology, Pinguino was what I would consider a hardcore otaku, but in her own unique style. More than just an otaku, she had been involved in a number of other technology-related subcultures since she was 10 years old:

> When I was 10, I was into BBS's and Amateur radio. A lot of people who were in the early BBS scene eventually filtered into the underground computer scene. That was split into several sections, art (ANSI) (people who did art for BBSs), hackers, phreakers (so that the couriers could make long distance calls for free to pass warez), couriers (people who pass warez files around), and crackers (people who crack files). I became heavily involved with the ANSI scene, both as a publisher (recruiting artists, promoting works), and a writer (writing and interviewing artists for a variety of online publications). And as the internet evolved and became an option, I was on there too, where the borders between the different worlds began to fade.

I asked Pinguino how she saw anime fandom as a subculture, and she responded:

> I think that anime fandom is a subculture different than RPG players, gamers, and comic nerds :-) Anime fans have a lot more girls than any subculture that I've ever seen. You see a lot of hyperness, a lot of energy. Comic book fans, for the most part, are carrying huge bags of heavy books, and talking about artists and storyline plot holes. Anime fans tend to be more excited about new things they find. They are typically younger, where comic book fans are 20-40ish.

I had the opportunity to interview Joe Doughrity (35 at the time), a writer/producer in Hollywood, CA who was finishing his degree in film studies at Columbia College in Tarzana, CA. Joe, having experience in the film industry, produced an amateur documentary called "Seven Days in Japan" (2005), detailing his own experiences on a Pop Japan Travel tour. He was also interested in his fellow tour members and anime fans in general:

> I think it [anime] fosters community and most anime fans are well adjusted people, maybe even overachievers! (witness Theo in my video who works for NASA, etc.)...lots of engineers and filmmakers, writers etc.
>
> The 17 as I like to call them, in many ways they surprised me. I think they are a good sampling of fans. We had people from the East coast

> (Katie and Kevin from Penns), Midwest (Brian from Minnesota), the South (Tim) and the West. They were of all ages and backgrounds. I think they were a good cross section.

Despite the diversity, however, he felt a real sense of connection with his tour mates (through the act of shopping together) that was similar to my own experience:

> It was cool to be around people who were equally fanatical as you and understood how important it was for you to find that missing gachopan (vending machine excuse the spelling) action figure you always wanted. I even told others in the group what I was after in case I didn't see it. it paid off as Jin in our group bought me a book I was looking for but couldn't find myself.

Another venue in which I was surprised by the diversity of anime otaku was at the Japan Society in New York City, where I gave a talk and participated in two workshops (in conjunction with the Takashi Murakami exhibit: "Little Boy: The Exploding Arts of Japan's Subculture") discussing anime and otaku culture with American teens. In the first workshop entitled "Why is Anime So Cool? Otaku in America", I (and my fellow panelists) had the opportunity to interact with a roomful of young teenagers as they discussed what anime and being anime fans meant to them. There were two main things that were interesting about the participants. First, of the several dozen teenagers, at least half of them were girls. Secondly, even though they were young and relatively new fans with limited knowledge of anime as a whole, they displayed attitudes that I typically only associated with older fans. For example, they had strong opinions on topics such as English-language dubbing of anime, changes and edits to anime made by American distribution companies, and the way in which anime is sold in the United States. Even though they tended to focus their attentions on the few anime titles they had been exposed to (whenever I or the other panelists mentioned or showed a picture or video of an anime title they were familiar with, the teens inevitably vocalized their approval), they cared deeply about anime as an art form, expressing displeasure at editorial changes to the shows not just because they wanted to see the originals (which was a non-issue to them personally because they already had access to the originals), but because they wanted others to see the originals as well, preserving the integrity of the original artistic work.

The second workshop, "Experience Otaku! Create an Exhibition: An interactive Exploration of Contemporary Art & Culture for High School Students", allowed a small group of about a dozen teens to study the Murakami otaku exhibit and to create their own one-day exhibit highlighting aspects of their own New York City teen culture. I was told ahead of time that the participants wouldn't necessarily be anime fans, so I should prepare accordingly. As it turned out, all the teens were anime/manga fans and most of them were heavily into it. As I discussed the history of the otaku concept with them, not only did they listen intently, many of them conducted Web searches on the topics I discussed as I was discussing them (using the internet-connected laptop computers at their disposal). After my initial involvement with the 9-day workshop, the teens had a week to come up with an exhibit about their own youth culture. They decided to create an exhibit (entitled *Pop Bunmei Kaika*) about their own experiences as American anime otaku, and I had the privilege of attending. The teens were very enthusiastic to share with me what they had created. Their exhibit covered a broad range of subjects, including Japanese fashion, violent and sexual imagery in anime and manga, the creation of fanart, manga collecting, plush toys, social video gaming, and social networking (such as at anime conventions). According to their press release: "*Pop Bunmei Kaika* explores the influence of Japanese pop culture on American pop culture, particularly the impact of *otaku* culture on American teen fandom...The exhibition reflects the idea that these influences have both positive and negative aspects." Their exploration of the positive and negative aspects of imported otaku culture indicated a level of critical reflection that I did not expect from such young fans. I was also impressed by the scope of their collections, which made up the entirety of the displayed objects.

The older and more experienced anime otaku I interacted with were less hardcore than I expected, whereas the younger and less experienced otaku were more intensely engaged in fandom activities than I expected. For example, when I attended a Halloween cosplay (anime costuming) party put on by members of the Upstate New York Cosplay Society, I was surprised that the main organizers were high school students, and except for a few RPI students and parental chaperones, all the attendees were young high school students. Ten years ago, one would not be able to find such an event organized and

populated by such young and dedicated anime fans, and certainly not female anime fans[91].

The surprising diversity within anime fandom and even amongst those who I would call otaku encouraged me to do more than describe only the most hardcore and archetypical otaku. On the other hand, that same diversity makes it difficult to describe the entirety of anime fandom with all its local variation. That is why the Otaku Ethic still proves to be useful. Although most otaku only adhere (at varying degrees) to certain aspects of the Otaku Ethic (a piecemeal adoption of otaku norms, in other words), the Ethic describes general concepts and norms that apply to the anime otaku community as a whole. In the following three chapters, we will be looking at how the Otaku Ethic functions in practice within the anime fan community, with individual otaku giving voice to what it means for them to belong to that community.

7.2 Otaku and intellectual property

In describing otaku as a novel information culture, it makes sense to describe an example that distinguishes their philosophy from those of other information cultures (such as hackers). In the following sections, I will detail otaku culture's stance with regard to information copying and transfer over the internet, the value of protecting intellectual property, and appropriation as a means of maximizing information. While this dissertation is about otaku and not hackers, I will be discussing hackers to clarify the sometimes subtle differences between the two subcultures.

7.2.1 A quick overview of hacker culture (a.k.a. Cyberlibertarianism)

In the relative anarchy of the early internet, and in response to corporate concerns colonizing this new frontier as fast as possible (to make as much money as possible), a new Cyberlibertarian movement emerged, partly informed by the 60s counterculture—some members of which became early computing gurus and visionaries well before the

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[91] Ten years ago, anime conventions were attended by mostly male and college-aged fans, but in modern day fandom, there are more female and younger fans than ever. I made an effort to interact with as many female otaku as male otaku, which was not difficult because of the prevalence of girls and women in fandom.

dot com era[92]. Its heroes are the Electronic Frontier Foundation, founded by Mitch Kapor[93] of Lotus 1-2-3 fame and Grateful Dead lyricist Perry Barlow. One of the movement's prominent stars is Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig, vaulting into the public and academic limelight with his books *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (1999) and *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (2001). Lessig, treated almost like a rock star within the free software community, has given talks all over the world about free information, intellectual property, and the importance of the "commons" to any free society's creative vitality. The members of the EFF have made it their task to ensure that people's civil liberties are protected on the internet, that new information technology policy is intelligently designed, and that intellectual property is properly defined with respect to data that sits waiting on servers and flows through networks. From the EFF homepage, we can read a detailed account of their purpose and activities:

> The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) was created to defend our rights to think, speak, and share our ideas, thoughts, and needs using new technologies, such as the Internet and the World Wide Web. EFF is the first to identify threats to our basic rights online and to advocate on behalf of free expression in the digital age.[94]

1960s hippies turned millionaires and law professors aside, however, the Cyberlibertarian movement has found its most active voice from within the realm of subculture. The movement has its quasi-mainstream ivory tower/enlightened culture representatives, but its subcultural potency comes from those who were present at the first stirrings of the personal computing and internet revolutions, individuals who did more than most to push those revolutions along. These were the software hackers, the first explorers and cowboys of the computerized information frontier. The hacker subculture as written about by Steven Levy (1984) has been widely romanticized and

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[92] LSD and mind-expansion advocate Timothy Leary, in his later days, began promoting personal computer use as another means of achieving personal enlightenment.

[93] Kapor eventually left the EFF in 1995, "burned out, disillusioned and feeling increasingly at odds with the more libertarian board members" (Stewart, 2000) http://www.thestandard.com/article/display/0,1151,12707,00.html

[94]Electronic Frontier Foundation. 2002. http://www.eff.org/abouteff.html

misunderstood, even well into 2006 (the time of this writing). Not writing about computer criminals who break into secure systems and steal data or commit acts of vandalism[95], Levy instead focused on an earlier, purer conception of hackers. His hackers came from the ranks of early computer users (or perhaps more accurately, *enthusiasts*) at MIT in the 1960s. Their philosophy of computer use was very close to that of the EFF, as described by Levy who laid out the "hacker ethic", still widely quoted today by those in hacker communities. He wrote[96]:

- Access to computers—and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works—should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative!
- All information should be free.
- Mistrust Authority—Promote Decentralization.
- Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position.
- You can create art and beauty on a computer.
- Computers can change your life for the better.

Many of the original MIT hackers moved on from being computer amateurs to become computer professionals, and new hackers at MIT and beyond followed their lead to form a legitimate and widespread subculture. While the computer criminal hacker culture had most of the spotlight in the 80s and early 90s, the old-school hacker culture has reemerged as a dominant ideological force on the internet, with the rise of the free software movement, spurred on by Richard Stallman's Free Software Foundation and the widespread dissemination of the Open Source movement as exemplified by the

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[95] Computer criminals have been referred to as "hackers" by mainstream news sources since the 80s, and some computer criminals indeed refer to themselves as hackers. There have been debates within computer user communities regarding whether these criminals should be called "hackers", "black hat hackers", "crackers", etc.

[96] Levy, Steven. 1984. *Hackers*. New York: Penguin Books. pp. 39-49

famous Linux operating system 'invented' by programmer Linus Torvalds. The hacker ethic has resurfaced with a vengeance, and its most potent aphorism continues to be "Information should be free", a statement with massive political and economic consequences, and where meaning is being aggressively negotiated.

The front line advocates of the free software/open source movement, who I will simply call "hackers" to keep things simple, are a subculture. Otaku are subcultural too, and they exist in many of the same domains occupied by hackers, but as I will explain, the otaku ethic causes otaku to behave quite differently from hackers.

7.2.2 The nature of information copying and transfer on the internet

Representatives of hacker culture have championed new forms and ethics of information exchange that have emerged from the evolution of the internet and related computing/networking technologies. Information has become more easily copied and transferred from one person to the next. Copying and transfer has always been possible in the past within face-to-face communities, but there has always been a non-negligible economic cost to those activities. Within online communities, however, costs of copying and transfer have been reduced to almost nothing, and hacker communities have said that this technological capability must be leveraged for the public (as opposed to private/corporate) good. With regards to the economics of information sharing on the internet, Peter Kollock writes:

> The fact that many of the public goods produced on the internet consist of digital information means that the goods are purely nonrival—one person's use of the information in no way diminishes what is available for someone else. It also becomes easy and very cheap to distribute information across the Internet.[97]

Technologically, it has become possible to send (only paying for the cost of a broadband internet connection) full-length and decent quality feature movies between internet users within less time than it takes to watch those movies. Kollock and proponents of the hacker ethic might ask: If it has become so easy and cheap to create public goods in the digital age, why shouldn't everyone share everything at all times for everyone's benefit?

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[97] Kollock, Peter. 1999 (2001). The economies of online cooperation: Gifts and public goods in cyberspace. *Communities in Cyberspace*. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, eds. London: Routledge.

Privacy concerns aside for the moment (as even staunch free information advocates believe in some degree of privacy protection[98]), otaku culture may have an answer that Kollock and hackers do not expect.

Based upon what we know about the otaku ethic, it might not be surprising to note that otaku do not wholly agree with Kollock's notion of public goods in the form of digital information being nonrival. For otaku, one person's use of the information certainly diminishes what is available for someone else. According to the otaku ethic, as information becomes widely used and known, its value diminishes for every user, and especially every subsequent user. The otaku who has discovered an elite piece of information and publishes it gains the most, but can only benefit from publishing that information once (and for a limited amount of time)—as that information becomes widely distributed and less valuable. Subsequent users can benefit somewhat from having that information, but by the time the last user gets it, s/he can no longer use it in very novel (and exceptionally valuable) ways, as the opportunity for novelty has long passed. As such, secrecy and selective hoarding of information is an important part of the otaku lifestyle. Otaku generate meaning and value independently of mainstream signifiers of meaning and value, and they only release information when it results in (what is perceived as) the maximum personal benefit. Having information that others do not have (and managing when to keep it secret and when to publish it) is of paramount concern to otaku. That the technological means (afforded by the Internet) for information dissemination are "easy and very cheap" is not sufficient justification for sharing within otaku communities.

7.2.3 Cultural rights and cultural costs

Some hackers have asserted that new technologies render old intellectual property laws obsolete (or at least in serious need of major revision). More importantly, they also say that new intellectual property laws created in response to new technological capacities are fundamentally restricting creative possibilities—"the future of ideas" as Lawrence Lessig might put it. The media and software companies are worried about technological

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[98] See http://www.cpsr.org/cpsr/privacy/crime/denning.hackers.html for Dorothy Denning's description (1990) of Richard Stallman's views on free information and confidential (private) information.

threats to the content they used to control with an iron fist, and the hacker culture feels that those companies are anachronistic and in the way of progress (towards a free and open society). In a presentation given in 2002[99], Lawrence Lessig organized his talk around four basic points:

- Creativity and innovation always builds on the past.
- The past always tries to control the creativity that builds upon it.
- Free societies enable the future by limiting this power of the past.
- Ours is less and less a free society.

Lessig is very passionate and concerned when he says "never in our history have fewer people controlled more of the evolution of our culture. Never."[100]

Hackers agree with Lessig and are quick to point out that the original meaning of copyright (in their interpretation) more strongly favored not the creative individual who is the copyright holder, but the general public at large. In a public conversation on Slashdot, a popular technology news and discussion site[101], one user wrote:

> Copyright owners often make the mistake of speaking as if copyright exists for their benefit. It doesn't. The entire point of copyright is to encourage the creation of intellectual property for the benefit of the public. The fact that the mechanism by which the creation of that intellectual property is achieved is by granting a benefit to the author is purely incidental. [102]

Copyright, according to the hacker community, is a legal means of granting *temporary* powers and benefits to authors of creative works such that they will have incentive to publish them *for the benefit of the public*. Therefore, the hackers say, the

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[99] Lessig, Lawrence. 2002. "Free Culture". http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/policy/2002/08/15/lessig.html

[100] ibid

[101] The site slogan is "News for nerds. Stuff that matters."

[102] peterb. 2002. "Copyright and Copy Rights: A good article, with some minor flaws". http://yro.slashdot.org/comments.pl?sid=45803&cid=4734323 .

rights of the general public outstrip the rights of individual authors. This is especially so in the case of intellectual property, because, unlike material (physical) property, abstract creative works always draw upon the public ideas of others—meaning that no idea is wholly an author's private invention in the first place. Lawrence Lessig offers further insight:

> This is the Disney Corporation: taking works in the public domain, and not even in the public domain, and turning them into vastly greater, new creativity...Now the Disney Corporation could do this because that culture lived in a commons, an intellectual commons, a cultural commons, where people could freely take and build. It was a lawyer-free zone. (2002)

The hacker argument is that the public domain is shrinking and becoming less accessible because of new legislative protections of copyrighted works[103]. In other words, we have lost our right to the cultural commons. Cultural products that should not belong to single individuals or corporate entities are being withheld from the public that they drew upon to create that product in the first place. The hacker community feels that the public lost a fundamental right as soon as it allowed copyright to be used for the benefit of individuals rather than the community at large.

The otaku community, on the other hand, takes a very different view towards copyright and the public's right to cultural products. As otaku are an extremely dedicated subset of fan and enthusiast cultures, they care very strongly about the protection of cultural products (especially the ones they are fans of), and therefore the protection of author and creator rights—as they want to ensure that their favorite authors and creators have incentives to produce more work for them to consume. Otaku themselves being authors and creators of novel products, such as Web sites containing elite information, are also seeking to protect *their own work* when they support the

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[103] One example of such legislation is *The Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act*. See Keyt, Richard. 2001. "Sonny Bono Term Extension Act Extends Copyright Terms". http://www.keytlaw.com/Copyrights/sonybono.htm .

general schema of copyright[104]. Members of the otaku community feel that copyright is necessary because: without a means of guaranteeing individual incentives for creating new works, many individuals simply will not create new works, and that is detrimental to the public good. In other words, the public good *requires* individual good (as opposed to individual sacrifices for the sake of the public). It is impossible to adequately address the needs of the public without acknowledging the needs of the individual. Copyright law was not intended to make individual needs incidental to public needs. Those two needs are *inseparable* in a free and open society.

It should be noted, however, that otaku are not strictly concerned about author and creator rights from the perspective of corporate concerns. Otaku do not tend to be anti-corporate, per se; anime otaku, for example, strongly support and promote products of the American anime industry on Web sites such as AnimeOnDVD.com. However, otaku often place author rights above corporate rights. They believe in copyright protection as a means to ensure that authors maintain control over how their works are used. When corporate money-making concerns disrupt that control and the integrity of cultural works, anime otaku have few qualms ignoring copyright in that case. To give an example of the commitment otaku have to cultural works and the appreciation they show to the authors of those works, here are a few points from "the animeprime.com credo", animeprime.com being a site that catalogs instances of anime companies making edits to anime works prior to distributing those works in the United States.

- Anime´ exists to advocate that the original uncut video and uncut Japanese audio be preserved for all anime released outside of Japan.

- Anime´ exists to inform potential customers of what titles have been edited/changed and what, if any, impact those edits/changes have on the original story and plot so they can make an informed buying decision.

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[104] With regard to hackers and Web sites, hackers believe strongly in the World Wide Web's inherent information-free nature, such that content should be shared, archived, and linked to freely. Otaku, in comparison, are highly protective of their content, even if some of that content comes from illegally copied or scanned copyrighted material. In some cases, otaku list their Web sites as not being "link free", meaning that one has to ask permission before linking to that site, a practice that is heavily criticized by many within the hacker community.

- Anime´ feels that all anime deserves to seen by all audiences as the original creator (meaning the original creative team, not the businessmen who finance them) intended when it was first released in Japan.

- Anime´ believes the first responsibility of any company that licenses animation from Japan is to TRANSLATE the story, not alter or change it.[105]

For otaku, content needs to be protected, and copyright provides one method of achieving that protection. In terms of building upon existing works, otaku realize the importance of a "cultural commons" as Lessig puts it, but do not feel that revoking copyright protection is the correct solution, as that would take away a major source of author incentives. Instead of calling for legislative action making more works part of the cultural commons, otaku *appropriate* existing cultural works, often disrespecting copyright, but always being careful not to harm the interests of the original authors. More on this point will be expanded upon later, but the point I am trying to make here is that otaku find appropriation (of closed and protected systems) a more interesting and fair strategy than making all or most content open and free. Even though otaku are not representative of large media and software companies, they do not believe that culture is or should be free. As Chris Beveridge, the editor of AnimeOnDVD.com, writes:

> Anime is not a right. You aren't owed every release and for every release to be affordable for everyone. This is a hobby, one that I assume we all love. But it doesn't mean we can all have the same things. And if you can't afford a particular limited edition, don't spend your time complaining about its cost. It doesn't help you and only causes others to start ignoring you more and more.[106]

7.2.4 Discriminate and indiscriminate sharing

Hackers have bypassed the consumer model of software production and distribution by adopting things such as the Open Source paradigm, where anyone is free to download and view the entire source code of a software program (such as the Linux operating system), make changes, and allow all other users to take advantage of the changes that

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[105] Lazar, Jim and animeprime.com. "Anime' - No Editing Zone". http://www.animeprime.com/edit/ .

[106] Beveridge, Chris. "Anime on DVD: Random Tracks".
http://www.animeondvd.com/specials/articles/randomtracks04.php

were made. Some hackers also circumvent consumer channels by participating in illegal file-sharing on P2P (peer-to-peer) networks[107]. For example, instead of purchasing music on what they consider overpriced compact discs, they simply 'rip, mix, and burn[108]' their own compact discs, much to the dismay of organizations such as the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).

Although we have already described that otaku do not share information indiscriminately, one may be interested to learn that otaku do engage in some sorts of illegal (copyright-infringing) information-sharing activity. As mentioned in the previous section, otaku do not call for legislation that allows for such information sharing. Instead, their strategy is one of appropriation. The example of appropriation by otaku most tied into intellectual property concerns is the practice of fansubbing, which involves the illegal modification and distribution of copyrighted works.

To properly explain fansubbing, it is best to take an historical approach. The anime fan community in the United States largely grew out the science fiction convention scene of the late 70s, where individuals who had contacts in Japan (or knew people who had contacts in Japan) showed imported low-quality video tapes of Japanese animation to their friends and anyone who would watch. With personal video recording technology becoming widely accessible for the first time, tape trading became an important activity of the newly-formed fan community. Until the late 1980s, few American companies existed that imported and translated anime for American consumption. By that time however, it had become technologically possible for some individuals who had access to anime (either recorded off of Japanese television or bought in the form of laserdiscs or videocassettes) to subtitle the anime themselves using computers. This "fan-subtitled" (or "fansub") anime was then duplicated and distributed to whoever wanted copies. Fansubbing is still an important part of anime fandom. The trading and distribution of physical video tapes has all but disappeared, and fansubbing has moved into the digital realm, where full episodes of anime (and even full length anime movies) that have been

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[107] The most famous peer-to-peer file sharing network was "Napster", but other networks have gained popularity after Napster was shut down by the government.

[108] Apple Computer ran an advertisement called "Rip. Mix. Burn". See http://www.apple.com.au/hardware/ads/ripmixburn.html .

fan-translated and subtitled are then distributed completely online. While fansubbing (now mostly "digisubbing") looks like an activity that would be advocated by hacker culture, it is in fact something that is very much a part of otaku culture and is dictated by otaku-specific norms.

Fansubbing is an example of otaku taking control of information while seeking to minimize the harm done to the producers of that information. While one might view fansubbing as being no different from other forms of "digital piracy", otaku would disagree. Fansubbing is not indiscriminate sharing of information that "wants to be free". The anime fan community has a nuanced set of ethics that describes what is acceptable or not acceptable regarding how anime is distributed, making fine but significant distinctions between fansubs and bootlegs, between ethical fansubbers and unethical pirates. One anime site explains:

> The fansub ethic is that only titles which have not had their rights bought by a company outside Japan (or sometimes only in the country the fansubber/distributor lives in) are fansubbed. Fansubbing and fansub distrbution should be non-profit (fees only being charged for tape and postage costs). Distribution ceases when said rights are bought by a company outside Japan (or in the country the distributor lives in)...The motivation behind fansubbing is that it allows anime fans who live outside Japan and do not speak Japanese to enjoy anime that has not been (and may never be) released outside japan with english subtitles.[109]

Lyndsey Christian, a concerned anime fan, wrote an unofficial "Code of Conduct for Fansubber/Distributors". Although I will not quote that document in its entirety, one important point is as follows:

> 4. Fansubbers should operate in a manner which minimizes impact on the commercial interests of companies in the U.S. as it is in the best interests of anime fandom. This, for example, means that they should not create or distribute fansubs of commercially available titles.[110]

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[109] http://www.anime.org.au/scoop/?op=special&page=anime_faq . Although the site is based in Australia, the ethic it describes also applies to North American fandom.

[110] Christian, Lyndsey. 2002. "Code of Conduct for Fansubber/Distributors". http://www.livejournal.com/talkread.bml?journal=anime&itemid=1457557

One of my informants, Ben Spiegel, a 20 year old student from West Hartford, CT, studying Geography at the University of Toronto when I interviewed him, explains his personal philosophy regarding fansubbed anime, reflecting sentiments I encountered frequently when talking to anime fans:

> Because I'm poor now (can't get a job in Canada because I'm not a citizen) I mostly watch anime through either downloads or bootlegs. But if there's a show that I really like, I'll buy it on domestic DVD. I'm planning on buying Last Exile, because I like the show so much, but the bootleg DVDs I have of it are pretty mediocre.
>
> I feel a bit of guilt bootlegging shows that have already been bought up, because in the past (when I had money) I took a strong stance against piracy.
>
> My friend, the one who introduced me to anime, works for TokyoPop, so theoretically, she's affected by piracy (though its not too rampant for manga). Plus, I feel that the companies do put in a lot of time and effort to get these things out to the public. My little work around is that I don't download animes that have been released domestically.

As one will note, not all anime works are fansubbed. When a particular title becomes commercially available in the United States, not only does fansubbing and distribution of that title cease, fans are encouraged (according to their own community norms) to destroy (e.g. to record over) the copies of their now "obsolete" fansubs—so as to prevent those free fansubs from competing against commercial videos. Although anime fan communities recognize the illegal nature of their fansubbing activities, they continue anyway so long as they do not harm the interests of the very anime creators and companies that produce the works they enjoy. Free distribution of anime videos is considered less harmful than charging for copies because such "bootlegging" would dilute the buying power required to purchase legitimate versions of the anime. In fact, many anime fans often consider fansubbing to be *beneficial* to the anime industry, in that fansubs increase demand for anime titles that would otherwise not be licensed for import. Whether or not their activities actually benefit the anime industry is a matter of debate, even within the fan communities themselves. Nonetheless, the intent is clear. Anime otaku (and otaku in general) consider it their responsibility to protect intellectual property—not just their own, but that which is created by corporate interests. Nonetheless, those same otaku have no problem appropriating that intellectual property

for their own benefit. They strongly feel, however, that such benefit can *only* be obtained by preserving the notion of intellectual property itself, as without that concept, there would be nothing for otaku to appropriate and no elite information for otaku to claim as their own.

7.3 Intellectual property of their own

In the previous section, I described otaku culture's general stance towards protecting intellectual property. Beyond the works of professional creators they admire, such a stance also applies to their own work, as many otaku are amateur creators themselves, which helps to explain their sympathy towards intellectual property rights. Otaku culture might readily be described as a hotbed of amateur creation of intellectual property. Information that is owned and can be sold, traded, or used to bolster reputation is the lifeblood of otaku communities. Some examples of otaku activities that implicitly or explicitly involve IP include the creation of Web sites, artistic works, fansubs, and everyday postings on discussion forums. I will start with the more common examples that also happen to be the most explicitly protected works within anime fandom.

7.3.1 Fansubs as property

The primary legal concern surrounding fansubs is the fact that they are distributed without permission from the official copyright holders or those who hold the distribution rights for any given geographic region. The private creation and viewing of fansubs using legally acquired source material may or may not be protected[111], but even if it is not, policing such violations would be impossible. It is difficult to know whether many otaku create fansubs solely for personal use, but given that those who have the Japanese language ability to create fansubs in the first place do not need subtitles, it does not seem likely to be a widespread phenomenon. In my fieldwork, I have never encountered someone who created a fansub solely for their private use. At the very least, they intended to display them at local (and public) anime showings.

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[111] Fansubbing might be permitted, but depending on interpretations of the Digital Millenium Copyright Act, it is possible that knowledge of how to fansub or publishing such knowledge, irrespective of whether or not it is actually used, might not be protected.

While fansubs typically infringe on the copyrights of others, they also exist within a special realm of (informal) intellectual property. Given the widespread dissemination of fansubs on the internet, one might expect a free-for-all regarding the usage of the vast amounts of copyright-infringing material that is available. On the contrary, a certain level of respect regarding authorship is expected even for fansubs. Even in the early days of tape fansubbing, it was very typical to see text added to the anime (usually in the "eyecatch" segments that mark the beginning and end of commercial breaks) that said 'Made by fans for fans. Not for sale or rent'. Such remarks essentially asked the viewer to respect the fansub ethic. In addition to that generic assertion, however, fansubs often included credits to indicate authorship. Most commonly, the fansub group would be named, very often accompanied by the name of the translator (usually a nickname to avoid real life identification). Some fansubbers and/or tape distributors also included homemade graphics or other animated sequences at the beginning of the tape to identify their role in the process. Modern day digisubbing typically involves large teams of workers, including translators, typesetters, editors, and video encoders, and those individuals are commonly credited as well.

While free fansub distribution is presumably intended to increase awareness of anime titles not otherwise distributed in the United States, and is done without monetary compensation, those who are involved in the process usually like to have their work recognized. Even though the illegal nature of their work prevents most of them from using their real names, they take their reputation and the credit they receive very seriously. With the advent of digisubbing, it is also not uncommon for several fansub groups to release fansubs of the same show, so the stakes have become even higher now that competition to produce the best, fastest, and/or most popular releases is factored in.

Most aspects of fansub production do not allow for appropriation of material used by other fansub groups. For example, I have not observed instances of one fansub group using another group's work, putting their own name on it, and then releasing it as their own. The major exception, however, is the use of translations. Groups that produce digisubs typically have their own translators. An increase in the number of anime fans with Japanese-language skills has accompanied the overall growth of anime fandom, so fansub groups in a rush to release a show do not tend to wait around for someone else to

produce a publicly available translation. Likewise, stealing another group's translation to produce a similar fansub is not considered good form, and the resulting product would be considered redundant.

Before digisubbing, however, when anime fandom was significantly smaller, and fansubbing was not nearly as widespread, translators and translations were much harder to come by. Some scripts could be found online, and it was generally expected that the fansubs that used them would give proper credit to the translators. Other scripts, however, were more guarded. "The Fansub FAQ Part III: Creating Fansubs[112]" goes into some detail regarding the practice of sharing or not sharing translated scripts:

> 2. Why would a fansubber not share their scripts, but share thier tapes with the scripts on them (Or, what is "script theft")?
>
> Most fansubbing operations and translators do NOT make their scripts available to the public. Some of the more common reasons for this include:
>
> - They are afraid that somebody will use their script and not give proper credit.
>
> - They are afraid that somebody will use their script to do a sloppy job and that they or their translators will take the blame.
>
> - They don't want bootleggers like S. Baldric to have easy access to the scripts and use them to try to turn a profit.
>
> - They have invested a great deal of time and money into a script and just don't want anybody to get a free ride at their expense.

A well-known and controversial case of "script-theft" occurred in 1996, when a high profile fansubber named Karen Duffy decided to stop fansub work on *Fushigi Yugi*, a very popular anime TV show of the time that was not yet commercially available in the United States. Her group "Tomodachi Anime" fansubbed *Fushigi Yugi*, but did not release the scripts to the public. Another group, "Central Anime" transcribed the scripts directly from the VHS fansubs and released the scripts online, at which point Karen Duffy wrote an email detailing how upset she was that her work was stolen, and because

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[112] Schultz, Erik. 1996. "The Fansub FAQ Part III: Creating Fansubs". http://www.fansubs.net/fsw/general/faq3.htm

of that, she would stop doing work on *Fushigi Yugi*, which was a major blow to many anime fans because the series was popular, and they wanted to see how the story would end. In her email, which was reposted on the Usenet group rec.arts.anime.misc on January 1st, 1997, she wrote:

> For many months my work has been stolen by my dear thief. I'm not angry. I do feel violated. And have been spending a great deal of time reviewing my feelings of whether I'm right or I'm wrong, what my options were, which options fit my personality, which did not.
>
> Let me put it this way. When I do my work, I put my insides on the outside. Anyone touching that is like touching my body. This is something that apparently my dear thief may not have ever experienced and may not understand why I have. Otherwise, he wouldn't forcibly take my work. I, on the other hand, don't know why he doesn't have these feelings too. (^_^)[113]

Clearly, she felt that she had been wronged and her hard work had been appropriated improperly, not on legal grounds, but in terms of fan ethics. Predictably, a heated debate (or a "flamewar", using internet jargon) erupted, with some anime fans on Karen Duffy's side, and other fans arguing that she was overreacting, preventing people from seeing the anime, and also being hypocritical. The last charge is the most interesting. As I have already described, distributing fansubs is clearly copyright infringement. Those who called Karen Duffy hypocritical pointed out that she was complaining about her intellectual property rights being violated while she herself was violating the intellectual property rights of others. Whether one agrees with Duffy's supporters or detractors, it is clear that many of those who intentionally infringe on copyrights are not against the concept of intellectual property, especially when it is their own.

US copyright law gives credence to the idea that translations are unique works and should be protected. The copyright holder, however, maintains exclusive translation rights. In other words, fansubbers infringe upon copyright through a) the unauthorized distribution of anime, and b) the distribution of unauthorized translations. Those who were against fansubs tended not to sympathize with Duffy, since she was a fansubber who was now complaining about theft. Some who supported fansubs were supportive of

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[113] Repost by ILUVANIME. 1997. "Fushigi Yuugi--SUBTITLES DISCONTINUED!!!" http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.anime.misc/msg/9e793d2c9e652c18

Duffy. Even though they looked the other way when it came to the illegal appropriation of the original anime, they did so because they presumed there was a net benefit to the fansubbing activity. Script theft, on the other hand, meant that a noble fansubber's hard work to spread anime (without monetary compensation) was disrespected and devalued.

Others in the debate who also supported fansubs were less sympathetic to Karen Duffy. To them, the overall goal of spreading awareness of anime was more important than a single person's claim of ownership over a translation. From the Fansub FAQ (Schultz 1996), we have an explanation of this point of view:

> 1) The primary goal of fansubs is to promote anime. Fansubbers who distribute and approach the task with other goals wiil (sic) find themselves at odds with the fansub community and probably become frustrated and give up...
>
> 2) Once you release a fansubbed tape, you lose control of it. Bootleggers will copy and resell it. People will transcribe and make revised masters from it. You can't control their actions; this is just the unfortunate reality of the world. The best you can hope for is to weigh the good (e.g. helping fans enjoy anime, receiving thanks from people who support and contribute to your efforts) against the bad (the people who criticize you, those who demand instant perfect tapes, those who steal your work, etc.). If you focus just on the negative, again, you become frustrated and quit.

What it comes down to, therefore, is how far anime otaku are willing to ignore copyright for the greater good. With fansubs, many (but not all) anime fans agree that such intentional infringement can, or at least should, have a positive effect on the anime industry as a whole. As seen in the Duffy incident and the debate that followed, some anime fans feel that infringing upon the intellectual property rights of other fans is also acceptable if the goal is to further the spread of anime. The latter argument is made even more complicated when talking about translations, which are not universally agreed upon to be intellectual property worth protecting (unlike original novels, for example). As will be explored in the following sections, however, the general trend that has evolved has been in favor of recognizing and protecting (when possible) the several different kinds intellectual property created by fans.

As a footnote to this story, it is interesting to note that Karen Duffy stopped producing fansubs after visiting anime studios in Japan and asking them how they felt about fansubs. Based on those discussions, Duffy decided that continued fansubbing

would not be ethical. Rika Takahashi, one of the translators working with Tomodachi Anime, went on to become a professional anime translator. This would not be first or last time anime fans became involved in the legitimate anime industry in the United States.

7.3.2 Fan derivative works as property

As my exploration of otaku culture is about their information practices more than their creative/artistic endeavors, I will not be describing in great detail the very large and complex communities that exist within anime fandom that surround the production of fan works such as fanart, fanfiction, music videos, and costuming (known as 'cosplay'). Instead, I will be describing the ways in which fan works are treated as intellectual property, valuable information as defined by the otaku ethic.

Anime otaku value authenticity. They place tremendous value on anime works being unedited, presented in their original language, and translated accurately. Commercial works are expected to adhere to a certain standard of quality in terms of keeping the original work intact. Fansubs, since they are created specifically by fans (for fans) are held to an even higher standard, and bootleg anime or merchandise is not tolerated. Unofficial copies of anime, posters, and other merchandise made in Taiwan[114], for example, are banned from anime conventions when they are discovered. Despite such an emphasis on authenticity, anime otaku revel in the creation of derivative works, meaning artworks that use preexisting characters or settings that are not owned by the artist. While this might sound contradictory at first, one comes to realize that the derivative works make no sense except in reference (and in comparison) to the originals, and unless the originals are guaranteed to be authentic and unaltered, there can be no fixed point of reference that allows fans to communicate with each other (through their derivative works). Furthermore, as in the case of fansubs, fan artists of all stripes protect their work as their own, even though their works are directly based on the works of others.

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[114] Taiwan is known for having a lot of bootleg merchandise. This merchandise is well-produced and sold openly, as Taiwan is not a signatory of the Berne Convention, which lays out the provisions of international copyright law.

Within the anime fan community, there are fewer moral ambiguities surrounding fan-produced derivative artworks compared to fansubs, even though both are technically illegal. According to US copyright law, original copyright holders retain the exclusive right to produce and distribute derivative works, except in those cases that fall under the provisions of Fair Use. For fan creators, parodies are the works most often protected by Fair Use, but the majority of derivative works are not protected. Nonetheless, fans typically consider fan art to be fair game from a moral, if not legal, perspective.

In order to justify fansubs, anime fans construct nuanced ethical arguments based on their assessments of perceived and actual harm (to the original creators and publishers). Similar assessments are made for derivative fan art, and most fans agree that such art is not harmful; it is not believed to negatively impact sales of the original works. A lot of derivative fan art is available for free, but even when it is bought and sold (at anime conventions, for example), not much money changes hands because it is done on such a small scale. Since the works are clearly derivative, they are perceived to be a secondary market that does not interfere with the sale of official goods associated with the original work that the art was derived from. Furthermore, many fans believe that such artworks generate free publicity and interest in the original works. For the most part, anime copyright holders (in both Japan and the US) have turned a blind eye towards the majority of derivative works. There are certainly some cases where fan produced artworks have come up against corporate interests and the law, but those have been surprisingly uncommon. In this section, I will describe the ways in which authorship of derivative artworks is considered important and how the works themselves are closely protected intellectual property.

In the anime fan community, one can observe many instances in which derivative works are considered a form of (unofficial) intellectual property. Claiming authorship credit for the work of others is not tolerated, but even beyond this basic rejection of plagiarism, many fan artists do not approve of people republishing their works without permission, even if there is no money involved; for example, neither the original artist nor republisher intends to make money off of the work. While some artists do want their works to be widely distributed, even going so far as to licensing them under a Creative

Commons license[115], one distinguishing feature of otaku subculture is that otaku typically wish to retain control over their works and engage in practices that specifically aim to prevent unauthorized republication.

Examples of such practices include, but are not limited to, explicit warnings on Web sites not to republish content without permission, prominently placed copyright notices, works that bear an artist's mark, and digital watermarking, also known as steganography. An example of the latter is an artist inserting some type of hidden code in his or her images so that if someone else republishes and later claims ownership to it, the artist can stake his or claim by pointing out the hidden code that was inserted.

In the case of scanned images that regularly appear on anime Web sites, those are mostly scans of copyrighted material, such as scans of anime-related artbooks published in Japan. While these are not derivative works in the sense that the scanner manipulated the content and offered his or her interpretation of it, the production and publication of such scans is considered a form of work by some otaku. This attitude explains why some scanners include files crediting themselves for their work, or in other cases, include markings on the images to indicate that they did the work and not someone else. These marks are not always appreciated because they damage the authenticity of the original art in the eyes of the downloading fans, which is another indication that these scans are considered copies more than derivative art, even if work was involved. Still other otaku, especially those who collect art books and other publications from which images are typically scanned, look down on those scanners who cheapen the works by illegally presenting scans of entire books, magazines, etc., making it less likely that people will buy those publications. According to their argument, which is akin to the fansub ethic, by not buying those products legitimately, the content producing industry is robbed of necessary profits that allow the original content creators to publish their works in the first place. Anime fandom produces much derivative work that is not simply scans of professional work, but I bring this up as an example of how even controversial works such as full book scans are often considered the intellectual property of the scanners,

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[115] This license, invented by Lawrence Lessig, allows content creators to protect their works but also specify how those works can be used by others, making it more flexible and generally more permissive, by varying degrees, than basic copyright protection.

who often insist that people not republish their scans since they were the ones who invested the time to make the scans in the first place.

The implied ownership of otaku-produced works is all the more significant given that most of these materials exist for free on the World Wide Web. There is a widely held Cyberlibertarian-informed sentiment that after something has been published on the Web, there is no point trying to prevent it from being further disseminated. In other words, it becomes fair game for copying, republication, and redistribution. While current copyright law does not agree with such a stance, extreme Cyberlibertarians and some internet utopians argue that the Web should be about complete openness, and that artificially making information scarce is unnatural and harmful to society. A frequent argument in favor of that philosophy is that if you want to keep control of your works, you should not publish it on the Web. Furthermore, some content creators express that they want their works to be copied freely. One commenter, "Herolint", on the technology news Web site Digg.com wrote[116]:

> Putting something on the web is like shouting it out on a corner. If you want to keep your secrets secret, don't publish them on the web.
>
> I am a programmer and sort of a web designer. I got a lot of help with both when I first started out from generous people on the web. I figure if somebody wants to steal my site designs or content, then I'm just paying the world back for everything its given me.
>
> People who worry about somebody "stealing" from their web sites are kind of stupid, I think. When somebody actually steals my web site and I don't have it anymore because it has really been stolen, then I'll worry. If somebody comes in to my house and clones all my stuff so we both have it all, good for him. Now we both have cool junk.

Even though otaku are some of the most prominent users and content producers on the Web, they do not adhere to the policy of free and unmitigated sharing of their Web-based content. Doing so, after all, would reduce the quality and uniqueness of their information, thereby leading to fewer incentives to publish the works in the first place. Original content, while considered important by most Web site producers, is of

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[116] Herolint. 2006.
http://www.digg.com/design/What_Do_You_Do_When_Someone_Steals_Your_Content

paramount importance to otaku. Otaku argue that those who want unfettered sharing are most often those individuals who do not produce original content themselves but are satisfied to use and enjoy the content of others. Even though many people see the Web as being about openness and sharing of information, some otaku even go so far as putting notices on their Web sites that other Web sites are not allowed to link to them without asking permission, something that Cyberlibertarians view as a perversion of the very purpose of hyperlinking. This phenomenon of Web sites being labeled as "not link free" appears to have originated in Japan and spread to otaku culture. It is not a common thing to see, however, mostly because inbound links to a page make it more likely that the page will be crawled by search engines, have good placement in search engine results, and therefore seen by more people. Given the huge number of Web sites that currently exist, and the ascension of search engines over directory based models of organizing Web content, being too picky about who links to your Web site will ultimately lead to your site being ignored, which (for otaku) is even worse than being criticized.

As a producer of anime-related Web sites myself, I have had my own share of content being republished without my permission[117]. As of this writing, there are still cases of plagiarism I have not dealt with yet, or am in the process of dealing with. More commonly, I have had Web site content translated into other languages and republished without my permission (and sometimes without attribution). I find it flattering in one sense, but annoying in another, in that I am now less likely to produce official versions of my Web site in other languages; too much of the incentive has been taken away. In the case of straightforward plagiarism, I found myself referring to a document online called "What Do You Do When Someone Steals Your Content"[118] that offered advice on how to contact the offender, how to write a cease and desist letter, how to register your copyrights, and other steps involved in protecting one's online content. While the document was not necessarily intended primarily for anime fans or otaku in general, it is

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[117] Some of my online work has been republished with my permission.

[118] VanFossen, Lorelle. 2006. "What Do You Do When Someone Steals Your Content" http://lorelle.wordpress.com/2006/04/10/what-do-you-do-when-someone-steals-your-content/

safe to say that it is a useful and appreciated resource for otaku who want to protect their works.

8. Anime/manga fandom as networked culture

Otaku are not drawn to subjects like anime, manga, science fiction, and computers simply by chance, or because they do not have access to anything else. Each of those subject matters (and others that have their share of otaku) are dense and information rich. Otaku have an impressive amount of media literacy that allows them to excel in activities that require memorization of data, processing of symbolic/abstract codes, and understanding the linkages of meaning that exist between them. In other words, otaku have a lot of factual knowledge at their command, but they are also adept at grasping the deeper relationships and context behind whatever it is they are interested in. This type of knowledge allows them to be innovative—to create new information, new combinations of existing elements. However, it is not enough for otaku to revel in their own novelty, isolated in the stereotypical basements of their parents' homes. A fundamental aspect of being an otaku is that he or she must exist in a larger social sphere inhabited by other otaku. This occurs in both face-to-face meetings and online, primarily on the Web.

The nature of otaku interactions, both on and offline, is often casual and friendly, with people "shooting the breeze" and not talking about anything in particular. People we might call 'otaku' are not necessarily information obsessed all the time. However, I would not characterize those casual interactions as defining their otaku identity. Instead, it is their less casual and significantly more intense and directed interactions that qualify most as otakuish behavior, especially when those interactions involve a network of some kind. Just as otaku are adept at understanding the networked linkages within and between their objects of interest, so too are they adept at using networks of their own to best pursue their goals as otaku.

8.1 Informal face-to-face networks

While stereotypes of anime otaku portray them as being socially isolated and rarely ever meeting anyone face-to-face, most anime fans actually get their start in fandom via face-to-face interactions. Amongst my informants, most of them were first exposed to anime broadcast on television. Their first interactions with other people who also enjoyed anime tended to be close to them to begin with, i.e. best friends, siblings, cousins, etc. Later, their circle might expand to include people they met at school who share an

interest in anime. Very few of my informants preferred to watch anime completely alone. Most liked watching it in the presence of friends, or even with strangers who are also anime fans. The importance of anime as a social activity was reiterated by most of my informants. Ben Spiegel, mentioned in Chapter 7, was an anime fan since he was 13 or 14 years old, and when I asked whether he ever watched anime alone, he responded:

> Nah, I still don't. I still see it as more a communal activity. We usually talk and laugh above the show so much that even when we watch dubs of animes, we turn on the subtitles so that we can still talk loud.

I once took advantage of the opportunity to attend an informal anime showing at a college student's apartment, and when I got there, nobody introduced themselves to me, but I watched anime with them for at least 30 minutes before I decided to introduce myself to them, at which point I discovered that several of them didn't even know each other's names, even though they were deep into an anime television series that was dozens of episodes long. Some may view that anecdote as being an example of otaku lacking basic social skills, but another way to look at it is to notice that otaku enjoy watching anime in the company of others, even if they do not know them very well.

Most of my informants, however, tended to know who they watched anime with. They typically had a small circle of friends who shared their hobby, and some would even organize anime clubs of their own at the schools they attended (whether high school or college). By having friends who were also anime fans, one benefited from a certain division of labor. Anime in the United States is not inexpensive[119], so having friends purchase different titles that can be shared potentially saves a lot of money while allowing a wide range of anime titles to be screened.

Beyond the financial benefit, however, most anime otaku enjoy the social aspect of being fans, being able to talk about the shows they like, laughing at the same jokes, being moved by the same sad scenes. With these friends, some otaku expand the scope of their fandom by participating in other activities such as creating fanart, fansubbing, interacting with fans online, attending conventions, and forming the aforementioned anime clubs, which I will discuss next.

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[119] Prices vary, but at the time of this writing, it would not be unusual for an anime DVD to cost about $25 for one hour of content.

8.2 Anime fan clubs

The next level of face-to-face network interaction is when a few fans expand their numbers and form a full-fledged fan club. While most anime fan clubs are centered on the basic activity of watching anime, they have usually included secondary activities as well, and the role of the anime fan club has definitely evolved over time. Fan clubs were important in the early evolution of American anime fandom. In addition to bringing people together to enjoy media that was very difficult to find elsewhere, fan club networks allowed for collaboration to occur between fans in different parts of the country. The C/FO, or Cartoon Fantasy Organization, in Los Angeles—founded in 1977—is widely considered to be the first anime fan club in the United States. Other chapters of the C/FO existed in other parts of the country, including the east coast. According to my informants, some of whom were intimately involved in this early American anime fandom, anime fans from all over the country would communicate with each other by fairly primitive means, sending hardcopy documents—containing anime information such as synopses, reviews, and rare and highly treasured translations—to each other. These early clubs relied heavily on personal contacts to acquire new shows and information. Although electronic networks of communication were just in their infancy, some fans from those early days feel that the anime community was more close-knit then than now, due to the fact that people had to make personal connections with people all around the country in order to get the information they needed (as opposed to simply using a search engine, finding the required information on a stranger's Web site, and then downloading it without ever being in direct contact with the information provider).

Starting in the late 1980s, anime clubs at colleges and universities were very important in the development of anime fandom. By then, anime had become somewhat easier to obtain, though not nearly at the levels seen in 2006. With such companies as Streamline Pictures, US Renditions, and Animeigo, commercially available anime was just getting its start in the United States, and the latter two companies are notable for releasing anime with the original Japanese dialogue intact with English subtitles. College and university anime clubs showed many of these commercially available titles, but they also had unprecedented access to illegally copied anime from Japan, whether it came

from somebody's Japanese pen pal who sent them tapes, was copied from a Japanese video store in Southern California, or copied from broadcasts intended for the Japanese population of Hawaii. The availability of Japanese import laserdiscs was growing as well, and some anime fans would pay a lot of money to get those even though they were very expensive at the time.

Most otaku who attended college anime clubs did not have easy access to Japanese pen pals, Japanese-run rental stores in California, and laserdiscs, however. Instead, they belonged to a tape trading network. These networks would grow even larger as the practice of fansubbing evolved. While individuals could request and obtain fansubs in the mail, anime clubs were often given priority when it came to getting fansubs first, the idea being that fansubs helped educate people about anime but did not harm the industry because few people owned them. Instead, a single fansub could benefit an entire club of 20-100 members, as opposed to every one of those members owning an illegal tape. Up until the late 1990s, which is when internet distribution of fansubs finally started to gain ground, college anime clubs were the premiere place to regularly see the latest anime from Japan, with fan-produced English subtitles. These clubs, in addition to providing a fun and social atmosphere where fans could watch anime together, played an important role in educating fandom about the diversity of the anime medium beyond what was commercially available, and by doing so, helped generate demand for varied, high quality, unedited, and well-translated anime in the United States. The earliest commercially available anime in the United States tended to be the most violent and sexually explicit titles. College anime clubs typically avoided showing those. Instead, they showed a large variety of anime titles, helping to create the market we see today.

Members of some of the early anime clubs would go on to work in the anime industry or organize major conventions. Some members of Cal-Animage Alpha, the UC Berkeley anime club, would eventually found Anime Expo, one of the largest anime trade shows / conventions in the United States[120]. Animeigo, one of the first two American companies to release English-subtitled anime[121], got its start after the founders

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[120] In 2005, Anime Expo exceeded 33,000 attendees over four days. Since 1992, the convention has enjoyed a 29% average growth rate. Source: http://www.anime-expo.org/?a=general&b=profile

[121] Animeigo released *Madox-01: Metal Skin Panic* in 1989.

of the company attended meetings of the Cornell Japanimation Society[122] and realized there was a market for unedited anime in the United States. The club's founder and first president, Masaki Takai, would become a founding member/translator for Animeigo.

In 2006, anime clubs still exist at colleges, universities, and elsewhere, but their importance has diminished somewhat now that a wide variety of unedited anime is so readily available at major retailers, and literally hundreds of titles are available as fansubs on the internet[123]. Many fans still congregate to watch anime together in a social setting, but they can easily acquire the shows they want on their own and watch it by themselves or with a few of their friends in the comfort of their own homes. As such, anime clubs have had to redefine themselves, shifting focus away from showing anime to other activities such as group shopping trips, costume making and cosplay events, group video gaming, anime lending libraries, and convention organizing[124].

8.3 Anime otaku and electronic networks

The most profound change affecting anime otaku, and perhaps otaku in general, has been the development and growth of the internet, which has allowed an unprecedented number of people with shared interests to interact with each other—expressing their opinions, asking and answering questions, doing research, exchanging and publishing information, organizing events, etc. Otaku of all stripes gravitated towards the internet even when it was very young, and they used it very heavily[125]. Some even used earlier information networks such as Compuserve and GEnie to connect with other fans. Still others made use of dial-up bulletin board systems (BBSes) to interact with each other and to download information that previously was only available if you had access to hardcopy guides and newsletters distributed amongst anime fan groups by postal mail.

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[122] CJS would later be renamed to CJAS: Cornell Japanese Animation Society, which I joined as a Cornell undergraduate in 1994.

[123] At the time of this writing, animesuki.com, a major listing of anime fansubs, lists over 450 anime titles (not counting individual episodes or installments) available for free download.

[124] The Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute anime club, RJAS (Rensselaer Japanese Animation Society), holds an annual science fiction/gaming/anime convention called Genericon.

[125] Pinguino, mentioned in the previous chapter, told me that she spends an average of 17 hours a day on the computer (14 hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays), sleeping 4-8 hours a night.

Before the rapid expansion of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, anime otaku were already using internet protocols such as FTP, Gopher, and Usenet to share information and interact with each other. Again, anime fans at colleges and universities had an advantage over other anime fans because internet access was not widely available yet, and many colleges and universities offered students very high speed access to the internet. On FTP repositories such as Venice, anime fans could download hundreds of scanned images from anime-related books and other promotional materials, as well as translated scripts, media files (primitive and low-quality by today's standards), and other information. Gopher sites provided primarily textual information. Unlike the Web, Gopher does not support hyperlinks and does not allow inline display of image in documents. Usenet, a bulletin-board like system, was the primary venue where anime fans engaged in discussions with each other. In the mid-1990s, the most important Usenet "group" for anime fans was rec.arts.anime, which later became rec.arts.anime.misc.

8.3.1 rec.arts.anime

Other researchers have detailed Usenet and the way in which Usenet groups may constitute virtual communities[126]. This dissertation will not seek to describe the daily interactions between anime otaku on Usenet groups such as rec.arts.anime.misc. Instead, I will be pointing out some salient features of that particular medium of communication and how those features impacted online anime fandom.

Usenet is a highly distributed internet discussion system. Organizations such as colleges, universities, and internet service providers (ISPs) operate Usenet servers that copy and propagate user-posted messages widely so that a reader of a newsgroup such as rec.arts.anime.misc in California will see and be able to respond to the same user-posted content as a reader in New York. Some Usenet servers are faster than others when it comes to sending and receiving content, but for the most part, any given newsgroup will have the same content regardless of the location and time. This allows for sustained conversations between users.

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[126] Baym, Nancy K. 1995 "From practice to culture on Usenet" in *The Cultures of Computing* edited by Susan Leigh Star. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Electronic mailing lists allow for a similar form of communication, but Usenet allows users to download and read only the messages ("posts") they are interested in (based on the post titles). Furthermore, when replying to posts, Usenet maintains a hierarchical thread structure that serves to clarify how different posts are related to each other (e.g. who is responding to whom). Because of these features—users deciding which posts to download and read, and threading—Usenet groups tend to have much more activity ("traffic") than email lists, and conversations between users can go on for a very long time, which is especially common when controversial topics are discussed. With the advent of Usenet groups such as rec.arts.anime (and related groups such as rec.arts.anime.marketplace), anime fandom in the United States (and beyond) finally had a single electronic discussion system that was widely accessible and free to use (provided that one had internet access). Usenet was, by far, the main way that anime fans on the internet in the early 1990s talked to each other about a large number of anime-related subjects.

Because of its role in the 1990s as a central electronic meeting place for anime fans, rec.arts.anime attracted some of the most active anime otaku in the United States, including convention organizers, members and organizers of anime clubs, and members of the fledgling American anime and manga distribution industry. In sharing information, asking useful questions, providing insightful answers, participating in heated debates, and/or by sheer force of personality, the first anime internet celebrities emerged. Usenet users took their identities and reputations very seriously, crafting complex ASCII art signatures to place at the bottom of all their posts. Some users made themselves well known by posting often. For example, in March of 1996, Enrique Conty posted to rec.arts.anime a total of 158 times[127]. There were no official or technical measures of a user's popularity. The celebrities on rec.arts.anime were celebrities mainly by virtue of how well-known they were and how often people mentioned them.

Until the debut of Deja News, a service that published archives of Usenet activity (now owned and operated by Google in the form of Google Groups), Usenet messages were ephemeral except in cases where an individual user saved them to his or her

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[127] Tsurugi. 1996. "Stats." http://groups.google.co.uk/group/rec.arts.anime.misc/msg/fce2ab32676a29b1

computer. As such, during a discussion, if a user wanted to cite what a previous user said months or years ago, he or she would be unable to make the citation unless the original post was deliberately saved. That said, however, even Usenet groups had institutional memories, in the form of FAQs, or lists of frequently asked questions.

In the absence of archived messages, certain questions would appear on newsgroups over and over again. In response, people would write FAQs in order to answer common questions and instruct new users to read the FAQ before posting to the group. These documents provided some of the earliest formal and authoritative knowledge amongst anime fans online, and as such, the FAQ authors themselves became more authoritative and well-known as fans.

8.3.2 The World Wide Web

The invention of the Web changed things for many people, and anime fandom was no exception. Usenet allowed geographically dispersed fans to electronically gather in one place, but the Web allowed fandom to spread out, still accessible to anyone with internet access, but no longer reliant on single venues (such as rec.arts.anime) that everybody visited.

The Web allowed for users to cheaply publish content on the internet that was persistent[128]. They had total control over what was published on their Web sites, and typically provided links to other sites with related information. In these early days of the Web, Web site publishers promoted their sites by mentioning them on Usenet, on electronic mailing lists, and by submitting them to directories such as Yahoo and specialized directories of anime Web sites such as the Anime and Manga Resources List[129] and the Anime Turnpike[130].

For anime Web sites, the content was usually information on a certain anime show or movie. A site might include information on an anime's staff and cast, episodes summaries, scanned images, character descriptions, merchandise lists, multimedia files,

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[128] Or rather, more-or-less persistent, since a user could decide at any time to stop publishing his or her content.

[129] http://csclub.uwaterloo.ca/u/mlvanbie/anime-list/

[130] http://www.anipike.com

and related links. In the 1990s, information on many anime titles was not easy to come by, so Web site creators sought to fill a niche by providing that information. For anime sites, therefore, a certain amount of research was necessary to provide high quality information, and sites varied in quality depending on how much information the site owner was able to uncover (as well as his or her Web design skills). There were also different types of specialist Web sites such as sites covering specific anime creators, genres, voice actors and actresses, merchandise, specific characters[131], etc. The vast majority of sites, however, were those dedicated to single anime titles. In addition to providing information to other fans, the sites allowed their creators to express their devotion towards their favorite shows and to enhance their own reputation as experts.

When there were only a few anime Web sites[132], there was not much competition between them, but the trend has gone towards more and more sites (anime-related and otherwise) on the Web, and many sites compete to be the most popular and authoritative resources. Having a popular site required more than simply having the most compelling content, however. Getting attention for one's site required actions such as listing the site on popular directories and getting the site noticed by the right people. For example, in the early days of the Web, various organizations gave out "awards" to certain Web sites to recognize high quality content on the web. In addition to getting noticed by those organizations, some fans also took pride in their sites getting informal awards from other fans, and would include a section on their Web site listing all the awards he or she had received. Another strategy would be to create one's own award and give it to related sites. In doing so, one indicated his or her good taste in Web sites, established oneself as being authoritative enough to be a judge of other people's content, and managed to get other Web site owners to place a link on their site back to the awarder's Web site.

Another common strategy to get one's site well-known would be to collaborate with other site owners who had similar sites and form what is known as a "web ring", a collection of sites linked together by topic. Each participating site would contain a

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[131] Sites devoted to specific characters were sometimes known as "shrines", though that term can also be applied to any site devoted to any specific subject, such as a single anime television series.

[132] I fondly remember when I knew *every* anime-related Web site that one could visit, something that is impossible now.

graphic indicating membership in the web ring, and would have links to the "next" and "previous" site in the web ring's list of sites, or one could also visit the master list.

Anime site owners would try to make their sites stand out using the best graphics, user interface, cutting edge design, and content. While different sites on any given anime title would have the same or very similar information, the most well-known sites would be those that contained the most unique, interesting, and informative content. Having that unique content makes it more likely that others will link to one's site instead of someone else's (except in cases where one deliberately avoids linking to a competitor). This content is often protected with copyright warnings, visible and invisible marks on images, and sometimes even specially crafted JavaScript to prevent others from saving images[133] to their own computers. While some site owners attempted to create a one-stop authoritative resource for a given anime title, containing everything and anything a fan interested in that anime would want, others took a more communitarian approach, looking at the content of existing sites and then trying to fill a niche that wasn't taken yet. The latter sites tended to link heavily to other related sites. Interestingly, the most authoritative sites also tended to link heavily to other sites. All-in-one sites attempting to become more authoritative were the ones that avoided linking to other sites, ostensibly to prevent users from discovering other resources.

For a period of time in the mid to late-1990s, such anime-related sites made by individuals were trendy and commonplace. Free Web hosting services such as Geocities and Angelfire made it very easy for even younger anime fans to host their own Web sites. While otaku made the most of the Web and produced highly informational sites, most anime sites were not made by die-hard otaku who sought to publish the most cutting-edge information and have their sites become famous. Many sites were casually constructed, did not contain much information, and did not offer anything new. These sites were almost never updated and only rarely removed (since it is so inexpensive to keep sites on the internet). As the total number of Web sites grew, it became increasingly difficult for directory sites to maintain usable lists of links—lists that were growing ever

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[133] Early schemes to prevent users from copying images from one's site tended to be easily circumvented, but modern methods are somewhat more effective

larger and more unwieldy. Some directory sites had editors who highlighted certain sites as meeting or exceeding certain standards of quality, and other directories used rating systems to allow users to rank the sites they visited. Neither method proved very successful, however. There are various technical and social difficulties involved in Web site ranking systems, and it takes time for directory editors to review sites and rate their content, and even then users do not necessarily have compelling reasons to trust the opinions of an anonymous editor. Ultimately, these aforementioned methods of trying to organize and rank the ever-growing number of sites on the Web were grossly overshadowed by a new paradigm: Web searching.

8.3.3 The Google Effect

Early search engines relied on cataloguing Web sites and returning Web site links as search results based on whether or not those sites contained the keywords one was searching for. Sites with more keywords and those sites containing the right meta-information (telling the search engines what the sites contain by means of keyword summaries, for example) would show up as the most relevant results. This approach was seriously flawed, however, as unscrupulous site owners would hide invisible (and popular) keywords inside their sites even if those keywords have nothing to do with the site's actual content. Furthermore, some site owners would deliberately publish inaccurate meta-information regarding their site in order to trick search engines into pointing them when users were actually searching for something else.

Google addressed that problem by implementing an algorithm known as PageRank. The exact mechanisms behind PageRank are unknown, but the most important distinction between Google's PageRank and other search engines is that Google does not rely as heavily on keyword analysis and meta-information, preferring instead to judge site relevance based on whether or not other legitimate sites link to them. This method is akin to using citation analysis to determine which scientific articles are considered the most important in any given field. Inbound links to a site are treated as external votes of confidence indicating the site's value, instead of relying on a site's self-reporting of its content and value. Google's system relies on an impersonal algorithm, allowing its

servers to automatically compute what the algorithm considers the most relevant search results for any given query.

Public perception of Google's usefulness and reliability in returning relevant results has led to the search engine's massive popularity such that "google" has become a generic word to mean Web searching. Users shifting from using directories to using Google to find Web sites has had a profound effect, as well. Instead of relying on directories, editors, and personal recommendations, users trust Google to give them what they are looking for. Since Google lists sites in order of relevance, top-listed sites are visited far more frequently than lower-listed sites, leading to a phenomenon we call the Matthew Effect in Science Studies. The Matthew Effect (Merton 1973), is essentially a restatement of the fact that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer[134]. It is why, for example, a few Web sites have thousands of inbound links, while the majority of sites have none or just a handful. Because of the way Google works (ranking pages according to popularity), popular content on the Web is what gets noticed and becomes more popular over time while less popular content gets buried deeper and deeper over time, making it especially hard for new content and Web sites to get on an equal footing with old Web sites with pre-established audiences (and therefore high PageRank).

What happens, therefore, is that the top-listed sites in Google are highly viewed and more likely to be linked to, resulting in Google perceiving the site as being even more popular and listing the site even higher, or if it is already at the very top, Google will make it harder for other sites to take over that top position. As a result, competition to gain the top spot in Google for a given Web search query has become very high, since the increased traffic generated from being the number one site will bolster the site's reputation and the site owner may make more money from ad revenue (generated by visitors clicking on advertisements on the site[135]). Because the top few listings on Google are considered so important (compared to being mentioned on a long directory listing), site owners have less incentive to link to related Web sites that are now direct

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[134] Economists use the term "power law distribution" to describe this type of phenomenon. In describing the Matthew Effect, Merton gets into the psychosocial causes of this particular behavior and its implications.

[135] Google is also a major player in the Web advertising business.

competitors when it comes to Google rankings[136]. This results in a less communitarian Web environment; sites no longer have a great incentive to work together to provide a broad range of original content. Instead, site owners are encouraged to make their sites singular authorities on any given subject.

"Fanlistings" are one type of Web site that benefits heavily from Google's PageRank algorithm. A fanlisting is conceptually very simple. It is merely an online list of anyone who wishes to identify him or herself as a fan of something, such as a particular anime, or a certain fictional character. On one's Web site, one announces that he or she has a fanlisting and whoever wants to be listed sends the site owner some very basic information (at minimum, a name), and that person then gets added to the list, which can grow very large (with hundreds or thousands of listed members). The listed member is then asked to place a graphic on his or her Web site with an icon (usually created by the fanlisting owner) denoting that he or she is fan of the thing in question. Most fans do this because the purpose of signing up in the first place is to publicize what they are a fan of. Listed members are encouraged to use the icon to link back to the fanlisting. In order to prevent multiple fanlistings existing for the same topic, semi-official organizations such as The Fanlistings Network[137] exist to regulate the fanlisting ecosystem. Since Google rates Web site relevance based on how many people link to it, fanlisting sites (with their hundreds or thousands of inbound links) often appear at the top of Google search results. As such, staking one's claim to a fanlisting can be very beneficial to a site owner, and maintaining such a listing does not take much work. Most fanlisting sites, other than details regarding the fanlisting itself, tend not to contain very much information. One could argue, therefore, whether or not Google is actually correct when it lists fanlisting sites as being highly relevant to a search topic.

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[136] In January 2005, Google implemented a way (the "nofollow" tag) for site owners to tell Google not to consider outbound links to sites as positive "votes" for those sites. This was implemented to prevent advertisers and other unscrupulous third parties from adding links to one's site for the purposes of boosting their PageRank. However, some site owners use the nofollow tag on all or most of their self-created outbound links so that they can to link to related sites without diluting their own PageRank.

[137] http://www.thefanlistings.org/

As certain sites become very popular, and without the benefit of users looking through directories to find a wide variety of sites on a single subject, there becomes less incentive to maintain second string sites. Furthermore, because of the Matthew Effect, it is difficult for new Web content to rank highly on Google, even if that content is of high quality. In the scientific community, old scientists retire or die off, allowing younger scientists to finally gain the attention they deserve, but on the Web, old content can last indefinitely, leading to fewer people creating fresh content on established subjects. As a result, the Web becomes more and more monolithic.

In anime fandom online, mega-sites that attempted to be the authority on any given anime became more common. They were typically huge repositories of information, and many of them even had their own self-contained communities in the form of web forums (which will be discussed in more detail in a later section). In 2006, some of these mega-sites still exist for very popular anime, such as the ones broadcast on American television, but yet another paradigm shift occurred that changed the face of online anime fandom: sites that rely on user contributions to a database.

8.3.4 Generalist Web sites gain ground

With the abundance of anime currently available to anime fans in the United States, otaku are spending less time analyzing and probing deeply into specific titles. In the past, when the availability of anime was much lower, otaku had more time to spend learning and writing about a single show. Now, however, when one show is completed, they have plenty of new shows to move onto. Also, Web sites about moderately popular or even unpopular anime used to have a built-in audience due to the fact that anime fans (without much to choose from) were likely to see those anime and spend time learning more about them. Again, the new abundance of anime has changed that. Only the most popular shows have a large enough audience to sustain Web sites that garner a high number of repeat visitors and merit constant updating of content and/or the maintenance of a community (e.g. a Web-based discussion forum). Professionally-produced anime-related magazines such as Newtype USA (which was first published in 2002) have further reduced the need for highly detailed, niche information on specific anime titles

on the internet. The nature of the information demanded by anime fans has changed, and this is reflected in the new face of anime otaku information networks online.

There are many important anime-related Web sites, and not all of them can be discussed here. Instead, we will focus our attention several of the most well-known sites and how they fit into anime fandom and the general trends of anime-related information on the internet.

Generalist anime Web sites—containing information on a large number of anime titles or related information—are the current trend. In order to make sense of the massive amounts of information related to their hobby, anime fans are increasingly looking for sites that coalesce and organize that information for them. Coupled with advances in web database technology, sites such as AnimeNfo.com[138] allow anime fans to quickly look up basic information on a large number of shows, and each entry on that site is part of a larger database so that one can also look up other shows that came out in the same year, belong to the same genre, were produced by the same studio etc. Entries also contain brief summaries intended to help users decide if they actually want to watch that particular anime title. Registered users can rate shows on a 1-10 scale, and the site displays the average user rating, and lists the top 200 shows according to average rating. AnimeNfo.com also contains a large database of voice actors and actresses for those fans who like to keep track of that and use such information to help them choose what anime to watch next. Another feature of the site is that it has its own self-contained community in the form of an IRC channel and Web forum.

Anime News Network[139] is another important Web site for anime fans online. Its primary purpose is to provide anime and manga related news. On any given day, half a dozen or so news items may appear, encouraging fans to visit the site daily in order to keep up with the latest happenings in the world of anime and fandom. Anime News Network has an editorial staff, but anyone may mail in news item submissions. News items typically include announcements regarding new anime titles being broadcast on television or released on home video, special guests appearing at anime conventions,

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[138] http://www.animenfo.com

[139] http://www.animenewsnetwork.com

links to external articles talking about anime and the anime industry, and links to external articles talking about anime fans. The site also contains reviews, articles, and editorials, and convention reports. The community on Anime News Network is one of the most active on the Web, with registered users posting on many dozens of topics on any given day, with even more guest users reading the content[140]. Perhaps the most significant feature of Anime News Network, however, is its "Encyclopedia".

The Anime News Network Encyclopedia includes a lexicon explaining the meanings of various Japanese words commonly heard in anime, and also anime and fan-related jargon. Even more impressive is its database of anime (and manga) titles, similar to the AnimeNfo.com database but with important differences. Like AnimeNfo.com, encyclopedia entries on Anime News Network describe a show's genre, provide a basic summary, list staff and cast members (voice actors and actresses), and show user ratings. Unlike AnimeNfo.com, however, the database is open to registered users, so that people with information on a show can add it to the database. As such, having a large number of users on the site with a collectively broad range of knowledge on anime, allows the encyclopedia's database to be very rich in detail. Those who add information are not credited, but having to log onto the system before entering data discourages pranksters from vandalizing the database, as anyone who does so will likely be banned and all previous information he or she has submitted will be removed. That said, once changes are submitted, they appear immediately on the Web site without having to be confirmed by an editor. Good-faith contributors to the encyclopedia have a high level of control over the content of the encyclopedia, encouraging users to add to it, further encouraging readers to trust it as a high-value source of information.

8.3.5 The Wikipedia Effect

Wikipedia[141] is an online encyclopedia that uses a wiki format. A wiki is a collaborative web editing tool that allows users to edit content on a site. Unlike database sites that allow information to be submitted, wikis allow for information to be directly added, removed, and edited with a high level of user control. For example, entire page layouts

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[140] Users who read content on a virtual community but do not post are known as "lurkers".

[141] http://www.wikipedia.org/

can be changed by the user. With this basic technology in place and a set of basic guidelines with a supposedly relaxed level of editorial control on the part of the site owners, Wikipedia seeks to be a free, publicly available, and publicly editable repository of knowledge, where any user who has knowledge to contribute can do so either anonymously or as a registered user. All changes are kept track of, and if vandalism occurs or if incorrect information is added, other users may correct the information of revert the changes completely.

Projects such as Wikipedia exemplify cyber-libertarian ideals regarding open access, collaboration, and free sharing of information without needing arbitrary and artificial sources of authority. Debates rage regarding the usefulness, trustworthiness, accountability, and general value of Wikipedia and Wikipedia articles, with strong opinions on each side of the debate. Dissertations and books by others will surely discuss Wikipedia in more detail, but for the sake of this dissertation, we can simply conclude that Wikipedia has become a major power on the Web in terms of information, and anime fandom has been affected as well.

As discussed earlier, Web sites devoted to less popular or well-known anime have become less common. For many reasons, the incentive to create such sites has decreased. However, encyclopedia articles on many of these anime have appeared on Wikipedia. Instead of hosting an independent site on an anime that few people care or know about, it is easier to publish similar information on Wikipedia instead. A major difference, of course, is that authorship credit is not considered as important on Wikipedia since anyone can contribute to and edit articles. Wikipedia articles are similar to the Anime News Network encyclopedia entries in that user contributions are possible, but one can also remove and edit content on Wikipedia, and even create brand new articles. Also, the format of Wikipedia articles tends to be more text-oriented and descriptive, whereas Anime News Network encyclopedia entries are more database oriented (fields of information instead of long narrative descriptions). Both include internal database and external Web links. Unlike Anime News Network, however, I would argue that Wikipedia has an even more profound and potentially negative effect on certain forms of information on the Web, such as information on anime.

A major distinguishing factor of Wikipedia, in addition to it being editable by anyone (and anonymously)[142], is that the content published under the GNU Free Documentation License, meaning that the information may be republished widely with very few restrictions. The content of popular sites is what tends to get replicated on other Web sites. With open sources of information like Wikipedia becoming more and more popular with internet users, content on Wikipedia is also being heavily replicated (word-for-word in many cases) on other Web sites (including other popular online encyclopedias). Furthermore, when referencing topics, site owners frequently link to Wikipedia making the site even more popular and making Wikipedia articles more likely to show up on Google for any given search. As a result, alternative and less popular sources of knowledge become harder to find amidst the glut of copied information.

The ability to copy information without directly altering the original might avoid the 'tragedy of the commons', but it can result in a Tragedy of Sameness, a type of information entropy where all knowledge moves towards an equilibrium where everyone knows the same things about the same topics, and nothing new is said or created[143].

Web content that can be copied and republished freely often becomes more popular than similar content that is more strictly controlled by their original authors, especially when the free content has been around longer. The tragedy occurs when this freely distributed and freely editable content is of lower quality than the non-free content, and the non-free high quality content can't compete in the long run and therefore disappears forever. Anime information sites provide an excellent illustration of this phenomenon because anime is relatively niche content, content that is particularly well-suited for Wikipedia.

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[142] In 2006, changes to this policy have been enacted in order to prevent 'editing wars' from occurring. In such conflicts, users having highly divergent viewpoints on controversial topics would keep changing a given article to reflect their viewpoint.

[143] John Boghosian Arden, in his book *America's Meltdown, The Lowest-Common-Denominator Society* (2003), looks deeper at the phenomenon and its root causes. One of those causes is the corporate control of mass media. Ironically, although open sources of information such as Wikipedia fall outside the sphere of direct corporate control, they are still subject to the lowest common denominator knowledge of lay people who consume and are directly influenced by homogeneous corporate-controlled media.

8.3.5.1 The precariousness of being in The Long Tail

The Long Tail[144] is a concept that describes the way in which a very small amount of very popular content gets a lot of attention, while the vast majority of content gets very little attention at all (and exist within the "long tail"). However, the amount of attention given to the vast majority of unpopular content may exceed the amount of attention given to the very popular content, and for those with distribution networks that can handle Long Tail content, much can be gained. It is said that The Long Tail is good for content that is not in high demand, and that sites such as eBay[145], Amazon[146], and Netflix[147] make it possible for niche content to survive and get exposure they wouldn't get otherwise (while making those companies a lot of money). Such sites and Long Tail content are mutually beneficial to each other.

Wikipedia also benefits from having a lot of niche content that could be considered in the Long Tail. There are many specialized articles that don't get read a lot, but the fact that they exist adds tremendous value to Wikipedia, whereas print encyclopedias are much more constrained regarding the types of articles that get printed. It is not entirely clear, however, that Wikipedia is reciprocally beneficial to independent Web site creators, many of whom initially research and publish the valuable information that Wikipedia later incorporates. As Wikipedia and other generalist sites get popular, the independent Web sites are increasingly being pushed into the Long Tail of the Web and face the threats of obscurity and/or extinction.

The growing usage of generalist sites to get information on niche subjects (such as anime) can, in many cases, reduce the demand for independently created sites that cover the same content. With reduced demand, there becomes less incentive (monetary or otherwise) to produce such content independently, and the Web becomes populated by copies of Wikipedia articles and the other most popular sites on Google for any given

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[144] Described by Chris Anderson in Wired Magazine, October 2004: http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html and Clay Shirky in February 2003: http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html

[145] http://www.ebay.com

[146] http://www.amazon.com

[147] http://www.netflix.com

subject. What used to be a collection of incredibly diverse (and sometimes quite expert) opinions and analysis on a multitude of subjects is increasingly becoming a monolith of sameness. In the case of anime sites, for example, it is now difficult to find a wide range of detailed and unique information sources on any given title.

"Heavy" content on the web is becoming scarce, and only a few contemporary anime fans I interviewed indicated an interest in publishing unique and dense information content online. Web sites that used to contain deep and original analysis have now become heavily outnumbered by sites intended for audiences with relatively short attention spans, focusing on daily journal entries, photo and video albums, and easily digestible news articles (about current events, celebrity gossip, the latest tech gadgets, etc.). Imageboards (such as 4chan[148]), or sites that mainly exist so users can submit and download images, exemplify the ephemeral nature of web content that is currently popular and desirable.

Those who do create original content often see their work being illegally appropriated as the often uncredited source material for Wikipedia and similar sites, and in the process of being transferred, details get lost or are presented out of context. Wikipedia also has a culture that does not readily add external links to articles (for fear that advertisers and commercial interests will use Wikipedia for self-promotion). This too, negatively affects the ecology of the Web (that depends on robust linkages) and ultimately discourages people from independently producing high quality content.

8.3.6 Commerce oriented sites

In highlighting the contours of the otaku network landscape, one also has to consider commercial Web sites. Companies that distribute anime in the United States, such as ADV Films, Animeigo, and Pioneer all have their own sites to promote the titles they sell. In the early days of the Web, official sites for specific anime titles were not generally considered very good information resources, but as the industry grew and evolved, the quality of those sites improved as well.

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[148] http://4chan.org

Retail Web sites are also important in that the most variety of anime and anime-related products can be purchased online. Anime specialty stores exist, but are fairly uncommon or only exist in major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City. Many comic book stores carry anime, but only as a secondary product. Major brick and mortar retailers and video stores have begun to carry more anime titles, but their selection is limited by the shelf space, so less popular and older titles are harder to find in such stores, and they rarely carry secondary merchandise such as anime-related books, posters, and toys.

Animenation.com[149], in particular, is a well-known retail site that also hosts a vibrant and well-populated web forum community. AnimeOnDVD.com[150] is a site that was created near the beginning of the DVD boom and continues to be one of the most popular anime sites on the Web. Although AnimeOnDVD.com is not a commercial Web site per se, it is heavily related to commerce because it is focused on a single type of commercial product (DVD). In addition to hosting reviews of just about every anime DVD that is commercially available in the United States, the Web site posts news regarding new releases and license acquisitions[151]. AnimeOnDVD.com also hosts its own popular web forum community, focused (unsurprisingly) on anime DVDs and other issues surrounding the anime industry, but containing broader topics of discussion as well.

8.3.7 Web forums

Just as the amount of anime-related information grew online and sources of that information became very disperse over time (before coalescing again in generalist Web sites), we can observe a similar phenomenon occurring with regards to anime-related online communities. rec.arts.anime was a fairly centralized online location for anime fans across the nation to interact with each other. As the internet became more popular, however, more people began using Usenet, which made the content of groups like

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[149] http://www.animenation.com

[150] http://www.animeondvd.com

[151] When an American anime distribution company "acquires a license", that usually refers to the fact that they negotiated the rights to distribute a certain anime title in the United States/.

rec.arts.anime very chaotic. New anime fans on Usenet could not be told fast enough that they ought to read the relevant FAQs before posting the same questions over and over again that so many people had asked before them. The crippling blow to Usenet, however, came when advertisers began to "spam"[152] Usenet groups with unsolicited and off-topic messages. In response, anime fans who used to read rec.arts.anime and related newsgroups migrated to the Web, and new anime fans who came about after the Web boom neglected Usenet altogether (and many younger fans don't even know what Usenet is).

Early anime Web sites about specific anime titles would often include crude forums to allow communities to form surrounding their Web content. For the most part, these early forums did not take off because any given show had several Web sites devoted to it, and many of those hosted similar forums. Except for extremely popular sites (i.e. sites dedicated to very popular shows), few of these forums were able to create sufficient critical mass to form an active community with a constant stream of fresh content in the form of new posts. Anime-related communities on the Web did not take off until generalist discussion sites (with sub-forums devoted to anime in general in addition to specific titles) and other generalist sites (such as Anime News Network, Anime Nation, and Anime on DVD) appeared that hosted their own forums. While these various forums were numerous and disperse, meaning that anime fans online no longer had a central place to interact with each other, the generalist sites had enough visitors that a sufficient number of people actively posted on the forums, making them bona fide online communities.

Earlier, when discussing rec.arts.anime, we looked at the minor online celebrities that formed within the online otaku community. With the growth of anime fandom, however, and the way in which multiple unrelated virtual communities sprung up to replace Usenet groups, it became significantly harder for any single otaku to achieve widespread and universal fame. Instead of anime fans become more equalized, however, new mechanisms were put into place to allow local hierarchies to form. In this new environment, one might have a harder time getting known by anime fandom in its

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[152] 'Spam' is internet jargon for junk content, usually found in unsolicited emails.

entirety, but one can more easily became well-known on a smaller scale, and amongst a larger number of sub-communities within anime fandom.

Usenet was an important and impressive technological achievement, but it had certain technological constraints that became problematic over time. First of all, until archiving companies came along, Usenet posts were temporary. One could not easily point someone to a conversation that took place ten years ago (though that is possible today). Usenet groups were easily spammed, such that advertising might make up a huge bulk of the new posts on any given day for any given group. Usenet attracted people (known as "trolls" according to internet jargon) who enjoyed baiting others and deliberately making people angry, and there was not much one could do to stop them. The fact that one's identity could be so easily hidden or faked in Usenet made it even easier for spammers and trolls to hinder the experience of everybody else. Special Usenet groups that had moderators were started, but that meant that a moderator had to approve your post before it was publicly displayed, hindering the free-flowing conversational styles that made Usenet unique in the first place. Also, while some people who posted on Usenet became well-known, there were no official or technical means of recognizing the valuable members of the community and their contributions. For new people visiting a Usenet group, there was no easy way for them to find out who the most reliable and helpful veterans were. Except for collective memory, users had no recorded history of participation. Finally, there was no way for users to mark content that was good and content that was bad. In order to find out what was good or bad content, one had to read the posts directly. Given the huge number of postings one might see every day on a popular Usenet group, having to read through every post meant that a user would have to read a lot of bad content before finding something of interest. There were no mechanisms in place for users to help each other out by ranking the content so that people would gravitate towards good content and avoid the junk.

Out of the mess that was Usenet, however, many lessons were learned about online forum design, and various Web forum programs were developed that addressed many of the issues described in the last paragraph. Most Web forums have fairly rudimentary design, but even the simplest forums have features that Usenet groups lack. For example, hosting a forum on a Web site means that the site owner can archive posts indefinitely

and keep those archives online for anyone who wants to access them. Also, many forums require users to register with a valid email address before posting, thereby discouraging spammers and trolls. With Web forum software, it is easy for moderators to remove offensive or off-topic posts after they appear, which is altogether different from having to approve all content ahead of time. Problem users can easily be removed, and for those who try to rejoin the community with a different name, there are technical (albeit imperfect) means site owners can use to block them. Most anime-related Web forums still do not implement ways to recognize valuable members and valuable content, however, though sometimes a few useful posts and discussion threads are highlighted indefinitely so that new users will be able to find them easily. Those Web forums that do make an effort to highlight valuable members and content merit further discussion here.

8.3.7.1 Elite forums

One of the simplest ways that Web forums recognize veteran members and heavy contributors is to specify next to their names when they joined the forum and/or how many posts they have written. Of course, just because a person has been a member of a community for a long time does not mean that he or she has contributed much to it. Similarly, posting a lot does not mean that those posts were necessarily of high quality. In some cases, people deliberately post short messages very often in order to bolster their post count and to make themselves look better in the community. This practice, sometimes known as "postcount whoring" is highly discouraged by most forum moderators who may or may not take action against those users. One site that makes heavy use of post count to distinguish different members is Anime Academy, a popular anime review and general information Web site that uses an academic motif, complete with a Dean of Academics (the site owner), two other deans who help with site administration, several professors (including retired ones) who post reviews and other informational content, and a student body (members of the Web forum). Forum members are classified as freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students and their progression from one level to the next is determined by how many posts they have made.

> Graduation is commensurate with involvement in campus activities, the same as with any school. All incoming students enroll as Freshmen.

> Sophomore status comes after 100 posts, Junior at 250, Senior at 500 and finally Graduate Student at 1,000 posts. Any student who completes graduation is allowed the freedom of a custom rank instead of "Graduate Student".[153]

Furthermore, since Anime Academy professors retire, they often need new professors to write for the site. In order to become a professor, one has to submit an application highlighting his or her qualifications (as an articulate and insightful anime fan) along with a writing sample. It is a competitive process with many applicants, and being a professor on the site is quite prestigious. Even if the professors are not well known by the majority of anime fans in general, they are quite well-respected by the fans who frequent the Anime Academy Web site.

Another example of an anime-related online community that has implemented various methods of highlighting valuable members and information is Anime Grapevine[154]. Starting in late 2000, I became a highly active member of that community and quickly became part of its elite and inner circle. Anime Grapevine is most notable for its very explicit and complex hierarchical systems. The site creator and community leader, Clairvaux, took great care to design a Web forum that met very specific needs. Utilizing principles of psychology, user interface design, and community design in general, Clairvaux crafted a community infrastructure that was unlike anything I had encountered before. In addition to attracting very articulate and intelligent anime fans, the technical design of the community subtly and not-so-subtly encouraged users to create high quality content and discouraged them from engaging in behaviors that would disrupt the healthy functioning of the community. The most noticeable and unique feature of AGV's forum design is the post ranking feature. Any registered user may give a "merit" to a post that they think is good or a "demerit" to a post that is bad (i.e. contains offensive language, is inappropriately insulting or provocative, is advertising, is an accidental duplicate, etc.). When a post is given a merit, its score increases and displayed prominently, allowing other users to see what others have designated as good

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[153] Anime Academy. 2004. "Anime Academy Lounge FAQ: What are the graduation requirements?" http://www.animeacademy.com/forums/faq.php?faq=aa_lounge#faq_aa_faq_item02

[154] http://www.animegrapevine.com (The site appears to have started earlier in 2000)

or bad content. The majority of posts tend to have no score at all, a few have a negative score due to demerits, and a significant handful have a positive score from 1 to 10. Posts that have earned more than 10 points are listed as 10+.

One of the most important effects of such a ranking system is that it provides a means by which arguments and controversies can be resolved, in the sense that votes by community members indicate a certain level of public consensus on any given matter. On other online communities, for example, debates can go on for days or even weeks with opponents on each side providing seemingly endless arguments and counterarguments. More often than not the conversations get personal and insults are exchanged. There is no official way to tell who is winning a debate, and no way to gauge what most readers think of the respective arguments. Winning flamewars on most online communities, therefore, often amounts to "getting the last word", and people keep posting to prevent their opponents from having the final say.

On AGV, however, the post ranking system allows all members to weigh in on the arguments that are made. Posts that contain well-accepted arguments, therefore, score very highly, while less-accepted arguments have lower scores. As such, it becomes very clear who is winning an argument, at least in terms of general public perception. Instead of threads going on interminably, when the posts are no longer scored very high, post authors usually take the hint that the argument has ended, and hopefully, they scored better in general than their opponents.

While content ranking systems (where all users are moderators) are not wholly unheard of, AGV's innovation was to link the merit-giving ability to whether or not one has received a lot of merits him or herself. In other words, the content ranking system is tied into a user ranking system. The concept is simple. Some people are more qualified than others to judge the quality of content. On AGV, one's qualifications are determined by how many merit points a person has received, and the more points one has received, the higher his or her rank on the forum. A person who has written a lot of high quality posts that were heavily merited by other users will therefore be a high-ranking member on the forum. The main benefit of having a high rank is that one's merits correspondingly become worth more points. Therefore, members whose contributions have been recognized by other community members have more influence when it comes

to judging other people's content. Users who have not received a lot of merits can still recognize others, but their votes literally count for less.

AGV's system is the purest form of meritocracy I've seen in a discussion forum on the internet. While the meritocracy inevitably led to some competitive behaviors, resentment and jealously, and many emotionally-charged arguments regarding the system's value and fairness, the community was still attractive to users who found the content and user ranking useful in terms of distinguishing meaningful information from junk content. Furthermore, the post ranking system gave writers a level and quality of feedback not present in other Web discussion forums. Those who enjoyed having their contributions recognized in the long term also found themselves drawn to the community, as good writers could quickly become very popular, increase in rank, and therefore develop very positive reputations for themselves[155].

In addition to the ranking system, other technical features more subtly sought to influence user behavior. For example, the titles of shorter posts are displayed on the front page of the community, but using a relatively small font. The titles of longer posts, however, are displayed using larger fonts (and in bold if the posts are very long). Posts that have been merited are also displayed using larger fonts and in bold. These features are intended to encourage users to write longer posts, as opposed to short one sentence (or shorter) responses. Various measures were also put into place to prevent misuse of the system. When preparing to give a merit to another user, the system tells you how many merits you have given that user in the past, what percentage of merits given to that user have been by you, and how many merits you have given to that user relative to the number of merits you have given total. Users seeing that information—indicating that the system is keeping track of their behavior—are therefore discouraged from giving merits to the same people over and over again. Likewise, users are therefore encouraged to give out merits widely (as opposed to only people they are friends with).

In addition to the features already mentioned, Anime Grapevine implemented many other features to enhance the Web forum experience, such as a fully accessible archive

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[155] During my time as an active member of Anime Grapevine, I quickly rose to a very high level in the community, mostly due to the fact that I was an older and more experienced anime fan (with a lot of writing under my belt) than most of the other members.

of all posts (including all the posts written by any given user), listings of the top ranking members, lists of the top scoring posts in various categories, and active removal of inappropriate content and troublemaking users. In addition to the ranking system based on the quality of one's posts, AGV had yet another hierarchy—user class—based not on a person's knowledge, but how much the community leaders trusted them. For example, a user who refuses to give any identifying information about him or herself has earned very little trust within the system and will not have the ability to post as often or to give away as many merits as someone who Clairvaux knows personally, regardless of how many merits he or she has received. Progressing in user class is based on how much you are trusted, so the criteria for class promotions are far more subjective than those used for rank promotions. Nonetheless, the combination of the rank and class system encourages users to behave well in the community so that they may have a chance to improve their standing. Some users who do not succeed in improving their rank and class may become discouraged and vocally criticize the system, and some even leave the community altogether. Those who stay, however, are highly committed to the community. I have participated in many Web forums, but none were able to generate the same amount of user loyalty that Anime Grapevine inspired, even when the community came under hard times. Due to financial difficulties, Clairvaux was unable to keep Anime Grapevine open to the public, though it is still accessible to members who paid a small membership fee. Anime Grapevine was ahead of its time, implementing features that are only now being incorporated into modern Web sites[156]. At the time of this writing, no other anime-related community site I have encountered has come close to the design complexity of Anime Grapevine. That said, however, there have been other attempts within anime fandom to encourage high quality writing on the Web.

Different anime-related Web forums cater to different types of users. People using the AnimeOnDVD.com forums appear to be a bit older (one typically has to have enough disposable income in order to afford anime DVDs). The forums on Animesuki.com are populated by those who generally prefer watching the latest anime

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[156] Such as those technologies that fall into the category of "Web 2.0", a term popularized by O'Reilly Media.

released as fansubs, since Animesuki.com contains a huge listing of fansub releases. Some forums insist on a higher level of discussion than other forums. Instead of encouraging that kind of discussion via technological means (like AGV does), members of those forums regulate content via normative means—by explicitly saying that certain kinds of posts and certain opinions are not considered acceptable. This type of normative gate-keeping has spread to the world of blogs (short for web logs) as well. Blogs are generally online journals, and are not known for being particularly stringent when it comes to the type of content they contain. People typically post whatever they want on blogs, whether it is political commentary, complaining about work, talking about their favorite TV shows, or chronicling every meal they eat. Within otaku communities, however, a few elite blogs have sprung up as well.

Most blogs are written by a single author, but some blog software allows for multiple authors to post to a single blog. LiveJournal.com, for example, allows for LiveJournal communities where multiple people post to the same blog, usually centered around a common interest. In the course of my research, I came across two anime discussion blogs—"Anime Snobs[157]" and "otaku_elite[158]"—that heavily regulated content by being strict about who was allowed to join and post. In both blog communities, applications were required to join, and existing members voted on whether or not the applicant deserved to be a member. On the Anime Snobs community, applicants are asked to write about their five favorite and five worst anime they have seen and are then judged according to their "clarity of thought, punctuation, grammar, literacy and intelligence"[159]. While it sounds very elitist, and some members might actually be elitist in practice, the basic goal of the group is to encourage "fun, smart, rational and reasonable anime discussion minus the many irritating things that make discussing it on the internet such a problem[160]" which is not unreasonable given everything we have talked about. The otaku_elite community asks applicants to answer a

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[157] http://community.livejournal.com/animesnobs/

[158] http://community.livejournal.com/otaku_elite/

[159] ibid

[160] ibid

set of questions[161] regarding his or her experiences as an anime fan (i.e. "How long have you been an anime fan?" "What is your favorite anime?" "How large is your anime collection?" "Do you have any anime posters in your room?" "Do you speak any Japanese?" "Have you ever been to an anime convention?"). Prospective members are apparently judged according to their tastes, how experienced they are as fans, how enthusiastic they are about anime, whether or not they have done high level things (such as going to Japan, conventions, and anime clubs) , and how well they are able to articulate their interests.

It is clearly evident that otaku networks online are not free-for-all egalitarian paradises where everybody has an equal voice. Hierarchies inevitably form, whether they are technologically encouraged by / built into the system, are informally regulated via community norms, or are created and maintained by gate-keeping systems (such as requiring applications to join communities). Otaku networks, therefore, are not level playing fields and otaku apparently do not want them to be. It is a highly competitive subculture. Yet, when otaku meet in person at anime conventions, the atmosphere is generally very light and friendly.

8.4 Anime Conventions

Most anime otaku conduct their daily anime-related activities on the internet. They also tend to have a small circle of local friends with whom they watch anime, and in some cases, they also have access to and attend local anime clubs. The ultimate events for anime otaku, however, are anime conventions. Anime conventions are large fan gatherings that have multiple tracks of programming to keep anime fans occupied and entertained over 2-4 days (usually weekends). The vast majority of anime conventions are run by fans themselves, though different conventions have different amounts of industry participation. Anime conventions trace their history back to science fiction and comic book conventions where members of the fledging anime fan community would get together informally in their hotel rooms to show off the latest anime they acquired,

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[161] See here for a typical application and member responses: Otaku Elite. 2006. "In what way is one allowed to proclaim themself otaku and not be crazy?" http://community.livejournal.com/otaku_elite/101334.html#cutid1

usually very low quality videotapes that were copies of copies (e.g. 3rd generation and above), and completely devoid of any form of translation. Later, science fiction conventions such as Baycon in the late 1980s would include official anime screening rooms. Even at this time, most of the anime screened was not translated, but hardcopy summaries were more readily available to the convention attendees.

Although any gathering of anime fans might technically be considered a convention, anime conventions are generally distinguished from more informal gatherings by virtue of their size, broad advertisement, being held annually, and having multiple forms of programming (as opposed to a small group of friends getting together to watch anime in someone's living room). What counts as the first true anime convention is somewhat debatable depending one's definitions, but one of the most notable early conventions was AnimeCon '91 held in San Jose, considered the first international anime convention in that it hosted guests of honor from Japan. AnimeCon evolved into Anime Expo, still one of the largest anime conventions in the United States. The largest conventions are the ones that have been around the longest, including Anime Expo in Southern California, Project A-Kon in Dallas, Texas, and Otakon in Baltimore Maryland. While anime conventions got their start in major metropolitan areas, one can now find multiple anime conventions in most states all throughout the year. The increase in anime conventions can be linked to the overall growth in anime fandom, and both are linked to the growth of online anime fandom. Most anime conventions advertise heavily on the internet, have their own Web sites, and host their own Web forum communities and mailing lists so that convention organizers and prospective attendees alike can talk to each other and plan their convention experience.

Of the various otaku I spoke with and interviewed, most had attended anime conventions or planned to in the future. Of those otaku who had attended conventions, most have different things they like to do as attendees. For example, some enjoy shopping for merchandise in the dealer's room where vendors sell anime and anime-related merchandise. Others like watching new anime in the multiple video and film rooms. Still others browse or staff tables at the artist's alley where fan art is sold, or attend art show where fan art is displayed and can often be bought or bid on. Costuming is a major part of anime conventions as well. Most attendees do not wear costumes, but a

significant and apparently growing number of fans do enjoy dressing up as their favorite anime and video game characters, getting their pictures taken by admiring fans, and participating in the masquerade, often performing humorous skits or musical acts to accompany their costumes. Frequently, costuming (or "cosplaying", appropriating the Japanese otaku jargon) is done in groups, i.e. several characters from the same show or game.

For those otaku who want to show off their obsessive knowledge, conventions also have game shows. Otakon, for example, runs an annual game show where contestants compete against each other using their knowledge of anime trivia. I participated in the Otakon game show many years ago in 1997 but have never qualified to enter it since then, though several of my friends from CJAS have played and won in recent years. Other information-related programming at conventions include professional and fan-run panels. Professional panels are generally run by members of the anime industry giving eager fans details about upcoming releases and future projects. Those panels give fans and anime companies an opportunity to directly interact with each other during question and answer sessions. Given that many in the anime industry used to be amateur fans themselves and continue to be fans of the products they distribute, the atmosphere is generally laid back and friendly. Other professional panels include those held by Japanese guests of honor who talk about their work and allow fans to ask them questions. Fan-run panels are diverse and the most likely place to find die-hard otaku.

Anime conventions usually ask for panel proposals ahead of time. Approved fan panels are then placed into the master schedule. Panels cover a wide range of topics, including (but definitely not limited to): cosplay tips, Japanese culture, learning the Japanese language, how to write fanfiction, how to draw anime, how to make anime music videos, Web site creation, anime cels, anime toys, manga, how to run anime clubs, and panels talking about specific anime or specific types/genres of anime. Panels generally consist of one or more panelists who sit at the front of the room. They may or may not give a prepared talk (with or without visuals), but almost every panel includes a question and answer session and/or a discussion with the audience. Those who run panels tend to be experts on the panel topic (or at the very least, they envision themselves as being experts). Since most otaku only attend a few conventions a year

(most fans only attend one convention, and only a few attend four or more conventions a year[162]), sharing their expertise at panels only happens on an irregular basis, so many panelists also have a significant presence online, either through a Web site of their own, or being active members of an online community. Some anime fans attend panels to see and meet panelists who are essentially minor online celebrities.

All of the anime fans I spoke to who attended conventions agreed that they enjoyed them as places to socialize with other anime fans. Ben Spiegel explains:

> The great thing about cons, I find, that because everyone knows that you have common interests, it's easy to start conversations with people randomly and have something to talk about.

Some attended as parts of larger groups of local friends. Others met up with friends who lived elsewhere. Many use conventions as a way of meeting up with friends who they only know from online interactions. For example, participants on a web forum might announce that they will be attending a certain convention and ask who else will be there. They might organize a forum meet-up, such as going out to share a meal during the convention. A couple of interviewees told me that they like talking to total strangers at anime conventions, just casually talking about their shared interest in the medium. Some attend conventions to make friends, though that is more likely when common friends are involved. At the furthest extreme, Pinguino explained to me that she spends almost all of her time at conventions meeting friends. When I asked her about the people she meets at conventions, she said:

> I'm friends with half the people who make independent comics, I think. A lot of people say that I'm the most connected person they know. So I'm meeting friends, but that's work too cuz I'm tracking info for Flippersmack[163], so i know when to interview them and stuff.

It is not uncommon for otaku to use conventions to strengthen and bolster the (online and offline) networks they already have. They also use conventions to acquire information and material goods they can not easily find elsewhere. Finally, for those otaku who cosplay, run their own panels, or even those fans who organize the

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[162] Anime News Network. 2005. "How many anime conventions a year do you go to?": http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/poll.php?id=58

[163] Flippersmack is Pinguino's online fanzine.

conventions themselves, anime conventions are a place where they can show off their skills and expertise. Anime conventions are a place to have fun and socialize, but they are also a place where otaku can promote themselves, not necessarily to satisfy their egos, but for other self-interested reasons. Being a well-known anime otaku, for example, can lead to increased access to other networks, information, and goods. In other words, becoming famous as an otaku allows one to continue being an otaku at a high level.

9. Anime/manga fandom as resistance culture

In describing the information and networking activities of otaku, we have begun to see some examples of how otaku culture might also be a culture of resistance—in other words, a true subculture. In this chapter, we will catalog in more detail some of the other forms of resistance enacted by otaku in general, and anime otaku in particular.

I describe otaku resistance as being *oblique*, meaning that it is not directly countercultural—positioned in direct opposition to mainstream values. Otaku, existing firmly within the middle class, tend to resist in ways that are subversive at best, and are far from revolutionary (which is not to say that otaku resistance is insignificant). Otaku resistance exists symbiotically, but not (completely) antagonistically, within middle class consumer culture. While some within the mainstream middle class attempt to reject capitalist consumerism outright, otaku strategies of resistance against the same thing are often far more subtle, and as such need to be evaluated carefully against a framework that defines what resistance is and whether or not it is effective.

As described in Chapter 2, Dick Hebdige defines resistance as acts that serve to make invisible ideology visible, thereby exposing the underbelly of dominant discourse and, perhaps, making it open to attack and change. Hebdige focuses primarily on subcultural style, such as the confrontational and intentionally affected mode of dress adopted by working class British youth to highlight the inherent meaninglessness of dominant and mainstream tastes, which further translates into a criticism of the dominant social order. The same phenomena can also be examined from the other side of the spectrum. Pierre Bourdieu[164] explains the way in which the culturally powerful separate themselves from the less powerful (those who hold less cultural capital) by practices that reinforce authentic high class legitimacy over the vulgarity and unrefined status of the lower classes. Some of these practices also include consumer behavior (which will be discussed at length in this chapter), where having 'good taste' in things (such as expensive luxury goods) reinforces social power. Subcultural practices therefore, can be

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[164] Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

said to disrupt dominant definitions of legitimacy, authenticity, and good taste, questioning the very basis of social inequality.

Beyond making dominant ideologies visible and open to challenge, subcultural acts of resistance also have to be evaluated on the basis of whether or not social change is actually effected. Subcultural style, although it opens up dialogue, is not always the most effective means of changing the *status quo* (Clarke 1976: 189). That said, however, some subcultural acts are more likely to lead to larger scale and more powerful political actions than others. The acts of resistance described in this chapter should be evaluated with these two criteria (of resistance) in mind: making visible dominant (and potentially problematic) ideologies, and leading to actual societal change.

Many otaku do not necessarily view themselves or their activities as being particularly resistant. Many anime otaku have a generalized sense that they belong to a larger subculture, but their perspective on that is based more on a perception of being different, *but not too different*, from other people. Most of my informants considered themselves to be academically successful[165], and although they did not typically identify themselves as being the most popular kids in school, they were also not the least popular, and almost all of them expressed that they were comfortable in their more-or-less self-chosen positions in the highly stratified world of high school hierarchies. Most otaku I have spoken to do not view themselves as being strongly opposed to larger societal structures, hegemony, etc. Even if most otaku do not explicitly articulate the resistant implications of their activities, perhaps we may have useful alternative perspectives as outside observers.

9.1 Sidestepping the target audience

When I decided to focus my research on anime otaku, my initial justification was based on the fact that anime fans were some of the first people identified as otaku in Japan, and my own experiences as an anime fan made the study of anime otaku an almost obvious choice. Beyond the obvious, however, there is a crucial feature of Japanese animation

[165] I specifically asked about their experiences in high school. In addition to being an important time in adolescent development, many anime fans become exposed to other anime fans (and therefore fandom) in those years.

that makes it attractive to American otaku. I already mentioned how anime, created in large part by creators who are also otaku, are information dense and appeal to detail-oriented otaku. Such information-rich media content is not wholly unique to Japan, however. Baseball, for example, and other sports that have a lot of players and teams generate a lot of statistics that are appealing to hardcore sports fans. What makes anime in America unique, however, is that it is not made in America, and Americans are not its primary target audience[166].

Staying outside or being on the margins of the target audience is one of the most notable otaku strategies of resistance. Such a strategy is directly related, predictably, to the information philosophy of otaku. Constantly being outside of the target audience allows otaku to stay at the cutting edge of content, having access to novel information that others in their demographic are not aware of, privy to, or interested Given the prevalence and ubiquity of advertising and marketing in American daily life (and the way those things increasingly impinge upon the consciousness of youth[167]), deliberately consuming things that were originally meant for completely different audiences may be an important form of resistance. Instead of buying into media-constructed ideals regarding what one must own or like in order to be accepted and respected in society, otaku eschew mainstream norms of consumption in favor of their own.

The study of consumption as an important social practice has been undertaken by those interested in the relationship between material culture (the world of physical things) and society (Miller 1987: 3). Rejecting one-sided assumptions that the growth of material culture necessarily results in the degradation of modern life, these scholars have recognized that material culture has resulted in some very positive social changes (including but not limited to increased knowledge and social justice). In studying the artifacts of culture, scholars have had to justify their academic interests against those

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[166] Defining "anime" is itself a contentious issue, with many debating whether anime is a medium, a genre, and/or a style of animation. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the fairly common American definition of anime, which is: animation that is created in Japan, by Japanese creators, and for Japanese audiences.

[167] For further discussion, see Quart, Alison. 2003. *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*. New York: Basic Books.

who make a strong distinction between high culture, such as the fine arts, versus low culture (which includes most of popular culture, such as television, or accoutrements of working and middle class life). Moving beyond such artificial[168] distinctions, scholars of material culture have shown how the consumption of everyday things, including the products of popular culture, contributes greatly to the formation of meaning in society[169]. Building upon the idea of consumption as a process of meaning-making, certain forms of consumption can be considered socially progressive and/or resistant.

The studies of consumption most relevant to otaku are those that deal with conspicuous consumption and what counts as socially acceptable consumption. Judith Goldstein, in her article "Lifestyles of the Rich and Tyrannical" (1987), examines the meaning of conspicuous consumption by comparing the extravagant collections of royalty versus those of dictators (and especially their wives). While both types of collections (i.e. the crown jewels of Iranian royalty and the treasures collected by Imelda Marcos) contained items of exceptionally 'good taste' ironically combined with items of 'poor taste' and mundane objects, the collections of royalty were publicly considered acceptable, whereas the collection of Imelda Marcos was viewed as decadent and corrupt. The main difference, Goldstein asserts, has to do with the fact that the items collected by royalty, including the kitschy and mundane items are imbued with legitimacy based on the history of the royal line which is also the history of the nation that all citizens share. The collection of Marcos, on the other hand, lacked a legitimate history. Dictators, according to Goldstein, rapidly acquire goods in order to artificially grant themselves legitimacy (e.g. nobility) that they otherwise lack.

When thinking about the way that otaku collect goods, Goldstein's assessment raises an important question of whether or not otaku consumption can be viewed as

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[168] I chose not use the word 'arbitrary' since such distinctions between high and low culture serve a very clear and deliberate social purpose, as explained by Bourdieu.

[169] A poignant example of consumption as a powerful meaning-making activity is described by Linda Layne who discusses the way in which the personhood of unborn children is defined and made tangible through consumer activities by those who experience pregnancy loss. She also explains how such consumption may be resistant in the sense that it affirms the existence of those children against those who would assert they never existed. (Layne 1999)

legitimate, and if not, does that make it a form of resistance? If it is resistance, is it worthwhile and positive, or is it decadent in the way that Imelda Marcos consumed goods? I will argue that otaku consumption (which I will describe in more detail below) does count as resistance in that it is a form of alternative (and sometimes conspicuous) consumption often done for the purpose of establishing legitimacy within the larger otaku community. On the other hand, it is different from the consumption style of Imelda Marcos because otaku, although they belong to a relatively privileged class, are neither dictators nor fabulously rich. The degree of spending amongst otaku could never be so high, and those otaku who seek to establish themselves through indiscriminate spending are indeed looked down upon by other otaku as being inauthentic—trying to buy an otaku identity without necessarily displaying the other requisite aspects of being an otaku. Otaku purchases, even if they are frequent, are expected to have personal meaning. They do not buy things simply for the sake of buying, or simply because they can. Otaku view items contextually, where items that they own or want have a history, or provenance. Otaku are expected to be connoisseurs in a way that Imelda Marcos was not. Compared to mainstream forms of consumption, therefore, otaku consumption is resistant, but within otaku communities, there are standards of legitimacy that the consumption is expected to abide by.

One such standard of legitimate otaku consumption is very similar to a standard of legitimacy used by Goldstein to explain why the collections of royalty are more acceptable than the collection of Imelda Marcos. Goldstein explains that the public nature of royal collections, such as crown jewels which are openly displayed and are said to represent the shared history and wealth of the citizens of an entire nation, are very different from the collection of Marcos that was hidden behind closed doors, only to be revealed when that regime was overthrown. Marcos, therefore, was a hoarder. Her collection did not serve the public interest. Otaku, although they do not share information indiscriminately, do often make a point of sharing their collections, whether by making lists (and/or photographs) of what they own publicly viewable on the internet, or by allowing anime clubs to borrow their videos so other anime fans can see them. Otaku might not give away free copies of everything they own to whoever wants it, but they do share when they feel the cause is worthwhile (such as educating other fans about

relatively obscure anime). Amongst anime otaku, one form of hoarding behavior that is considered negative by some is the collection of fansubs purely for one's personal enjoyment. According to certain interpretations of the fan ethics surrounding fansubs, fansubs are meant to be shown to large groups of people to educate them about anime, but are not meant to be owned by everyone, obviating the need for many fans to buy legitimate copies of the anime when they are eventually released.

Another way to conceptualize the meaning of otaku consumption is to consider the way in which certain shopping activities are designed to produce ideal society. In "Something More: Japanese department stores' marketing of 'a more meaningful human life'", Millie Creighton (1998) writes about Japanese department stores and the way in which they offer customers "cultural engagements, self-development through 'edutainment', and philosophical statements regarding social issues and definitions of a meaningful human life." The highly structured Japanese department store atmosphere reflects an entire worldview, a statement of good taste and how to behave. Creighton writes:

> According to those in the Japanese department store industry, consumption involves much more than satisfying physical, or even social, needs. Consumption is a form of self-expression, a form of communication; it communicates an attitude, a philosophical orientation, a sense of identity. The purchasing choices people make reflect their values and world views.

Changing the form and venue of consumption, therefore, is a high stakes maneuver, potentially resulting in alternative forms of self-expression, communication, and identity, some of which may be described as resistant. The significance of the department store atmosphere really struck me as interesting because the major otaku shopping areas in Japan are not like department stores at all. Both Akihabara and Nakano, famous otaku hangout spots, consist mostly of separate specialty stores. Otaku shopping spaces, therefore, are highly fragmented. There is no otaku department store to propagate a unified vision of an ideal otaku lifestyle. Within the United States, the situation is even more pronounced. For the most part, American anime otaku can not find the anime goods they desire in department stores. Shopping malls are not much better. Instead, American otaku rely on disparate Web retailers and individual

convention dealers. One form of otaku resistance, especially in America, comes from them avoiding the gamut of meanings that would be imposed upon them if they shopped heavily at department stores or other highly structured shopping environments.

9.1.1 The alternative appeal of anime

Anime otaku are often quick to point out that their preference for anime is based on a realization that anime is different from American media that is more readily available. Raymond DiPasquale is an older (over 40) anime otaku I met and befriended at an anime convention after interacting with him online. He explained to me why anime appealed to him:

> I slowly got more engrossed with each title that I watched. I liked them and wanted to see more. They were so different than the homogenized stories of Disney and I liked that.

Anime fans routinely talk about the detailed artwork and deep storylines of anime, and how a lot of American animation is inferior. Veteran anime fan Fred Leggett, 36, who started watching anime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, explained the difference to me even more vividly:

> A few things came out now and then, such as Disney fare, but I wanted the "real thing". I mean, animation in and for America was for kids. Anime, on the other hand, ran the gamut, from the absurdly silly to the melodramatic. We had Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, while anime offered incredibly cool and sexy characters, such as Amuro Rey and Priss Asagiri. How could The States compete against such vision? The Japanese seemed to be on another plane of existence when it came to drawn media. Sure, the animation itself was choppy and had a certain cheapness about it, but it didn't stoop to the level of a bunch of talking animals constantly spouting dumb one-liners.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to presume that American anime otaku universally reject American media. Amongst my informants, almost all of them admitted to liking English-language media, especially science fiction and fantasy, but also television shows with ongoing and complex storylines. Over the many years I have been an anime fan, I have only come across a small handful of anime otaku who reject all Western entertainment media. Given that anime itself has been highly influenced by American movies, science fiction, and fantasy, there is much room for crossover appeal.

Raymond's girlfriend Marie, who he met online and was a college student when I interviewed her, discussed her view of anime and American animation:

> I like American comics/animation a lot, but I just fell in love w/ the intense storylines of animes. But I still hold American animation art near and dear to my heart ^_~ I love the realism in American animation/comics a lot more than anime. Anime is more like...a simplified version. Very static, too.
>
> I just like animes because of their stories, they are so well thought out.

Another individual I met online (and who I later met in person at Otakon in Baltimore) was Otaprince, the maintainer of a Web site called Gainax Pages[170]. Due to the heavy information content of his Web site, I expected Otaprince to be a very hardcore and obsessive otaku, but he clarified to me that he did not consider himself in that category at all. Instead of obsessive focus on details, he created the Web site for a different purpose:

> I don't like it when Gainax Pages gets caught up in the minutiae. I prefer it to be a place for relevant, interesting discussion and commentary.

Like Raymond and Marie, Otaprince was also attracted to anime because it was different from most media consumed by Americans:

> I've always sought out challenging, experimental works in all media. I somehow found a web page that recommended Evangelion to people who'd enjoyed Foucault's Pendulum, the novel by Umberto Eco.

His interest in anime as being challenging and experimental was related to his interest in similarly challenging works in the English language, such as the works of:

> Joyce, Pynchon, Rushdie, Eco. Foreign film: Fellini, Tarkovsky, Carne. Paintings, classical music, you name it. When I got into anime, I viewed it as simply one more interesting medium.

Anime otaku may express a resistant worldview in that their interest in anime also serves to highlight the way that some other entertainment media (such as American animation) are lacking. Their recognition of the problems of various media, however, does not do much to directly improve the quality of those media, except in the rare cases

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[170] http://www.gainaxpages.com

that they become professional content producers themselves. On the other hand, American content producers who become aware of anime's popularity may seek to emulate the aspects of anime that make it attractive to otaku, potentially resulting in higher quality work.

9.1.2 Anime otaku and the industry

It is worthwhile to examine how the anime otaku community embraced something (Japanese animation) not intended for them, leading to the current state of the American anime distribution industry. Even though several anime titles were shown on American television in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, during that time, anime was not heavily marketed to consumers in the United States. Many of those early titles were not even advertised as being Japanese, and many Americans who watched those shows were unaware that they were originally from Japan. The first major wave of anime titles sold in the United States that were marketed as being Japanese in origin appeared in the latter half of the 1980s. American anime fandom, however, had existed and grown since the late 1970s, and from that time onwards, they have had access to many anime titles that were not commercially available in the United States. One of anime fandom's main goals was to explore the diversity of the medium and to pool resources so that individuals could gain access to obscure, expensive, difficult to acquire, and imported media content. Much of the anime industry's early success has been attributed to the demand created by early anime fandom, and many of the companies distributing anime in the United States were in fact started by fans. Furthermore, those companies were not approached by Japanese anime companies seeking to export their products to the United States. American companies, closely tied to fandom, were the ones that contacted the Japanese companies to convince them (with significant difficultly, at first[171]) that there were Americans who wanted to watch unedited Japanese animation in its original language. The important point to consider is that the rise of anime otaku culture in the United States was not the result of Japanese (and American) companies deciding to create a market within which they could sell products. Anime fans themselves created otaku culture in the United States and the

[171] The history of Animeigo, describing some of these difficulties, can be found on that company's Web site: http://www.animeigo.com/ABOUT/HISTORY.t

industry and market came afterwards largely as a result of their actitivies. Even though the anime industry in the United States has grown significantly[172], anime otaku still find ways to avoid being in the target audience they helped to create, and in many cases seek to maintain a more egalitarian relationship with the anime companies.

Two chapters ago, I described fansubs. Even though the number of commercially available anime titles has never been greater, fansubs are still a huge part of anime fandom. The vast majority of anime fans I interviewed either downloaded and watched fansubs actively, or they watched fansubs downloaded by their friends and acquaintances. Most fans are not against purchasing anime DVDs, but they still actively consume non-commercial (and illegal) anime as well. It is very possible to be very active in the otaku communities without buying any DVDs at all, watching only fansubs (which still outnumber the amount of translated anime available in the United States). Some fans who can not afford DVDs do exactly that, or only buy a minimum of DVDs. Here, we can see an example of anime otaku culture manifesting a form of oblique resistance. Instead of actively being against consumer culture and preferring to download content illegally for free, most anime fans (even those who mostly download) express the notion that they would buy the DVDs if they could afford it. Strong norms exist within anime fandom that encourage fans to support the industry whenever possible by buying DVDs, despite the fact that it is possible to find so much anime for free. The Fansub Ethic that insists that fansubs of commercially released anime must no longer be distributed is part of that attitude. Nonetheless, the importance of fansubs within the anime otaku community highlights the fact that otaku still seek to retain control over the shows they can watch, legally or not. Any marketing or advertising that otaku may encounter regarding the fansubs they are interested in is generated solely within fandom itself, or can be found in Japanese media (magazines, television commercials, etc.) that are not typically sold to American consumers.

Amongst the fans I spoke to who buy anime DVDs, most said that they do not rely on traditional marketing to decide what they will purchase. By traditional marketing, I

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[172] According to a 2005 Fortune article, "Anime, piracy and profits", the anime and manga retail market is worth $625 million, and is "growing rapidly, with sales up 13 percent between 2002 and 2004". http://money.cnn.com/2005/12/13/news/midcaps/anime_fortune_121205/index.htm?cnn=yes

am referring to things such as magazine ads, flyers that are inserted into DVD cases, and trailers for other anime on DVDs themselves. An anime club officer who preferred to remain anonymous, who I will refer to as "Nick", told me that he never buys things based on advertising, such as print ads in anime magazines:

> Because you can dress up stuff all the time, but if you go in getting it because of how it's marketed, chances are you'll be disappointed.

Instead, most anime otaku rely on word of mouth reviews from people they trust, online reviews, and even fansubs. Regarding the latter, instead of relying on other people's impressions of a show, some otaku download fansubs explicitly for the purpose of sampling content before it is commercially available so that they will know whether or not they want to buy it. Ben Spiegel explains his strategy, which is not uncommon amongst anime fans:

> That's one of my problems, I'm very cheap. I'm hesitant to spend money on something that I'm not sure that I'll like. Sometimes I'll go buy something based on a friends recommendation, but my most common way of decided what DVDs to buy is to watch part or all of an anime fansubbed, and than, if I really want it and want a permanent copy, go out and buy the DVDs

Even though anime otaku are often portrayed as voracious consumers, the fact that they go to such lengths to research anime before they buy it also means that there are far more DVDs they are not buying for every DVD that they do buy. Almost every otaku I interviewed expressed that they are not impulsive shoppers, that they are very deliberate about how the spend their money, and that they use their networks (such as the internet) to inform their decisions.

Otaku also exercise control over the consumer environment they exist in by maintaining close relationships with the companies that produce the media content they buy. At anime conventions, for example, when company representatives give their presentations and take questions from the audience, anime otaku are known to be rather blunt about what they want from the companies. In general, because the companies provide otaku with the products they love so much, the relationship is amicable, but in cases where the product falls short of otaku expectations, they are not afraid to publicly voice their grievances, even going so far as to organize petitions and boycotts, some of

which appear to have been successful[173]. Instead of just being a target audience—implying one way communication between producers and consumers, where the producers have more power than the consumers—anime otaku are proactive in their relationships with the companies they buy from, seeking to exert a level of control that is not typical for fans of a product. In one sense, companies may enjoy this level of interest in and engagement with their products, and therefore do their best to appease otaku demands. In other cases, however, otaku demands may become so great or unwieldy, companies may simply wish that the fans were slightly *less* involved and emotionally invested.

Otaku resistance in this case involves highlighting and disrupting the traditional relationships between content producers and content consumers (members of the audience). Within the context of the anime industry, at least, American otaku have managed to create a good situation for themselves, though it is hard to say if their actions will cause non-anime companies to adopt similarly fan-friendly business models.

9.1.3 Collection culture

In addition to being conscientious about buying commercial goods, some otaku sidestep being in the target audience by trading in goods that are commercially made, but not meant for public consumption. In the world of anime, this usually takes the form of promotional goods that are not meant to be sold. Anime posters, for example, are often intended to be advertising for products (such as DVDs) that otaku can buy, but some otaku have made the posters themselves into valuable commodities, despite the fact that they are ephemera, short-lived and fragile products meant to be used once and then quickly discarded. Such promotional goods are in direct contrast to things such as limited edition special collector's items which otaku often view as being little more than marketing gimmicks bought by less sophisticated fans. Ephemeral promotional goods

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[173] One example of a petition that was successful involved an anime title called *Kite* that was initially released with significant edits. After the petition, a less-edited version was released. See http://www.animeprime.com/edit/petition_kite.shtml . Numerous anime-related boycotts have been organized, and while it is difficult to ascertain if any of them were directly successful, fans voicing their complaints in an organized fashion may have influenced later decisions made by the boycotted companies.

that are not meant to sold and collected tend to be far rarer than official collector's items and therefore have higher information and trading value. Also, since they do not have a manufacturer's suggested retail price, their value (e.g. at internet auctions) is determined solely by unofficial otaku standards of value. Having access to such goods is less about how much money one has and is more about one's connections and sources of information, making them some of the most important otaku artifacts. Otaku who trade exclusively in rare promotional goods may therefore be heavy consumers who do not give any money to the original content producers, preferring instead to deal within their underground economies.

One activity engaged in by some otaku is cel collecting—that is, acquiring the original animation cels used in the production of anime. Cel collecting has become popular enough that cels are now widely recognized by fans as being highly collectible, such that whole online communities dedicated specifically to cel collecting now exist. Despite this recognition, cels are still sold in mostly informal settings, such as private transactions (including trades) and internet auctions. In Japan, I visited a few specialty stores aimed at cel collectors, but those were uncommon. In the United States, anime specialty stores may carry a small selection of cels, as well. Marie described the experience of being part of the larger cel collecting community:

> Before I knew it, I joined a forum, was making friends w/ collectors, emailing etc... the appeal I think is that, its one of a kind! You own a piece of your fav anime, whereas other collectibles come in quantities. I think the thrill of finding something you like, getting a bargain , or saving up for it, the heat of a bidding war.. its an adrenaline rush that comes with getting a great piece of art.
>
> As for being part of a community, there's no way around it! If you're not, you miss out on great deals and discounts. If you are part of it, you get special privileges and nudges to where the good stuff is and the updates.

Raymond, who was being interviewed at the same time, chimed in and said that cels were:

> more than artifacts for me. I guess it's the same way an archaeologist feels about the treasures he finds, they have a kind of history and life about them

Having had the chance to visit Raymond's home in New Jersey on two occasions, I was able to view his impressive (and expensive) cel collection in person. Although the cels themselves never had an official price, and only a handful of people in the world would pay money for them, they took on new value from the way he acquired, treasured, and took care of them[174]. Implicit in both Raymond's and Marie's accounts is the way in which unique "one of a kind" items are considered more desirable than mass-produced items intended for general consumption. At anime conventions where Japanese creators are guests, autograph sessions are heavily attended, and convention goers will often seek to imbue value upon the mass-produced anime merchandise they own by getting them autographed. In a conversation I had with Raymond, he agreed that deciding what to get autographed is an important decision, and that getting unique goods signed is generally the optimal course of action, making uncommon objects even more uncommon—the rarity of the item combining with the rarity of the autograph, producing a new object of significantly greater value.

Otaku resistance via this alternative form of consumption highlights the way in which many mass-produced goods are enjoyed only temporarily and then disposed of, incapable of producing lasting meaning for consumers. As companies notice otaku collecting culture, they may attempt to produce items that are specifically meant to be collected, but otaku may reject those items for that very reason. Unfortunately, there is nothing to indicate that otaku consumption, while useful to them, will result in fewer disposable items being produced in general.

9.1.4 Beyond genre

American consumption of Japanese animation (that was pulled to the United States as much as or more than it was pushed here by Japanese corporate interests[175]) is already one form of oblique resistance. On a more specific level, anime otaku in the United States also resist against the target audience classifications implied by different genres of

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[174] He also displays many of them on his Web site.

[175] See especially "Progress Against the Law: Fan Distribution, Copyright, and the Explosive Growth of Japanese Animation" by Sean Leonard (2004): http://web.mit.edu/seantek/www/papers/progress-columns.pdf

anime. For example, even though certain genres like "action" are not necessarily limited to certain demographics, others definitely are. Anime is notable for its diversity and targeting of different audiences. American animation, such as feature length Disney animated films, are often known as family-friendly or "intended for the whole family", whereas anime also includes many titles that are intended for "each member of the family", with shows that are targeted specifically to children, shows for young teenage girls, shows for young teenage boys, shows for older teenage girls, older teenage boys, young adults of both sexes, etc. This diversity is made possible partly due to the fact that the animation industry in Japan is less monolithic than the American animation industry. Anime studios are small, but there are a lot of them, all doing different things. Also, anime follows in the tradition of manga, which is similarly (and even more) diverse and targeted very specifically to different audiences.

Anime otaku, especially in America, are quick to ignore the fact that certain genres of anime are intended for audiences completely different from themselves. Given that they don't care that anime is intended for Japanese audiences, perhaps it is no surprise that they also don't care if they (the otaku) themselves are not in the target audience (according to genre) for the various shows they like. It is not unusual, therefore, for a 25-year-old white male otaku to be die-hard fan of an anime television show in Japan whose primary audience is preteen Japanese girls[176]. Female otaku are frequently fans of shows aimed at male audiences, but that is perhaps less surprising given that many of those shows have a unisex appeal. Shows (and comics) aimed at girls, however, are frequently very stylized to appeal specifically to girls. A male otaku I spoke to in Korea indicated that he and other male otaku he knew avoided anime aimed at girls. He thought that Korean culture was close enough to Japanese culture that it felt awkward and embarrassing to consume media intended for girls. I have observed that those feelings are far less common amongst American anime fans. Male otaku who enjoy shows made for boys are often big fans of shows made for girls, as well. At the UC Davis anime club in the late 1990s, there were two public anime screenings each week, a general screening

[176] One of my informants, a president of a University anime club who also belonged to a fraternity, got his start in anime fandom as a die-hard fan of *Sailor Moon*, an anime television show originally intended for young girls in Japan.

that showed primarily shounen (boys) anime and a more specialized screening featuring shoujo (girls) anime. The shounen night, with its more popular shows in general, had greater attendance, with approximately 2 males for every 1 female in the audience. The shoujo night was not as popular, but the females only slightly outnumbered the males.

The popularity of girls' anime amongst male otaku in America might also be explained by the fact that most anime, including those intended for females, are directed by men, even if the original stories and art were originally by women. Having male directors may soften some of the stylized aspects of the original stories (often published as manga), making them more palatable to male audiences. Many of the male otaku who watch girls' anime, however, do go on to read and enjoy the original manga they were based on, even though those manga were made by women for female fans.

By disregarding genre distinctions, otaku demonstrate how consumers are viewed as target audiences, expected to conform to specific tastes. Otaku consume things based upon their own tastes instead of those that are imposed upon them. Content producers may be encouraged by otaku to produce genre-bending works that do not attempt to anticipate the tastes of audiences. (By anticipating audience tastes, content producers also reproduce pre-existing standards of what counts as appropriate for each target demographic.)

9.1.5 The expert as an alternative type of consumer

In the previous two chapters, I described otaku as an information-based and networked culture. In other words, they are a knowledge community. Being in a knowledge community has various benefits. As mentioned above, knowing about consumer products empowers otaku as they decide what (or what not) to buy. To summarize what I have already written, otaku manifest an oblique form of resistance by positioning themselves as being outside of the target audience, but remaining an audience nonetheless since they love the media products they consume. However, otaku often put themselves *even further* outside of the target audience by engaging in a form of consumption that does not require them to actually buy the products. By being experts on a product, they can benefit from it without necessarily having to physically own it. Instead, they "own" information about it, which is rewarding in its own way. In some

cases, otaku may own illegal copies of works, or even receive legal free copies from companies who appreciate the fact that they have promoted the work online (for example), but even without those copies, otaku can benefit simply from being experts on a product or topic. They own the product or topic in the sense that they know all about it, have bought into (and in some cases rework) the meanings surrounding it, and may even encourage others to (physically) own it. In the latter case, although the expert who does not buy translates into a lost sale, his or her activity in providing information on the product and promoting it may translate into many more sales that are gained.

Before anime products were readily available in the United States, this type of consumer activity—being experts about products without actually owning them—was very common. It provided a way to participate in otaku communities without having to spend a lot of money. What it required, however, was access to information (usually via the internet) that others did not have. Even today, with the current availability of fansubs, anime available to rent, televised anime, manga available to browse in bookstores or checked out in libraries, it is possible to be a heavy consumer of anime and manga without actually owning very much of it. By becoming experts on that material, otaku take their level of engagement one step further, using the products, their own research abilities, and their networking prowess to distinguish themselves from other fans.

Otaku also become experts on issues pertinent to anime fandom, so in addition to knowing about anime, they may also know about fandom-related activities, such as how to create costumes, how to design anime Web sites, how to produce anime music videos, etc. Such expertise can be shared at local gatherings of otaku, at anime conventions, or on the internet. By applying themselves and developing these forms of expertise, otaku are similar to other, more formal, knowledge communities such as the scientific community. Other professionals who are not typically considered scientists (such as art collectors and wine connoisseurs) who participate in knowledge communities may also be said to engage in some activities similar to what professional scientists do. What makes otaku expertise resistant, however, comes from the fact that such expertise and scientific practice is generally reserved for serious concerns, such as physics and biology, but also high class cultural pursuits such as the aforementioned art collecting

and wine connoisseurship. Developing expertise in popular (low class) culture, applying scientific methods of inquiry to the amateur study of that culture, and emulating the structure and dynamics of the scientific community within fandom communities constitutes a form of unexpected appropriation (that can potentially be applied to other areas of life).

9.1.6 A thing of their own

Another manifestation of otaku resistance comes from the fact that the fans view anime and manga as things that they (and not others) understand. This resistance, therefore, is directed against the parents of otaku, teachers, or simply non-fans who do not understand the appeal of anime and manga. At the Japan Society otaku workshop mentioned previously, I had the opportunity to ask a large group of otaku teens what their parents thought about anime and manga. Some replied that their parents did not really like it, but most responded that their parents either did not understand it or want to understand what it was all about. One of the parents who was present explained how he didn't really know about the content of anime and manga, and that he only skimmed through the books that his children read. His philosophy was that there were much worse things that could potentially harm his children, and anime and manga kept them out of trouble. That said, however, most of the teens agreed that if their parents were completely aware of the content of anime and manga (which sometimes contains explicit sex and/or violence), they (the parents) would not approve.

Christopher Sui, a 17 year old high school student and anime club president in New York City who is already making progress on his own book about anime, talked to me about anime and parents:

> I get a lot of complaints from my friends like "my mom won't let me watch anime anymore she thinks its violent porn". Well, I'll admit it took me a long time to get my mom to like anime and all it took was a ticket to go see Howl's Moving Castle.
>
> Anime is not as people think it is. At first my mom thought the same thing, "Anime looks evil", but after Howl's Moving Castle she really liked anime. Anime spreading in the U.S. markets especially is important because it's not underground anymore. It's mainstream, in your face. It's there and you can do two things: like it or dislike it.

Christopher considers himself an anime evangelist of sorts and wants to see it become more mainstream. Unlike a lot of anime fans, he made a conscious effort to help his mother understand and appreciate anime, but not all young anime fans do this, and not all parents are so understanding (such as the parents of Christopher's friends mentioned above).

Some educators appreciate the enthusiasm youth have for anime and manga and have attempted to incorporate them into their educational programs, but not without some resistance on the part of other educators. I corresponded with Erin Clarke, a 28 year old reference librarian and anime/manga fan. She wrote:

> I appreciate the wide appeal anime and manga have for all types of readers, but especially for reluctant readers and students who are learning English as a second language. It's also useful for art students and people who enjoy drawing. Unfortunately I'm facing something of an up-hill battle with other librarians, especially school librarians, concerning the value of these types of materials. There's a stigma attached to them and I often hear some librarians referring to anime and manga as pornography or as a waste of time. This isn't all librarians, mind you; often this perception is expressed by older librarians with little or no exposure to the materials. Many younger librarians are already fans and are more than willing to interact with younger fans and purchase manga for the collection.

On a similar note, a high school art teacher I spoke with expressed her frustration at the obsessiveness of anime and manga fans in her classroom. She explained to me that all they wanted to do was to draw anime and manga style and were not open to learning about art in a more general sense. She admitted to me that she did not know much about anime and manga herself except that some of it was definitely not meant for children. On the other hand, some educators have been more successful in leveraging youth interest in anime and manga. Christopher Sui talks about experiences at his school:

> We have an anime club at our school, and well we were doing ancient Japan in our Global History 3 classes (this is back in January). Most of the teachers were shocked to find that their students knew so much about Japan during the periods discussed and today, both economically and socially. When asked how they know so much? "It's from an anime series, *Kenshin*. That's what we watched in Anime Club and we took notes about that period"

> I think we got some of the teachers to include anime into their lesson for next year, I think our club advisor did a lesson on "Grave of the Fireflies" with her class.
>
> Well it's kinda funny how I started the Anime club, It was after a test in my club advisors class in freshman year I pulled out a copy of *Love Hina* and she say's "Christopher put away *Love Hina* and finish your exam. Reading Manga won't help you now". I was shocked she knew about Anime. Afterwards the History Department gave us space to run the Anime club. Our club's goal is simple: watch anime, discuss its positive role in today's culture, expand knowledge on the Anime culture here and abroad. And we just finished our first official year.

The situation at Christopher's high school is somewhat unique. Working with the Japan Society in New York City, the school sent a group of students to visit Japan, and Christopher was chosen to be one of them due to his enthusiasm and knowledge of Japanese popular culture (especially anime). Most schools do not have such programs, but most of the educators I have spoken have at least noticed that their students are strongly into anime and manga, and even more intense fan-related activities such as writing fanfiction. At the college and university level, more classes are being offered to analyze anime, manga, and other aspects of Japanese popular culture[177], and teachers of Japanese language at all levels have noticed that students are increasingly joining their classes because of their interest in anime[178].

While American otaku are aware that some parents and educators do not approve of or understand anime and manga, they generally prefer that their parents and teachers *do* understand and engage with them about their interests. While young fans take pride in knowing about something that adults do not (for example, that not all anime is violent pornography), they do not actively wish for the adults in their lives to stay ignorant. Their resistance, therefore, is less about having and maintaining forbidden knowledge and more about having authentic knowledge (e.g. that anime is a legitimately good art form) that they want to share. Anime subculture therefore, instead of being like a secret

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[177] The Anime Manga Web Essays Archive keeps track of academic courses that discuss anime and manga-related issues: http://www.corneredangel.com/amwess/anime_on_campus.html

[178] See Brown, Desair. 2005. "For the Love of Anime: Middle Schoolers Plunge into Japanese Language Classes". http://www.newsline.umd.edu/schools/anime050405.htm

society, has more of a missionary zeal—attempting to transform non-fans into otaku. By successfully teaching non-fans about anime, otaku eliminate the need for this particular form of resistance.

9.2 Otaku sexuality

In writing about fan-based resistance in general, many have written about fans who take original works they enjoy and seek to subvert those texts via alternative readings/interpretations and by publishing derivative works based on those readings. These include fan works such as fan art and fan-made videos, many of them parodies, that use the original characters and/or remixed original footage in ways that were not intended, showing them in a new light—often combining completely different content for the purposes of humor, critical commentary, and/or simply to entertain. Some of the more interesting subversive fan works include those that are highly sexual in nature. Previous authors, including Constance Penley (1991), have discussed in great detail "slash" fiction that is made and consumed primarily by female fans who portray (in various media) famous male characters (starting with Kirk and Spock of *Star Trek*) in implied or very explicit homosexual relationships. A similar phenomenon exists within Japanese anime and manga fandom, as well, exemplified by genres such as *yaoi*, *shounen-ai*, and *Boys' Love*, which are all related and considered synonymous by some. There is much current and ongoing research regarding these genres and how they are perceived and used within American anime fandom, so I will not focus on that topic here (leaving it to my colleagues instead). That said, however, there are other forms of subversive sexuality within certain sectors of American anime fandom that are worth looking at in greater detail.

When I started my fieldwork, I wondered if I would find anything interesting with regards to otaku sexuality in terms of their sexual practices and philosophy. For example, could we presume that otaku obsessiveness might translate to them pursuing exclusively monogamous relationships? Annalee Newitz (2000) wrote about open relationships within the Open Source and Free Software communities. Given that otaku have a fundamentally different information philosophy, can we observe completely different types of relationships amongst otaku? My fieldwork did not yield anything

conclusive in that regard. Otaku seemed to be engaging in the same types and variety of sexual relationships one could observe anywhere else, and informal surveys of anime fans seemed to confirm that[179]. I did notice, however, that many anime otaku express their sexuality in the form of imagery that some have considered offensive, subversive, and possibly even criminal. In this domain, and in the discourse surrounding it, we may see another important form of resistance enacted by otaku.

It is no secret that amongst the various genres represented within the medium of Japanese animation, pornographic anime is quite popular, as evidenced by the vast number of Web sites that provide pornographic anime images and videos for download. There are various sexual elements in non-pornographic anime, as well; sex appeal is a common aspect of a lot of popular culture. When referring to pornographic anime, I am referring specifically to those titles that have sexual content that would be rated R and above if they were subject to MPAA[180]ratings. In Japan, these titles, explicitly intended to titillate are known as "H" or "ecchi" anime, and are usually only available as video releases (as opposed to being broadcast on television or being played in movie theaters). Nonetheless, adults-only anime is not difficult to acquire in either Japan or the United States. That said, it is very important to note that not all fans of anime necessarily watch or like H-anime. Many younger fans, especially, have indicated to me that they do not like seeing sexually explicit material in the anime they watch. Back in the 90s, many hardcore fans looked down on adults-only anime, mostly because they felt that there was too much of it available in the US, as opposed to the vast amounts of high-quality (non-pornographic) works not yet domestically released. Of course, as is the case with any type of pornography, it is difficult to know who actually likes it as people tend to keep their preferences for such material private.

Otaprince, who is generally impressed by how American youth have found a positive way to socialize within anime fandom, is one of the many fans concerned about the sexual content in anime young fans are being exposed to:

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[179] Such as those conducted by *Tsunami*, an anime and manga fanzine published by the Terrapin Anime Society, in the Summer 2001 issue.

[180] The Motion Picture Association of America

> The J[apanese] otaku female ideal, Chi[181], is scary. US otaku just think it's crazy and Japanese. I don't think they understand the obsessive, sexual nature of the females in anime that caters to the J otaku.
>
> Blond, childish, submissive, silent. That's the J otaku ideal that J otaku anime caters to.
>
> The Japanese female ideal is radically different from ours to begin with, and the J otaku takes it even farther from us. I don't mind fantasy, but the way females are portrayed in most new anime is disturbing. Not healthy fantasy, like super heroes or romance novels or something.

Otaprince's description may or may not be wholly accurate, but it does reflect a genuine concern about sexuality in anime, and some of that sexuality is more controversial than others.

The role and effects of pornography in society are uncertain and controversial. Even though there are a number of sub-genres of H-anime that attract negative attention, especially those titles that portray non-consensual sex, similar genres exist within American pornography as well and are considered legal in accord with First Amendment rights. Much more problematic, however, is one specific sub-genre of H-anime known as "loli", which is a shortening of "lolicon" or "lolicom", themselves shortened forms of "Lolita complex", named after the title character of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). As one might surmise, this genre portrays underage girls[182] in (sometimes very explicit) sexual situations, with either other underage characters, adult characters, or even non-human characters.

Child pornography is a widespread international problem, and people who enjoy it can be found in countries all around the world, including the United States and Japan. Why people enjoy it, and the implications of that, goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, but some people do like and/or produce it. Lolicon anime (and manga), which is not technically child pornography (though that matter is still open to much debate), appears to be gaining in popularity amongst American anime fans. When I visited Japan, lolicon titles were openly sold at anime specialty stores that also carried

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[181] Chi is a character from a popular anime series called *Chobits* (2002).

[182] H-anime featuring underage boys is known as "shotacon", but for the sake of simplicity, all H-anime featuring characters who are supposed to be underage will be referred to as lolicon.

more mainstream titles. Even in mainstream anime, younger characters who are portrayed in a sexually provocative manner are becoming more common, as evidenced by the popularity of a relatively new genre called 'moe', which refers to the feeling of being "turned on" by a certain type of girl character (who is typically young and depicted as vulnerable in some way[183]). Moe can also be used as an adjective to describe such characters.

In the last several years, lolicon H-anime and manga have become more available for public download on the internet. At the time of this writing, fictional depictions of underage characters engaging in sexual activity are generally considered legal and are not considered child pornography, but that certainly does not mean that such depictions are considered morally acceptable by all (or even most) parties. The precise legal standing of such images has not yet completely worked out, and different jurisdictions will undoubtedly treat similar cases differently. The Bush administration, via the office of the Attorney General, has made it clear that it is cracking down on child pornography and obscenity in general, and they do not support Supreme Court decisions making virtual child pornography (such as lolicon anime) legal. This is a contentious civil liberties issue, with one side arguing that virtual child porn is protected speech because no actual minors are harmed in the production of the work. Child pornography (and sex with children) is generally condemned due to the fact that children can not give consent to have sex, meaning that all sex acts involving children are coercive and therefore illegal. Virtual child pornography that does not involve real people attempts to sidestep issues of consent and coercion, making it similar to fictional (and therefore legal) portrayals of rape, murder, and other crimes.

The other side argues that the existence of such works is clearly harmful to society at large, may encourage other more insidious forms of child pornography, as well as child abuse in general. Pedophilia as an alternative form of sexuality is not widely accepted within American culture, and anything related to pedophilia is looked upon with great suspicion.

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[183] Older, tough, and self-sufficient female characters are liked by anime fans, as well, but are rarely referred to as inspiring "moe" feelings.

The issue is complex with a wide range of arguments, but it is also one that is not part of everyday political discourse due to the sensitive and controversial nature of child sexuality (especially as portrayed in media). Those against virtual child porn are not regularly exposed to it and see it as being clearly wrong. Those who are in favor of virtual child porn, or at least accept its place in civil society, are unlikely to speak openly in favor of it knowing that they may be ostracized for doing so. So even though the issue is one in which much debate is possible, that debate is not very widespread, but it is something that is heavily debated within otaku communities in the United States where such material is easy to find.

Given the general distaste people have for media in which children are sexualized, those anime fans who openly admit being fans of lolicon are clearly being resistant to mainstream American sexual values. That said, however, they are not necessarily doing anything that is criminal. Some critics of lolicon claim that those who enjoy it also necessarily enjoy real child porn and are turned on by children in real life. Yet, amongst the community of lolicon fans, real child pornography (and child abuse) is usually rejected as being completely unacceptable[184]. Lolicon fans are acutely aware of the (current) legal differences between virtual child porn and actual child porn and some even consider actual child porn to be repulsive, not to mention actual child abuse. Some argue that virtual child porn creates a demand for actual child porn and encourages child abuse, but the counterargument that is made is that virtual child porn may provide a safe and legal outlet for desires that cannot be safely channeled elsewhere.

Nick, the anonymous anime club officer, shared his thoughts on the matter:

> I feel that if people aren't led on to attempt things [e.g. sex with children] in real life, there's no problem. I don't look at the stuff myself, but I can see why some might like it. And as long as people don't "act on it", there should be no problem. Personally, I don't think pornography really "leads" a person to imitate what's on there solely, much like violent media doesn't solely, or even play a main part in leading to violent acts.

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[184] On image boards that cater to lolicon fans, for example, those who post actual child porn are quickly and permanently banned. This may be motivated by a combination of moral disapproval and practical concerns about the Web site being shut down or investigated for illegal activity.

Although Nick does not consider himself a fan of such imagery, he is generally forgiving of those who are, as long as they do not indulge in actual crimes against actual people. Nick also brings up an issue that is commonly discussed when talking about virtual child pornography: whether violent media encourages viewers to commit acts of violence, or if already unstable and violent individuals are drawn to the media, leading to further questions about whether or not such media can serve as a safe outlet for dangerous thoughts and desires.

There are many compelling arguments on each side of the debate, and only time will tell how they are eventually resolved (legally and otherwise). The important point to consider with regards to otaku resistance, however, is that otaku (whether they are lolicon fans or not) are actually engaging actively in this debate, delving deeply into the matter in a way that I have not observed in any other subculture or community (online or off). While otaku have not made their voice heard on this matter in a broader political sense, some have already begun to prepare to do so.

Anime and manga, although they are more popular now than ever before, are still relatively new to the public eye of the American mainstream. Things such as lolicon anime, H-anime in general, or even sexual elements in non-pornographic anime and manga will eventually garner increasing amounts of negative attention as more people are exposed to those things that differ from traditional/mainstream American sexual norms[185]. Anime otaku who have debated these issues amongst themselves may become an important voice against any such backlash that may occur. Even if such a backlash does not occur, it is possible that otaku may influence a shift in American sexual norms. However, not all otaku are enthusiastic about participating in broader public discourse on the subject, as it could result in further misunderstandings or stereotypes about American otaku subculture. Nick voices his concern:

> In that case, I feel that there's a fear that what's happening in Japan might happen in the US, and that anime fans might be vilified for it. Often the

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[185] It should also be noted that things such as H-anime and lolicon, while not difficult to find in Japan, are not considered mainstream and generally acceptable amongst the majority of Japanese citizens. As in the United States, live action pornography (featuring adult actors and actresses) is more common (i.e. available on television).

> more negative aspects of a subject are usually what people remember it by, and sometimes that negative aspect can be blown up to the point where that's about the only thing people think about when they see the subject. I feel that people are worried about that happening here. All anime isn't moe, and anime fans know that, but what about the random passerby who doesn't know better?

While he agreed with me that anime fans might have something to contribute to the discussion, he had a hard time viewing otaku as a force for social change (outside of their own localized acts of resistance):

> We aren't necessarily a main societal force. And I would assume that we'd be seen as oddities by "normal" people.

Otaku, perhaps, lack the credibility to meaningfully influence public policy in this domain, and arguing in favor of things such as virtual child pornography could make it even more difficult to achieve that credibility.

Otaku manifest resistance by locally challenging the logic and morality behind preexisting sexual norms. In terms of effecting large-scale social change in that arena, however, otaku are mostly silent, but that may change if (alternative) otaku sexual norms become widely known, forcing them to debate the issue in public.

9.3 Counter-resistance: selling back otaku subculture

Youth subcultures that attract mainstream attention are routinely co-opted by the mainstream and turned into commodities to be sold back to the youth. Otaku are no different, especially since they have such a close relationship with mass media products and popular culture to begin with. Even though current anime fans often consider themselves part of a subculture, they usually mean that they belong to a specialized community, but not one that is necessarily resistant. Anime, after all, can be bought at suburban shopping malls and viewed on network television. Manga can be found in any bookstore. T-shirts can now be bought with the word "otaku" on it in both Japanese and English. Some 'old school' anime fans view all of this with a certain amount of amazement. Veteran fan Fred Leggett told me:

> Anime used to be secreted and near-unobtainable. Now, it's in plain sight. Fortunately or unfortunately, this has greatly commercialized the entire medium and, in some ways, cheapened it. It's no longer something

> mysterious or magical. Shows I used to swear by now make me cringe (a little), as I now understand that many were produced for no other reason than to sell a toy or provide some distraction for parents for their kids.

In this new product-heavy consumer environment, otaku resistance is becoming more and more oblique. If otaku care to remain subcultural, then perhaps new forms of resistance are necessary, whether it means getting into more niche anime (such as lolicon?), or creating and engaging in new forms of fan activity (such as creating costuming clubs and parties). Otaku can not continue to simply engage in their activities that were previously considered 'elite'. As otaku subculture become co-opted, many of those activities lose their elite status (due to the way that information changes value as it becomes well known). For now, anime otaku in the United States have still found ways to keep a certain distance from the anime establishment that seeks to make money off of them. American anime otaku, even those who purchase a lot of American-distributed anime goods, buy things with a certain amount of cautious skepticism. They were not, after all, pressured into their anime fandom. It has not become that trendy yet; it is not really what 'popular kids' get into. Also, otaku are reluctant insiders have access to many other things such that they have more than anime and manga to occupy their time. Other hobbies, even if they are not as important to them, are not uncommon amongst American otaku. According to reports, this may make them better off than their Japanese counterparts who feel heavily pressured to buy the latest releases, to collect all the special limited edition goods, and who do not have other hobbies and social circles outside of their anime otakuism. This may be due to the fact that Japanese otaku are closer to the source material and are the natural target audience for that material, making it more difficult for them to manifest resistance via their practices of consuming it. Perhaps Japanese otaku who consume American popular culture fit better into the definition of otaku as being a resistant subculture. On that note, the first generation of otaku in Japan, although they grew up watching anime, were also big fans of Japanese and American science fiction. As in early American fandom, the early Japanese fans of anime were not heavily marketed to the way they are now, and they became experts on shows that were not targeted to them, including foreign titles (which explains the heavy influence of American science fiction on a lot of anime shows created by those early otaku who became anime creators).

As the American anime industry becomes more powerful, and as Japanese anime publishers start to target American audiences more directly, it will become increasingly difficult for anime otaku to maintain their subcultural status. As otaku by definition manifest oblique resistance as reluctant insiders, they are used to finding and engaging in modest forms of resistance while being immersed in the consumer sphere. What may happen, however, is that otaku will move onto other forms of popular culture and mass media that are not targeted to them. The corporate counter strategy, therefore, would be to create works that do not look like they are targeted to otaku, but nonetheless are. An example of that would be a viral marketing campaign that leaks what looks like secret and hidden information that is not supposed to be public, but is actually designed to attract the attention of otaku who are very attracted to novel information that nobody knows. Another example targeting otaku would be to produce items that do not appear to be official collectibles, but are actually specifically designed to appeal to otaku collectors (who do not know that the items were indeed meant to be collected). As of yet, it does not appear that such campaigns are very common, but it may be something to look out for, especially if one is an otaku who does not want to unwittingly participate in corporate marketing schemes.

Even if the benefits of otaku resistance are sometimes very localized to individual otaku or constrained within the boundaries of the otaku community, non-otaku may learn valuable strategies of otaku resistance that can potentially be transformed into more widespread social action.

10.New theories of otaku

10.1 Expanding upon the Otaku Ethic

The Otaku Ethic provided a preliminary framework with which to define otaku, and field research and continued discourse analysis has allowed for more in-depth description of what otaku actually do. In learning about otaku culture's practices of information, networking, and resistance, we can now elucidate secondary features and implications of the Otaku Ethic. For example, how can we formalize more specific otaku information strategies? How can otaku adapt in response to the ever-changing nature of communications networks such as the internet? How do otaku maximize their resistance when manifestations of that resistance are increasingly being sold back to them as a commodity? This chapter will seek to answer those questions and more. We will begin by looking deeper at the idea of otaku having a certain *attitude* about information, as opposed to otaku being defined by the sheer *amount* of information he or she has.

10.2 Otakuism as style (attitude) over substance (knowledge and material goods)

While some definitions of otaku focus on what they know (the level of their expertise) or what they have (the extent of their collections), I (coming from an STS perspective) define otaku in terms of their attitude, their philosophy about knowledge and the ownership of material goods. Just as there exists, according to Popper, an ideal of what counts as science, we can similarly discuss ideal forms of otaku behavior when it comes to information. Whether or not any actual otaku (or scientists) actually live up to those ideals is not the most important thing, as they are merely models of the goals otaku aspire to. They provide a basic attitude to follow as much as possible (or as much as desirable). Otaku culture works because it is a social phenomenon, because of otaku *communities* creating shared knowledge and systems of value, just as academic scientific communities work not because of individual scientists conforming to a perfect ideal, but because they work together in a community of interest whose members constantly seek to challenge each other, resulting in the overall growth and progress of scientific knowledge.

A good way to illustrate otakuism as an attitude is to examine the commonly held supposition amongst anime fans that Japanese otaku in Japan are at a "higher level" than American otaku, that they are intrinsically more otakuish than anime fans in the United States. Many American anime fans, no matter how involved they are in their hobby, consider their Japanese counterparts to represent the ultimate ideal of what it means to be a hardcore fan. In addition to knowing how to speak, read, and write the language, Japanese fans have the advantage of much easier access to the material goods surrounding anime. With better access to the material, Japanese fans can buy more, and combined with the language skills, they can learn more. It is easier, therefore, for Japanese otaku to devote a greater part of their lives to their hobby.

Taking the Otaku Ethic into account, however, and considering what American otaku actually do, I believe it is a mistake to idealize Japanese anime fans as being more otakuish than American anime fans. Essentialism is the most obvious flaw of such a position. There might be more hardcore otaku in Japan than in the United States, but that is an unproven assertion that is very plausibly wrong when you consider the relative populations of Japan (127 million) versus the US (299 million). It is more likely that there are *proportionally* more otaku in Japan. Whatever the case might be, it still makes little sense to compare an ideal Japanese otaku against an ideal American otaku. Comparing an "average Japanese otaku" against an "average American otaku" is equally flawed because there are no such entities that exist in either country. Instead, it is more accurate to say that there are some anime fans in Japan who are more otakuish than some (or even many) anime fans in the United States, but there are also some American anime fans who are more otakuish than some (or even many) Japanese anime fans. Any comparisons that are made have to be done on an individual basis to be meaningful.

A more subtle, but no less significant, problem with idealizing Japanese otaku is that too much emphasis is placed on what the Japanese otaku knows or is capable of knowing. Instead, according to the otaku ethic, the desire to know more, an attitude of wanting to learn, is more important than what is known or knowable. A veteran fan who is a walking encyclopedia of facts about anime but is not interested in learning more about it is less of an otaku than the brand new fan who only knows a little bit but desperately wants to know more. The effort that is put into it has to be considered as

well. For the Japanese otaku who are so close to the media and have such great access to information, great effort is not always required to gain knowledge. American otaku, on the other hand, have to go to great lengths to acquire the knowledge they seek, lengths that include learning a very different and difficult second language, importing goods from another country, and participating in specialized communities to acquire and share resources that would be difficult to access on one's own.

Similarly, a veteran fan who owns tens of thousands of dollars worth of otaku merchandise who is no longer interested in collecting (in some form or another) is less of an otaku than the new fan who does not own much but is already planning and researching his or her next acquisition, and working hard to afford it. The Japanese otaku have it easier in that the goods are close at hand, and can be bought without the markups associated with import items. American otaku, however, have to buy such goods at uncommon specialty stores or through online retailers that specialize in import anime goods. Buying goods at anime conventions is even more difficult, as conventions are not held all the time and are not easily accessible to everyone, not to mention the cost of simply getting into the convention, where the merchandise is routinely marked up 100% or more compared to the original Japanese Yen price. Some American otaku make special trips to Japan to do their shopping, or they use special services that allow them to bid on Japanese-only auctions.

Others will argue that American anime fans cannot be otaku at the same level of Japanese fans because anime was intended for Japanese audiences, so Japanese otaku will have a deeper intuitive understanding of the true meanings of the shows compared to American otaku who can only get part of the true meaning, or miss the point altogether. While some traditions of literary analysis still place emphasis on canonical readings (and the concept of canon in general), critical readers (influenced by postmodernism) no longer privilege certain readings of works over others. Authorial intention is still of interest and studied widely, but is not considered to be the final word on any given work. Alternative readings, where the 'observer' is co-constructing the work as it is being observed, are given equal weight in the sense that they are neither objectively right or objectively wrong, even when they diverge greatly from the author's original meaning and intent. "Japanese readings" of Japanese works are not to be held

higher than "American readings" or "Estonian readings" or "Kenyan readings" (etcetera) of Japanese works. Again, even those categories are problematic because they too essentialize cultures. Instead, we have to talk about individual readings of works, and all such readings are equally valid, making the issue of 'correct interpretations' completely irrelevant to the discussion of what makes someone more or less of an otaku[186].

Even if, for the sake of argument, we agree to the artificial standard of accepting the Japanese author's meaning as the "right" one, there is nothing to say that an American viewer is somehow intrinsically less-equipped to meaningfully interpret the work, compared to a Japanese viewer. In many instances, the exact opposite is true. Again, these things have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Finally, as explained in Chapter 9, consuming products that are not intended for them may make American otaku even more otakuish than their Japanese counterparts.

In summary, Japanese otaku are *not* more otakuish than American otaku. In order to reach that conclusion, we acknowledge that being an otaku is not about what you know, but the desire to learn and the ways in which you seek to gain knowledge. Being an otaku is not about what you have, but how you want to have more and what you do to get it. Otakuism is an attitude. Japanese cultural critic Tomohiro Machiyama said that he quit being an otaku because he didn't want to be defined by his possessions[187]. I would respond by saying that being an otaku is less about the destination(s) and more about the journey. Sometimes, you have to stop and take inventory to see what you have and where you have been, but only because keeping track of that aids in the continuation of the journey.[188]

Again, a comparison to Popper's demarcation criterion for science is apt in this instance. Being a scientist is not about what you know, but the constant quest to know

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[186] While this appears to be a highly relativist stance, I stand by it at least in this particular domain (the culturally-contingent and highly subjective interpretation of art works). In other domains, conflicting knowledge claims may be evaluated according to more objective criteria (even if those criteria were chosen for non-objective reasons).

[187] Interview with Tomohiro Machiyama, conducted by Bamboo Dong, April 11th, 2005: http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/feature.php?id=207

[188] A cruder way to put it: "Being an otaku is about growth, not being a growth"

more. Because objective truth is ever-elusive, we can never know if any of our knowledge is correct, but we continue anyway because we believe that scientific research results in progress and growth. A scientist who stops questioning and striving for knowledge is, for that moment at least, not a scientist (in that he or she is not doing science). Being a scientist, like being an otaku, is more a matter of one's attitude rather than one's knowledge, body of publications, or collection of precision instruments.

10.3 The nature of elite information in otaku communities

The Otaku Ethic describes an information philosophy that defines information in a very particular way, based on the idea that information value is not fixed, and that it changes depending on how widely it is known or available. When we say that otaku are seekers of information, we also mean that they are seeking valuable information, things that are rare, as opposed to things that everyone knows about. As such, we can talk about otaku culture as being focused on "elite information". How do otaku maximize their cache of elite information? In order to answer that question, we can look at different consumption patterns that an otaku might engage in.

Somewhat crudely, and not necessarily adhering to strict economic definitions, we can construct a chart with two dimensions: supply and demand, which we will define as simply being the availability of a given item (supply) versus how desirable the item is to the general public (demand). An example of a high supply, high demand good, therefore, might be breathable air, as everyone desires and needs it, but it is readily available to most people. An example of a high supply, low demand good would be pollutants. There are a lot of pollutants in the environment, but nobody wants it near them. Low supply, high demand goods might include precious metals, such as gold which is rare but universally desired. And finally, a low supply and low demand good might be a rare book that nobody knows or cares about. Items in each of these categories carry different information values, and an otaku deciding on what to buy would want to buy the thing that carrying the most information value.

High supply, high demand items do not have much information value because they are widely available, despite the fact that everyone wants them. Similarly, high supply, low demand items are not high in information value because they are available and

nobody wants them. The two remaining categories (low supply, high demand; low supply, low demand) are the ones that contain the most information-rich items. Low supply high, high demand goods have a relatively high information value in that they are not widely available and can be sold for high prices to the many people who desire them. However, low supply, low demand items have *an even greater* information value.

While low supply, high demand items can be sold at relatively high prices, acquiring them in the first place is also expensive because of that very demand. Our definition of information value, furthermore, takes into consideration how much a thing is *known*, in addition to how widely available it is. Low supply, high demand items are well-known by definition, in that many people desire them, whereas low supply, low demand items are not widely available nor well-known, giving them a very high information value. The true potential of low supply, low demand items comes from the fact that they can be acquired cheaply, and when and if they become low supply, high demand items, owning that item suddenly becomes very lucrative. Amongst those who trade in stocks, this principle is summed up by the motto of "buy low, sell high". For otaku, it means that they will seek out rare and unknown things, and should those things become popular later, the otaku are very well-positioned to profit (before moving onto the next rare and unknown thing). In that sense, otaku are not unlike cool-hunters or those early adopters so eagerly sought out by cool-hunters[189]. That said, otaku are not necessarily motivated by monetary/mercenary concerns. There are also intangibles benefits (i.e. status, reputation, a broader social circle) to having esoteric knowledge and possessions that later become more widely known and desired. Even in cases where the low supply, low demand items do not become very popular, simply being a known expert on things that few people know about gives otaku a form of valuable cultural capital within the otaku community.

With regards to being an expert, "known" is a key word here. An otaku who has esoteric knowledge about something that nobody has ever heard of and will *never* hear about does not stand to benefit from that knowledge. If an otaku's low supply, low demand item is a special skill that will *never* be in demand whatsoever, then that skill is

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[189] See the Frontline documentary, "The Merchants of Cool" (2001), hosted by Douglas Rushkoff.

not worthwhile to the otaku. Therefore, it is in the best self-interest of otaku to activel publicize their low supply, low demand items in order to change them into low supply, high demand items. In that sense, otaku have to be savvy marketers. One place where otaku actually do that type of marketing is on the Web auction site Ebay.com. Otaku who have rare and not necessarily well-known goods will do their best to advertise the merits of those goods in hopes that people viewing the auctions will bid high, resulting in significant profits. Even though many otaku may be introverted in person, on the internet they are often masters of self-promotion.

Ebay.com also provides an example of how changing availability and knowledge of items affects their value. Back in the mid-1990s, the market for 1st edition Advanced Dungeons and Dragons role-playing game books was small but lucrative. The books, published in the late 1970s and early 1980s were difficult to find and were in high demand, so they sold for well beyond their original cost. Most of this buying and selling activity occurred on Usenet initially. When the World Wide Web and Ebay.com rose in popularity, the value of the AD&D book market declined dramatically as the number of old books being auctioned off increased significantly. The books were suddenly no longer rare, and people did not perceive them as being rare. Otaku devoted to collecting such books either had to give up or move onto something else.

The important point to remember is that any given item or piece of information does not have a fixed information value. That value is relative and changes depending on people's knowledge of the item or its availability, both of which are variable. Furthermore, as the low supply, low demand item becomes low supply, high demand, it necessarily decreases in information value, which is why one does not reveal/release it until the right moment when he or she will reap the most reward, since such compensation only lasts for a limited amount of time. In the world of science and technology, for example, one may reap rewards for discovering a new piece of information or inventing a new device, but once that information is widely disseminated or the device is widely available, the scientist or technologist won't be able to make money off of that anymore and will have to find new information. To offset that effect, some scientists file for patents, and at the very least, they retain credit for their discoveries (which can be useful to them in the long run). As a general rule of thumb,

otaku only release information when they are clear that it will benefit them in the short run (in terms of some form of compensation) or in the long run (in terms of being able to produce more information later due to the disclosure now). The long-term benefit comes from otaku retaining control over their intellectual property and any mechanisms that are in place for their contributions to be recognized over time. Some (but certainly not all) otaku become famous for a long time through the work they share with the larger fan community. Hoarding information and never releasing it will yield no rewards at all, which helps to explain the meaning of the first part of the otaku ethic: "The essence of information is secrecy. The utility of information comes from its movement."

10.4 The Otaku's Dilemma

In addition to deciding what types of information are the most valuable, otaku also have to determine the best way to optimize the process by which information is gathered. The most critical choice that otaku have to make regarding how to invest their time and energy is whether to take an approach that emphasizes *depth* of knowledge versus one that emphasizes *breadth* of knowledge. It is this depth versus breadth optimization that characterizes what I call the "Otaku's Dilemma".

Otaku can acquire low supply, low demand information by learning a lot about many different subjects. This is especially valuable when the otaku are able to draw connections between those subjects that others would likely miss. The more common way that otaku acquire low supply, low demand information, however, is by delving very deeply into a single subject. It is this latter strategy that leads to stereotypes of otaku as being single-minded, overly obsessed, and lacking any sort of balance in their lives. Examining this stereotype may lead to some further insights.

10.4.1 The myth of otaku reductionism

While it is true that otaku tend to be interested in the minute details of any given subject, there is a fundamental flaw in the logic behind the idea that otaku are completely single-minded and focused on 'only one thing' to the exclusion of everything else. With regards to their objects of interest, it is problematic to say that otaku attention is reduced to a single object. There are no atomized objects of desire. In theory, reduction can be

continued infinitely, but nobody actually bothers to do that. Instead, people arbitrarily choose one level of interest and call that a singular obsession, even though it is far from singular. For example, one might say that an otaku is obsessed with television and nothing else, but television can include very many different things, genres, shows, etc. One might say that an otaku is obsessed with anime, but again, anime may include many different genres and shows. An otaku might be obsessed with science fiction anime, but that encompasses a lot of different things as well. One might argue, then, that a true otaku is focused heavily on only one show, but that neglects the different seasons of the show, or the different episodes. We can continue this process of reduction by pointing out individual characters, or even individual frames of animation, or specific points in time in an individual episode. While there are indeed some anime otaku who have a specialized interested in specific characters and (less commonly) those who enjoy studying anime on a frame-by-frame basis, even they tend to be interested in more than just one character from one show or from one episode, and the otaku who watch animation frame-by-frame don't just watch the same frames from a single anime or episode over and over again. In actuality, even otaku who are heavily focused on specific details also have broader interests. Those who deride otaku as being obsessed with only 'one thing' are speaking less about what otaku are actually doing and more about their own opinions and biases regarding what counts as a healthy level of interest in things, and what things actually deserve serious attention. It seems safe to say that no matter what a person may be interested in, there will be someone else to say that his or her interest is unwarranted and unhealthy.

10.4.2 Otaku exploration

The other strategy of acquiring information, learning a lot about different subjects, is not the natural tendency of otaku who prefer to be experts in a more localized domain of interest, as opposed to having amateur-level knowledge in many subjects. Being a so-called jack-of-all-trades (but master of none) holds little appeal for otaku, who view such behavior as dilettantism. That being said, however, otaku do branch out and seek out knowledge outside of their immediate comfort level (albeit carefully, so as to not stretch themselves too thin). As mentioned above, otaku do not only fixate on one thing. They

do explore broadly, but not indiscriminately. For example, after having explored and become an expert on one anime title, an anime otaku might seek out other anime of the same genre, or anime by the same creators, or anime that features the same voice actors. An anime otaku might begin to explore Japanese pop music because of a song used in an anime. Some anime otaku begin to watch Japanese live action movies and television dramas, even if they are very different from anime. They may become interested in various aspects of Japanese culture. Because they use the internet so heavily in their fandom activities, they might begin to learn more about computers.

This form of developing new interests has a particularly hypertextual feel to it. Exploration is based on linkages, as opposed to randomly trying new things. This is a fairly conservative information strategy, one that ensures that information acquisition is meaningful, and that one's identity is not defined by a mish-mash of disconnected and disparate pieces.

While depth of knowledge is highly valued amongst otaku, it is clear that a certain amount of broad exploration is also considered necessary. One can gain only so much valuable information by digging deeply into a very specific subject. Otaku have to be willing to seek out new domains of knowledge. Anime otaku, for example, routinely keep track of new shows that come out, compiling detailed information about those shows even before they are released.

The tension between developing deep knowledge versus broad knowledge is the Otaku's Dilemma. Every otaku has to decide for him or herself what the proper balance is between being an expert on one or a few things versus exploring broadly and learning a little about many things. It is a dilemma because there is no right answer that applies to every otaku and every circumstance they may encounter.

10.4.3 Navigating the Otaku's Dilemma

Various strategies are utilized to cope with the Otaku's Dilemma. On an individual level, the most common strategy is to become an expert on one or a few things, and then learn a little about everything else. Such a strategy is useful in that it allows an otaku to function and communicate well within a larger group of otaku, where each otaku has a different specialty, allowing for a division of labor. As such, otaku have a real incentive

to be part of a larger community, as opposed to being locked away in little rooms with little or no human contact. The ideal situation is to have enough broad knowledge to interact with other otaku who have different specialties, and to have unique knowledge that makes you valuable to the group as a whole. In that sense, we may say that an otaku is defined by *who* he or she knows more than *what* he or she knows. Having *access* to a broad range of high level information is more important to an otaku than the knowledge that resides inside his or her head. The Otaku's Dilemma, therefore, is a product of the otaku information philosophy, is mediated by otaku networking activities, and is a manifestation of otaku resistance (due to the care involved regarding information acquisition and identity management).

The changing information ecology has had a profound effect on otaku. Otaku have always been about collecting (and using) a lot of valuable information, and people have spoken of our "information society" for many years now, but even in the short ten years between 1996 and 2006, the amount of data (on just about any subject) available to people (not just otaku) has increased exponentially. As Langdon Winner points out in "Mythinformation", Chapter 6 of *The Whale and the Reactor* (1986), all this information does not necessarily mean that we are all necessarily more empowered. In fact, using our definition of information (that defines information value in terms of scarcity and obscurity/secrecy), much of this new data may not be very valuable information at all. Needless to say, having massive amounts of data available has profound effects on society and may even be empowering to individuals in significant ways, but what counts as *valuable* information has certainly changed. Otaku, therefore, have to refine their information acquisition strategies even further.

Low supply, low demand items become even harder to find in an age where digitization of content (plus globalization of markets) means that we live in an age of data abundance versus data scarcity. Everything is up for grabs, freely copied and shared via new digital and networking technologies. Even though some of this new dissemination of culture is not technically legal, there exists a prevalent attitude that widespread and indiscriminate sharing is good. Whether it is indeed good for society in the long run, there is no doubt that otaku who seek rare and unknown things have to adapt to the changing times.

Now that information is so readily available, in hoarding certain pieces of it and waiting for the right time to release it, there is the very real danger that the hoarded information will lose its value, since so much *other* information is already being made available. In hoarding and waiting, people are already moving onto a multitude of other things, or even worse, others are independently finding/discovering the same information as you, but have decided to share it with everyone for free. In other words, in an environment of sharing and information abundance, it becomes harder for those who have information to profit off of it. Not only does sharing culture challenge the *concept* of information, it often reduces the value of information itself.

In another example, anime otaku who once had special access to certain anime TV series and became some of the few experts on that show are less important in modern-day fandom where distribution is far more widespread because of the internet, and so many new shows are being distributed at a rapid pace. People are not spending as much time learning about the minutiae of any single show. In this new environment, we can observe a greater emphasis on breadth of knowledge as opposed to depth of knowledge. In a sense, having deep otaku-level knowledge has become more difficult as one's attention is more easily divided. Some anime otaku—seeing that the information value of anime itself has gone down now that it has become widely available and popular—have moved onto other things where information is more scarce.

In today's data-rich environment, some otaku seek valuable information by focusing on news—keeping track of the newest releases of anime, movies, technology, etc. This allows them to do research and to provide others with unique information (in the form of "scoops"). From the perspective of the Otaku Ethic, collecting news (which may include gossip and rumors) as the primary form of information acquisition is problematic. Publishing news on the Web is certainly a network-related activity, and good news sites are highly regarded and popular, but the information value of news is potentially very ephemeral. Information on a new anime title might be interesting a few months before it is released, but if the anime is considered terrible after people actually watch it, the value of that information will go down dramatically and rapidly. Furthermore, by focusing so heavily on product-related news, otaku become deeply tied into the cycles of consumption preferred by content distributors. In other words, the resistance value of

being a news provider is questionable. That is why otaku typically fall into the category of 'cult fans', people who are invested in things even after they are no longer officially distributed and marketed. Otaku who are involved with inactive media properties thereby avoid marketing hype and their knowledge of those properties has long term value, as opposed to short-lived news.

For anime otaku, the effect of anime becoming more and more mainstream can not be overemphasized. Now that anime has become more popular, the appeal of being an anime otaku has decreased for some, even if those otaku still enjoy watching anime. The compelling stories and enjoyable artwork of anime have made many people fans, but the ability to participate in a larger community of interest is what attracted the otaku, who reveled in the process of exploring a somewhat fringe hobby. Now that the anime distribution industry has become well-established in the United States, some otaku have turned their otaku energies elsewhere and become casual anime fans/consumers. Other anime otaku have continued to find new niches to explore by downloading and/or producing new fansubs, exploring new genres, finding new types of merchandise to collect, getting more involved with related content such as Japanese video games and popular music, and expanding the scope of their fan-related activities such as attending and running conventions.

In an interview with Roland Kelts for his forthcoming book on anime in America[190], I was asked whether or not I thought American interest in anime had peaked, or it would see sustained growth. My response was as follows:

> The growth of anime's popularity in the US in the coming years depends largely on the choices (regarding licensing, marketing, and their treatment of the material) that will made by the anime and manga publishers. Assuming they will make good choices, however, I would guess that anime will continue to increase in popularity.
>
> First off, there are still so many good anime titles that have not made it to the US. Some have made it over as fansubs, especially newer shows, but there are so many more (especially older titles) that haven't even been fansubbed (and just because something is fansubbed does not mean that people will know they ought to watch it). In addition to more DVDs and

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[190] Kelts, Roland. (forthcoming). *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* Palgrave Macmillan.

> fansubs being available in the future, more anime on television (such as the Cartoon Network and other channels) would further increase the audience for anime.
>
> Secondly, I expect there will be more opportunities for fan engagement with anime. Anime convention attendance seems to be increasing yearly, with some conventions having to implement caps on registration. New conventions are popping up all over the place, and more and more fans are learning about fan activities such as cosplay, creating their own artwork, etc. Furthermore, increased access to broadband internet will allow even more engagement with other fans online. Even if the American anime industry disappeared, the anime fan community would still be very strong.

In other words, even though anime is becoming more mainstream and popular, there are still plenty of possibilities for otaku subcultural engagement with it.

10.5 Fans, cults, and science

Earlier, I mentioned otaku as tending to be, amongst other things, 'cult fans'. I use that phrase somewhat hesitantly because of the implied association of otaku activities with cult-like devotion. While otaku appear to be very devoted and enthusiastic, I wish to distinguish them from the fans who actually treat their objects of interest with the type of reverence usually associated with religions and cults. In highlighting the ways in which otaku are always seeking to find new and more valuable information, instead of having a static interest in a few canonical works or dogma, I hoped to demonstrate that otaku are more like scientists than cultists. Both scientists (in the Popperian sense) and cultists can be devoted and enthusiastic, but they have very different attitudes regarding the nature of knowledge and truth. Ideal otaku, like ideal scientists, are dissatisfied with old knowledge and seek to find more, even if it forces them to change their previous worldview. This topic will be discussed further in the conclusion.

10.6 Exploration versus escapism

While discussing new understandings of otaku culture, it may also be fruitful to address the notion that fan cultures are inherently 'escapist' in nature, meaning that fans become absorbed in their objects of interest as a way escaping real world pressures and concerns, personal difficulties, and in some cases, interacting with people who are different from

them. There are indeed some fans who are addicted to the point of developing social avoidance behaviors and/or social anxiety disorder, but those are the exception, especially when we talk about the highly networked and social otaku community, such as those otaku I spoke with who use the internet to make friends that they later meet in person.

Some will argue that otaku only interact with other like-minded otaku—on the internet, for example—but what actually happens is more complicated. For fan communities surrounding niche interests like anime, although all the members have an interest in anime, they are not likely to be exactly the same in other areas of life. As described previously, the anime fan community consists of people of both sexes and many different ages, professions, ethnic backgrounds, economic backgrounds, and political orientations. Having a shared interest in anime does not mean that they have shared interests in everything else. That is why flamewars are commonplace within otaku communities. Some of the strongest disagreements amongst otaku can be found in the off-topic forums on anime communities, where non-anime topics are discussed. In participating within otaku communities, I encountered a wide range of viewpoints and worldviews, some of which were in direct conflict with each other.

In pursuing their objects of interest, there is no doubt that otaku have to sacrifice time doing other things, but it might be premature to call that an escapist behavior. All people choose to focus on certain activities over others, but we do not accuse all people of being escapist. To counter, some might say that otaku *are* escapist by virtue of the fact that they are only doing things that they *want* to do, as opposed to things they *have* to do. Otaku might respond by saying that they feel *compelled* to be otaku, but a better response might be to say that even in things that people nominally *have* to do, unless there is direct physical coercion, they are still choosing to do those things—people still *want* to do those things that they supposedly *have* to do.

Charges of escapist behavior, therefore, appear to have less to do with actual otaku behavior, and more to do with people's perceptions and judgments of the value of otaku interests. In doing things that other people are not interested in, otaku attract that sort of negative attention. When people claim that otaku behaviors are 'unhealthy', they are mostly giving their (non-psychiatric/medical) opinion regarding the preferred way to

spend one's time. Without clear and agreed upon criteria regarding what counts as a good use of time, it is impossible to proceed with a discussion of this issue.

Provisionally, it may be safe to assume that otaku and non-otaku alike wish to maximize their time so that they will grow as people—emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. By watching anime obsessively, some anti-otaku may argue, one does not grow. Yet, the same assertion could be made regarding any activity that people take very seriously. In observing otaku culture in America, I would argue that when otaku watch anime, it is actually all about growth. People develop very emotional attachments with a show's characters, find deep meaning in a show's philosophies, and learn a lot of new information that they would not be exposed to otherwise, and all of that comes from just *watching* anime[191]. Otaku usually go even further than just watching, of course. They participate in discussions with other fans, interact with each other at conventions, produce their own artworks, do research and publish, etc. In actively doing all of those things, otaku have many avenues of personal growth and development. Instead of shying away from and escaping life, otaku are actually exploring life, albeit in unconventional ways. We may view them as pioneers charting newly discovered landscapes.

Another criticism often leveled at anime otaku is that, even though the nature and level of their engagement is impressive and allows for a certain level of achievement and personal growth, the fact that they are spending so much time paying attention to cheaply made fictional works is a horrible waste of potential. Otaku should be focused on real things, not imagined constructs. This, of course, leads to discussions of the value of art and literature in society compared to purely factual knowledge. Without getting into that very complex discussion here, we may simply conclude that most societies accept the value of art and storytelling, and instead of viewing those things as meaningless escape and distraction from reality, we can view and study them as meaningful products of our imagination and important sources of inspiration, a way of

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[191] Not all watching is equal, of course. Sometimes, one may watch something merely to entertain and to distract, without taking anything away from the show other than the sense impressions of having enjoyed it. An example of that type of passive watching is when a person forgets (during a commercial break) what he or she is watching.

exploring not just what is, but what may be possible in the province of the mind and beyond.

All of these issues have been discussed at length by many otaku themselves. On an anime-related blog called "Sama Zama", for example, the blog author discussed the dangers of becoming overly engrossed with anime[192]. In response, a commenter known as "bateszi" expressed very opinions against the idea that being an anime fan is inherently escapist and unhealthy. bateszi wrote:

> Fanclubs, societies, screenings and conventions all exist as a means of social interaction. People meet and romances begin at these places. It's hardly superficial if someone travels hundreds of miles to meet people with a similiar mindset.
>
> We do everything for a reason, everything contributes to our personalities. We love anime because it gives us something in return, people are inspired by it, can take so much from it, it gives fans strength. So of course, it's never wasted time.

Otaku who participate in these debates usually acknowledge that there are some forms of obsessive consumption that are dangerous or unhealthy. Many of these same anime otaku, however, express that they get a lot out of their activities. The works may be fictional, but what otaku gain from their consumption is very real to them. It is true that otaku knowledge and prestige might not translate into knowledge and prestige in other areas of life, but that is the case for non-otaku forms of knowledge and prestige as well. Depending on context, people have multiple identities (as employers, as employees, as sons and daughters, as fathers and mothers, as friends and neighbors, etc.). Having an otaku identity does not necessarily detract from one's other identities, and in some cases may have broader benefits, to be discussed in the next chapter.

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[192] bateszi. 2006. http://samazama.animeblogger.net/2006/05/17/escapism-an-unhealthy-addiction-or-harmless-entertainment/

11. Otaku implications

11.1 On the importance of being otaku

In the last ten years, anime otaku culture in the United States has undergone radical changes. What used to be a small subculture with an even smaller number of known figures who everyone knew and relied upon to drive the direction of American anime fandom has transformed into a widely dispersed and highly fragmented community of interest with very few boundaries—vague points of contact being the only things keeping people together, or at least allowing a sense of recognition between anime fans who are separated by geography and/or their specific sub-interests as fans..

Now that anime otaku culture has become diluted in a sense, no longer the domain of "great men (and women)" as we might call them in Science Studies, what we are left with are fewer truly hardcore otaku, fewer people who are clearly subcultural, which is significant when one considers that otaku resistance has never really been explicitly countercultural in the first place. There is a vague sense that all (or most) anime fans are at least partially otaku, and even outside of anime fandom, there seem to be more otaku everywhere else, as well, as media fandoms and other communities of interest continue to multiply on the internet, spilling out into brand new "real world" associations and gatherings.

Such trends can be deceiving, however. Not everyone is really an otaku, even if we allow loose interpretations of the otaku ethic. What it means to be an otaku is still a contentious issue. Calling oneself an otaku in 2006 still involves considerable risk. Ignorance of the term is the norm, negative definitions of 'otaku' are still prevalent amongst those who do know the word, and even the positive descriptions are mostly weak at best, highlighting specific object of interest (anime and manga, for example) or detailing a certain level of enthusiasm, but not really explaining the greater significance of what it means to be an otaku, especially for youth in America. Understanding that significance allows us to determine what lessons, positive or negative, we can learn from otaku culture even if we do not embrace it wholesale (even though some readers may choose to do so).

American youth are increasingly under the microscope, as professional social scientists amateur observers alike are eager to determine how increased access to and use of information technology and media of all types is affecting young people psychologically, emotionally, and developmentally. Much research focuses on children as being passive vessels, acted upon by the causative forces of technology, the effects of which are then measured. More progressive work acknowledges that children have a certain amount of agency, that they actively engage technology and media, controlling the nature of their experience instead of allowing it to be dictated by the technology. This latter research is an excellent start, but it would be a mistake to presume that all youth engagement with technology and media are the same. There are many different styles of engagement, with otakuism being just one of them. Furthermore, it is a mistake to presume that engagement with technology implies complete mastery over one's environment. Technologies present very real constraints regarding how they can be used, and even appropriated. These factors weigh in when we consider the pros and cons of the otaku lifestyle.

In the previous chapters, we have established otaku as being a distinct subculture. With a deep understanding of the otaku ethic and what otaku actually do, it is now possible to present a simple but powerful picture summarizing the specific advantages of being otaku, followed by some of the potential disadvantages. Having these basic points in hand allows for reasoned discussion of otaku with non-otaku, something that is becoming more important as otaku are, for better or worse, spending more time in the limelight.

Reading the two lists below, whose items are not presented in any particular order, one should note that they apply to otaku in general, and not just anime otaku. The examples mentioned come from my observations of anime otaku, but the principles are hold true across different types of otaku (who have different core interests).

11.2 Ten reasons why it might be good to be an otaku

11.2.1 Otaku are media literate

In addition to their general proficiency with information technology, otaku have above average skills when it comes to reading complex media. While it is possible to be an

otaku regarding any subject or activity, certain subjects and activities are more likely to attract otaku personalities. Being an otaku of noodles is possible, but one is more likely to find otaku surrounding things like anime, comic books, science fiction, computers, trains, or even less geeky pursuits such as sports cars, baseball statistics, and high fashion. The one thing all those subjects have in common is that they are information rich subjects, with long histories, their own jargon, and sufficient complexity that experts are easily distinguishable from dilettantes. Like academics, otaku are drawn to topics that have require technical and/or arcane knowledge, and they quickly become proficient in that knowledge that is indecipherable to lay observers.

For example, certain anime characters designed to be 'moe' have particular characters that are meant to be instantly recognizable to anime otaku but would go completely unnoticed or misunderstood by non-otaku. The otaku, on the other hand, are able to understand the discrete aspects of the character design and how they work together to produce a coherent whole that evokes the 'moe' feeling.

Anime and manga are highly visual, and in order to tell stories within the constraints of still images on paper or a limited number of moving images on screen, a specific language of visual storytelling has evolved amongst anime and manga creators. Likewise, those creators who enjoy complex details themselves have added them to their works. In response, otaku watchers and readers have become expert at interpretation, akin to museum curators, able to dissect and analyze pieces and obsessed with cataloguing the different aspects of the work.

In short, otaku have an eye for detail and are able to process not only vast amounts of information, but information that is encoded for niche audiences.

11.2.2 Otaku are interested in new things as early adopters

Otaku are neophiles in the truest sense. Their lives are worthwhile to them because they constantly find new things to examine, even things that some would consider trivial. To otaku, old information is stale information. Whether by trying brand new things or by exploring old things in more detail, otaku constantly seek new data. When an otaku decides to stop searching temporarily, for that moment he or she is not an otaku. When an otaku decides to stop searching permanently, he or she stops being an otaku.

With this emphasis on novelty, otaku are some of the ultimate early adopters, finding things before they become trendy, and moving on to the next thing as soon as they do. This attitude makes them very valuable to cool hunters. They are the first to try new technologies and fit them into their lives in ways that were not necessarily expected by the creators of those technologies. For example, Fred Leggett was part of the early anime fansub scene. He told me about his initial forays into the technology that allowed fansubbing to exist as a practice:

> I HAD to invest in the technology. So, I did, by purchasing my first laserdisc player, a Pioneer unit. That eventually dominoed into buying an Amiga 500 and Supergen genlock, which gave me the capability to subtitle these shows onto tape in real-time. Alex Matulich was well on his way to writing the end-all, be-all subtitling application for the Amiga, the club was in need of first-generation, subbed shows to expand its library and presentation offerings, and I had amassed quite a few timed scripts by way of the BBS.

Otaku interest in novelty is not restricted to newly produced things, however. Novelty can also be found by re-imagining old things in new ways, unearthing material that will later become retro-chic, salvaging the past and recombining its knowledge and artifacts to create new expressions.

11.2.3 Otaku are savvy social networkers

Otaku are some of the most well-connected people around—not necessarily having the most close friends (people who would attend your funeral, for example), but in terms of loose-tie affiliations. These networks are made up of functional, as opposed to casual, relationships. For otaku, the primary purpose of knowing a lot of people is not to have companions to engage in small talk with at any given hour of the day or night. Instead, the large social networks are primarily used for information sharing, planning mutual activities, and the distribution of labor. Friendly banter does occur and deeper relationships do exist within otaku social networks, but those do not account for most people on any given user's network.

Given that otaku deal in information-rich subjects, they spend much of their time within their field of expertise. In closely related fields, their knowledge is good but not nearly as thorough. For less related fields, their knowledge drops off quickly. For people

without a social network to fall back on, having such a narrow focus could cause problems. For otaku, however, they are able to rely on the broad expertise that exists within their social networks, giving them a wide range of knowledge that is readily available to them. This distribution of intellectual capital allows them to hone their expertise without giving up the ability to address bigger concerns requiring more general knowledge.

In the age of search engines, such social networks of knowledge have become automated and slightly less necessary, but there is still value in human networks of knowledge, especially when the problems are particularly arcane and require unpublished information, or the help of experts who are able to work within specific contexts, work that is difficult to simulate using search engines or other computing techniques.

11.2.4 Otaku are discoverers and custodians of knowledge—society's unofficial experts

In describing the information practices and network usage of otaku, we have established the way in which they exist within an active knowledge culture, where individuals are expected to know a lot, have a willingness to learn more, and to contribute new information. All of these things are necessary in order to gain status as an otaku, to be taken seriously, and to gain access to further resources that allow an otaku to continue being an otaku, for whatever motivations he or she had to begin with.

The domains of otaku expertise are frequently mundane—elements of popular culture, for examples—but their knowledge is far from commonplace. It can usually be described as esoteric, things that most non-otaku would not find particularly interesting, but when those non-otaku are struck with a sudden and obsessive curiousity about, say, a certain television show they just watched, otaku are typically the ones who provide the knowledge they desire.

The selective release of information by otaku has already been discussed. While otaku may be custodians of knowledge, there is no guarantee they will actually share it with anyone. Their private collecting activities, therefore, might be considered of little practical value to society at large. On the other hand, by ensuring that information remains valuable as a commodity in a general sense, societies encourage otaku to share

their knowledge. According to the philosophy underlying American copyright law, content creators are encouraged to share, but are not expected to have purely altruistic motives. Copyright provides an incentive (certain exclusive, but temporary, rights), and as long as that incentive is protected, otaku hoarders and collectors will have a compelling motivation to make at least some of their knowledge public.

Others might criticize otaku for being interested in things that have no practical use, but some (including many otaku) would argue that otaku knowledge and expertise allow them to gain much within their own otaku communities. In other cases, otaku expertise gives them unique skills that are sometimes considered valuable, such as in the fields of high tech and mass media. Some otaku, for example, become members of the content producing industries that made the works they obsessed about as amateur fans. Some of these otaku even continue to interact with other otaku through public events such as conventions or via corporate blogging.

Finally, otaku expertise may be transferable in that the research skills needed by successful otaku are similarly useful in other activities that require research, including but not limited to buying computers, buying cars, or life planning in general.

11.2.5 Otaku are critical thinkers

Having and gaining knowledge is not enough to be a full-fledged otaku. Except in the case of deliberately misleading others, information has to be accurate in order for it to be useful. Given the vast amounts of data that exists on the internet, it is very easy for inaccurate information to propagate widely. Otaku take great care to ensure that the information they have and the information they publish is accurate. When wild and spurious assertions/assumptions are made on web forums, for example, otaku are quick to challenge and correct them, oftentimes citing resources to strengthen their arguments. Otaku intolerance for incorrect information is what frequently leads to heated flamewars and, in some cases, to whole Web sites devoted to criticizing misguided viewpoints. An otaku's ability to think critically (and to construct logical and persuasive arguments) is an important and highly valuable skill that can be applied in multiple areas of his or her life.

11.2.6 Otaku are discriminating consumers

At first glance, many would dismiss otaku as merely being pathological consumers, indiscriminately and recklessly buying worthless things instead of investing in their futures. Upon closer inspection, however, otaku consumption is not indiscriminate or reckless at all (though some might argue that it is pathological in other ways). Otaku, while they spend heavily on their objects of desire, typically do not buy things they are not heavily invested in, regardless of what other people think of those items. Given that there are so many products to buy, it is impossible for otaku to buy everything they are interested in, so they must make serious decisions regarding what and what not to buy, decisions that directly influence their identity as otaku. Otaku collections are not merely items that are meant to collect dust in a basement; they serve the greater purpose of allowing an otaku to remain active within the otaku community, whether by trading items, supplying information about those items, or even simply showing them off on the Web or elsewhere.

Otaku almost never buy items on impulse, preferring instead to do research beforehand, reading reviews, soliciting advice from others, and trying things out in advance before buying[193]. When one enters an otaku's home or room, it may seem that they collect a lot of useless junk, but one should also consider what things the otaku has deliberately chosen *not* to buy. One could make an argument against non-otaku, saying that even though they do not obsessively collect any objects in particular, they do buy a lot of things that do not hold serious and meaningful value to them. Un-researched and casual purchasing, or buying things according to popular trends, might therefore be considered the more wasteful form of consumption.

11.2.7 Otaku are adept at technology and use it for their own purposes

Because otaku utilize networks and are always looking for cutting edge information, they also tend to be adept with the latest consumer technologies. Otaku may or may not be early influencers when it comes to technology, but they are usually early adopters. Some otaku use new technology in order to further their other activities, putting them

[193] Many anime fans claim to use fansubs for exactly this purpose.

ahead of other otaku. Other otaku, on the other hand, are involved with the technology because it (the technology) is their primary object of interest. For these latter otaku, having and using new technology is a form of information.

Since most technologies are not designed with otaku in mind, it should also come as no surprise that otaku do not always use technologies in the ways they were intended, especially when we include various forms of media as types of technology. Otaku do not engage in typical activities, so their related use of technology is similarly atypical, whether that usage is more extreme in degree or qualitatively different. Otaku use the internet so heavily, for example, that they might be considered internet addicted by some. Other technologies are completely reworked and appropriated. IRC, which started as a protocol intended for internet users to chat, has been appropriated by otaku who now use IRC channels for filesharing (e.g. fansub distribution) purposes. Such channels often have many dozens of users, but with very few (or none) of them actually chatting with each other.

11.2.8 Otaku produce creative works, oftentimes remixing the work of others

In addition to their buying practices, network use, and knowledge culture, otaku also create original works of their own. Many of these are derivative works, interpreting and building upon the originals. In some cases, these works add value to the originals—keeping fans interested in the original media property, for example. Beyond that, however, these works are appreciated for their own merits within otaku communities where they are displayed and sometimes sold for money.

Otaku are adept at using technologies that allow works to be combined and remixed in interesting ways, resulting in new and new kinds of content that allow the otaku to exert a certain amount of control over the original material instead of just being passive consumers of it. The remixed versions also allow for new ways of reading and interpreting commercially-produced media, sometimes subverting it to produce biting criticisms that would be impossible without these remixed works.

Postmodernity has offered a serious challenge to the notion of purely original works, of creativity that does not rely on preexisting art[194]. Pablo Picasso's famous aphorism that "good artists copy, great artists steal" has never been so relevant in an age where access to information has become so easy, it has also becomes easier to notice that very few ideas are truly original. Otaku, on the other hand, have rarely concerned themselves with modernist notions of creativity. Instead, they have produced numerous works that exemplify what postmodern creativity is all about—combining preexisting and disparate elements to create new works. To otaku, therefore, all works are derivative, and their skills make them well-equipped to be postmodern artists and inventors.

11.2.9 Otaku do things on their own terms.

As discussed in Chapter 9, otaku culture manifests various forms of cultural resistance. In other words, otaku have found ways to exert control in their lives, not necessarily in large-scale ways, but via what Donna Haraway calls "modest interventions". Otaku resistance may be modest, but it is not meaningless or insignificant. Small acts may add up, or turn into larger-scale political action, whether that action is conducted by otaku themselves or those who have observed and been influenced by them.

11.2.10Otaku have fun

From my firsthand observations of otaku, they seem to enjoy what they are doing. Even some of the most labor-intensive work done by otaku is ultimately enjoyable to them because it is self-directed and motivated by their own interests. Outside of flamewars, online interactions tend to be friendly and cheerful, and conventions are essentially huge parties where like-minded otaku gather and enjoy each others' company (in addition to sharing and trading information, acquiring goods, and promoting themselves). For the most part, otaku seem to be a happy bunch, sometimes dissatisfied

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[194] Taking on the idea that everything within art has already been done, artists of postmodern bent instead produce and celebrate works that heavily utilize pastiche and bricolage, such as described by Michel de Certeau in his discussion of tactics utilized by the marginalized to locally and temporarily reclaim power. De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

and critical when they think it's appropriate, but never completely down on themselves[195]. Otaku realize they are different, but they often revel in that instead of letting it bother them.

11.3 Ten reasons why being an otaku might not be a good thing

Even when one downplays the negative stereotypes surrounding otaku, there are still some aspects of the otaku lifestyle that could be considered problematic in certain circumstances. Presented below are some reasons why being an otaku might lead to difficulties. Some might choose not to be otaku because of these reasons, while others—especially otaku and aspiring otaku—will keep them in mind to protect themselves.

11.3.1 Otaku are easily misunderstood

While not as radical in appearance or behavior as members of some other subcultures, otaku are nonetheless different and oftentimes noticeable by the non-otaku who make up the rest of society. In addition to "mainstream" Americans, members of other subcultures will sometimes misunderstand or disapprove of otaku behaviors. While I define otaku as reluctant insiders, they risk being marginalized after the fact, whether it is by others or themselves (as they seek to differentiate themselves from the masses and other subcultural groups). Sometimes, this self-marginalization may lead to poor self-esteem, guilt, and persecution complexes. Healthy otaku accept their subcultural status instead of wallowing in it, and maintain positive relations with non-otaku. Being marginalized by others may lead to witch-hunts, where otaku are blamed for society's problems, or viewed as a dangerous symptom of those problems.

11.3.2 Being an otaku is expensive and requires significant resources

Becoming an otaku is a form of middle class resistance because working class youth do not have the monetary resources and access to technology that are so crucial to being successful as an otaku. Even though otaku are discriminating consumers, they are consumers nonetheless, and they tend to consume heavily. This places a financial burden

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[195] American otaku, especially, seem happier about themselves than Japanese otaku, who feel more marginalized and resent their outsider status (according to popular media portrayals of otaku in Japan).

on many otaku who may be students or others without sufficiently high income to easily support their hobby. Even for those otaku who do have a lot of money, the money they spend on otaku goods could be spent elsewhere, on things that arguably matter more in the long run in terms of life success, such as buying a home, owning a car, investing in an advanced education, saving for the future, etc. One of my informants, a college student known as JJ, talked about his intense anime-related spending:

> I see a shirt/messenger bag going around that says "Anime: At least crack is cheaper" and it's kinda true if you really do buy into the whole thing. I had to give up other merchandise addictions to keep up my anime purchases. I never really buy cd's anymore. I stopped getting new upgrades for my computer. And I think I have enough clothing to last me for a couple decades so I stopped that too.

Otaku are known to sacrifice what others would consider necessities in order to further their involvement in otaku communities. These necessities might include healthy food and the proper clothing needed to make positive first impressions on prospective employers. In the case of JJ, he did not indicate that his addiction to anime was necessarily harmful, only that it replaced some of his other previous addictions (CDs, computer upgrades, and clothing).

A related criticism is that otaku are defined by their possessions, an idea that directly challenges whether or not otaku-style consumerism can truly be a form of resistance and personal empowerment. Otaku may or may not have an argument against this criticism, but from a sociological standpoint, our identities are constructed (or we are socialized) by the sum of our experiences, knowledge, environment, and genetics. Especially evident in the age of computer networks, our bodies are more than physical, more than our flesh and bone, and are profoundly social, consisting of fluid boundaries that blur the distinctions between our so-called "natural" selves and our interactions with the "outside" environment. As such, it is not farfetched to assert that our "possessions" are indeed part of us and our identity. As such, removing oneself from one's possessions may involve a profound loss of identity, as possessions might be said to also include knowledge and experience.

If possessions (or technology, for example) are part of us no matter what, one could argue that being deeply involved in choosing and acquiring one's possessions allows for

greater empowerment and self-directed identity formation than ignoring possessions altogether or acquiring them casually without emotional investment. People who buy things casually, for example, own a lot that does not hold much meaning for them; their identities are inhabited and constructed by disposable items. Otaku, on the other hand, construct their identities carefully by maximizing the meaning of their purchases, and given the importance of each item, they do not throw away, sell, or trade such items without much thought.

Otaku are not diminished or "owned" by their possessions because it is the *process* of acquisition, which is a process of growth that is more important than the possessions themselves. An otaku who does nothing but admire his or her static collection each day may indeed be said to be owned by his or her possessions. However, the otaku who constantly seeks to grow his or her collection carefully (not impulsively or casually) has an active identity that is greater than the sum of what he or she owns. The mere act of acquiring something new might diminish the (information) value of things that are already owned, or in other cases, new things may actually increase the value of already-owned things due to synergistic effects[196]. The complex relationship between acquiring items and its effect on information values makes the process of deliberation (regarding what to own next) all the more critical.

11.3.3 Otaku culture can be addictive

The otaku lifestyle might be viewed by some as being addictive. Otaku obsession with information, for example, might be considered a form of information addiction, with the otaku constantly looking for the next fix, damaging other aspects of his or her life in the process. Information addiction has only recently been identified and not much is known about it yet[197], but studies of otaku along with others who spend a great deal of time on the Internet, such as online role-playing gamers, may yield some important insights. The difficulty, of course, lies in determining what counts as addiction versus dedication. As

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[196] An example of such an effect would be buying something to complete a collection.

[197] Reuters. 1997. "Research Reveals Growing Danger of Information Addiction Worldwide" http://about.reuters.com/newsreleases/art_8-12-1997_id362.asp

technology transforms the landscape of everyday life, how is "normal" life to be defined, and how and why do we privilege certain concepts of "normal" in the first place?

Otaku themselves seem to be aware of the addictive potential of their activities and try to temper themselves when possible. Part of the otaku drive for information comes from the fact that otaku culture is so competitive and requires that its members have a deep knowledge of things that other otaku consider important. One anonymous informant who became an anime club officer explained:

> I'm not really as otaku as some of the others...I lacked a lot of knowledge about the culture of anime when i first joined. I didn't know anime terms like moe, otaku, etc.
>
> Since joining the club I think more about the culture and the genre, especially since I became an officer. I don't actively try to learn about it. I usually end up learning about it though through the people I hang out with. If there's something I want to know, then I do the research.

While she does not consider herself to be as otakuish as her peers, and therefore does not feel as strong a pressure to actively seek out knowledge of otaku culture, hanging out with otaku and becoming an officer in the anime club has apparently rubbed off on her, causing her to take anime and its fan culture more seriously.

Hardcore otaku have to keep working hard in order to stay ahead of the competition or at the very least keep up. This competitive zeal may contribute to the obsessive nature of otaku, and in some cases, otaku burn out because of it, especially those who find it difficult to be successful within the fast-moving, highly demanding, and oftentimes very critical world of otaku culture.

11.3.4 Otaku may suffer from tunnel-vision

This is a restatement of the Otaku's Dilemma described in the previous chapter. Depending on the intensity and scope of an otaku's interests, he or she might have difficulty seeing and understanding bigger picture concerns. Having an overly wide perspective prevents an otaku from acquiring deep knowledge, but spending all of one's time digging deeply prevents an otaku from noticing new information in other areas. How to create and maintain the optimal balance between one's deep focus versus general knowledge is the Otaku's Dilemma.

11.3.5 Otaku may have difficulty understanding or interacting with non-otaku

Otaku, even though they are not necessarily as socially stilted as some negative stereotypes make them out to be, nonetheless tend to be introverted and self-absorbed. They are far more interested in their own mental worlds than the worlds of other people. When meeting people who share similar interests, however, otaku are able to be pleasant and have no troubles with social interaction. Conversations between like-minded otaku tend to be about topics that they are all close to.

Difficulties occur when otaku meet people, especially non-otaku, who have wholly different interests. Even when an anime otaku meets a cat otaku, they share a common frame of reference based on the fact that they both engage in otakuish behaviors. An anime otaku who meets a non-otaku may be at a loss for words, as introverts are not usually good at small talk, and might not be interested in the non-otaku to even bother talking with him or her.

11.3.6 Amateur expertise is not always appreciated

Otaku have a lot of expertise in their fields of interest, but that expertise is not universally appreciated or taken seriously. Many people prefer professional expertise and are dismissive of otaku. Some professionals themselves also look down on amateurs who are seen as infringing upon their intellectual turf. In some cases, amateur expertise is better and more appropriate than professional expertise, but amateur experts have historically found it difficult (but not impossible) to be taken seriously.

11.3.7 Some otaku activities are of questionable legality

In seeking out hard to find information and appropriating works and recombining them to create new content, otaku often skirt the edge of the law, and sometimes go over that edge completely. Otaku morality is based more on ethical considerations than legal ones, though less lofty motivations such greed and selfishness may come into play when otaku decide to break the law. To some, therefore, otaku ethics are not much more than empty rationalizations of illegal and/or immoral behavior. Some otaku ignore such broad criticisms, evaluating their behaviors on a case by case basis, while others take the high ground, attempting to avoid illegal activity altogether.

11.3.8 Otaku creativity is viewed by some as empty

Derivative artworks created by otaku are viewed by some as being empty of originality, creativity, and innovation. According to this viewpoint, otaku works spend too much time referencing older works instead of coming up with and executing new ideas. Otaku counter that argument by saying that *all* works are derivative in some sense. Perhaps the more difficult and legitimate criticism of otaku creativity is that otaku works tend to reference other otaku works instead of branching out and using non-otaku works as inspiration and source material. In an interview with Leiji Matsumoto[198], one of Japan's premiere manga artists, he encouraged new manga creators to do more than just read and be inspired by manga. He himself studied non-manga technical manuals of all kinds, incorporating what he learned from those into his stories and art.

11.3.9 Otaku success does not always translate into success in other aspects of life

Although otaku skills and expertise are not inconsiderable and can be transferred to other activities, professional or otherwise, they are still somewhat limiting if one wishes to succeed in areas where the most successful people are very different from otaku (i.e. politicians, stage performers, and salesmen). An otaku might be very famous and productive regarding his or her object of interest, but such success does not necessarily mean that he or she will be good at other things. It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that otakuism causes one to fail at other aspects of living (some otaku are well-rounded and successful in multiple aspects of life, after all), but one should note that time devoted to otaku-related pursuits may hinder personal development in other areas that an individual may desire.

11.3.10Otaku are apolitical

Otaku, for all the resistance they manifest, are not political in any broad sense. Some otaku are not old enough to vote, but even for those who are, political debates are not common in otaku communities, and there seems to be a general sense of apathy regarding their privilege and responsibility to participate in the political process. That is

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[198] The Tokyo Foundation. 2006. "An interview with Leiji Matsumoto": http://www.tkfd.or.jp/eng/division/public/supercool/sc03.shtml

not to say, however, that the otaku phenomenon is completely devoid of social power (examples and discussion of otaku resistance were discussed in Chapter 9).

Furthermore, Lawrence Lessig (1999) highlights four ways in which things are regulated online, and that model may also be helpful to us as we attempt to interpret the impact of otaku culture on society. If otaku are to be viewed as meaningful social actors, it is due to the power they wield as consumers ('voting with their dollars'), the way in which their alternative social norms may find their way into mainstream consciousness ('the otakunization of humanity'), and the way that their technological artifacts (including the media content they produce) challenge the established order (that uses technologies and media content to exert control over societal behavior). In the legislative domain, however, otaku are conspicuously absent. Getting involved in lawmaking is too different from their preferred *Modus operandi*, which is appropriation.

11.4 Otaku as members of society

There are plusses and minuses to being an otaku in American society. How it ultimately plays out for individual otaku depends heavily on individual circumstance, personalities, and life goals. Keeping the positives in mind while remaining careful to avoid and protect oneself against the negatives, otaku can lead happy and productive lives. It is important to note that most of the positives and negatives mentioned in the previous section are not meant to *define* otaku (that is what the otaku ethic is for). Instead, those lists are based on my observations of otaku and what I think their strengths and weaknesses are. If otaku find themselves on the negative side of the spectrum, perhaps they ought to change and correct their behaviors (while still remaining otaku). There is no reason why being an otaku cannot be wholly positive (albeit, under ideal conditions).

Most people, however, are not hardcore otaku, and choose not to be so. However, perhaps they will come to accept otaku as having a legitimate and possibly important role in society, or at least tolerate them as a relatively benign subculture, as opposed to being a sign of everything that is wrong with American youth (as otaku in Japan were once viewed in the late 1980s and early 1990s). Knowing about otaku culture may provide us with some insights on the lives and choices made by non-otaku and the structural features of society that lead people to become otaku in the first place. In the

process, we may gain more tools to help us understand the ways in which American youth are developing identities for themselves.

The lessons we can learn from otaku have never been more relevant and far-reaching. Increased access to the internet and recent developments in Web technology have resulted in changes to daily life that are only beginning to be studied and understood. Otaku have always been at the forefront of those technologies, and studies of otaku culture have a lot to say about the current state and future of our networked society.

12.Conclusion

12.1 The intersection of otaku and faith

Unlike all the chapters preceding this one, I am writing this in a place as far removed from otaku culture as one could imagine. It is a sunny and humid day here at The Most Blessed Sacrament, a Catholic friary (much like a monastery) in a rough neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey. My wife, 13-month-old son, and I are visiting my brother-in-law, Paulo, who is a novitiate brother here at the friary. The brothers here live a strict religious life, characterized by much self-reflection, prayer, and solitude, but sharing meals, chores, and five sessions of communal prayer every day starting as early as 6:30 in the morning. There is no television, no personal telephones, no newspapers, no computers, and no internet. The brothers live simple, regimented, and secluded lives, except when they go out to offer service to the local community where they are treated with respect, despite the fact that the neighborhood is known to be somewhat dangerous, with frequent incidents of gang violence. While the brothers have immersed themselves fully into their faith and most will eventually take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, one does not get the sense that they have retreated from the world. In fact, their entire purpose is founded upon the idea that the world is in need of salvation, and through prayer, mission work, and conversion of non-Christians to Catholicism, they seek to spread their message to those who would listen and thus be saved. In seeking out sites of resistance, therefore, one only needs to spend a few hours at the friary speaking with the brothers to understand how deeply they are troubled by the ills of the world. Even though their version of what the *status quo* is differs from the *status quo* described by social reformers within certain domains of politics and academia, the Franciscan friars definitely see societal changes that need to be made.

When I say that the friary is far different from the world of otaku who are heavily invested in worldly things, I am not saying that the brothers are retreating from and rejecting the world in favor of heaven, as that is not the case. Instead, they are retreating from and rejecting certain *products* of the world—man-made worldly possessions that they feel distract them from higher truth, and have the potential to corrupt minds, even amongst those who are strong-willed. The friars, therefore, are a subculture of resistance,

but they are the opposite of otaku whose resistance is manifest within their heavy consumption of worldly products. The worldviews are not wholly incompatible, but the methods are very different, so much so that I found it awkward explaining my work to the brothers who asked me about it. We clearly agreed that technology unchecked and unquestioned could and does impact people's lives negatively. But when I spoke of otaku as being super-fans of worldly things (such as television shows) as a form of resistance (against passive consumerism and the social control that is implicit in that), I felt very self-conscious and received some inquisitive looks from brothers who had long ago forsaken things like television. I don't know what the brothers ultimately thought of otaku strategies of resistance, but the obvious question that comes to mind is which approach is better—that of the otaku, or that of the friars?

I do not think that can be judged objectively. In terms of my own personality, I identify with otaku far more than those who choose the religious life. I am used to working in my home office where I have multiple computers and even more computer monitors to aid me in my work which involves constantly being connected to the internet, absorbing many dozens of pages of new information every day and seeking to make meaning out of that. I typically have at my disposal a large library of books I can use and reference, and again, the internet provides me with even more that is only a few keystrokes away. I use media of all types, and my working space is surrounded by anime posters that even adorn my ceiling. In my exploration into otaku culture, that was the level of immersion I wanted, creating an information dense space in "real life", and then doing the same online via my Web site and the online communities I participated in.

As I write this, I am literally sitting in a cell in a monastery. In this tiny room, there is only a modest desk and chair, a box spring and mattress, one desk lamp, one wall-mounted lamp, a simple shelf, a radiator (but no air conditioning), a small fan, and a crucifix on the wall. Looking into the rooms of the other brothers, they are mostly the same, with perhaps a few books on desks and shelves. The brothers usually sleep on the floor on a mat made of blankets. I have a nice window that opens out into the courtyard below, and I was able to plug in my laptop for power, but I am far from the internet and have not checked my email or visited a Web site in three days, which feels like an eternity for someone like me. This is a very different life from what I am used to, but I

do not find it oppressive in the least. On the contrary, it is quite peaceful and meditative, and it is easy to gather one's thoughts far from the noise and annoying hum that is omnipresent in our heavily wired society.

The brothers themselves are not taciturn and withdrawn at all. Instead, they are extroverted, friendly, and boisterous, laughing and smiling often and with ease, even though they take their faith and the plight of the world very seriously. I have come to deeply respect their way of resistance, even though it is not what I am used to, which is why I do not judge it as 'better' or 'worse' than what otaku do.

Seeing their daily life, I know I could not be a brother, even if I had stronger religious inclinations. For all the problems I see in society, I also like it a lot, including those popular media technologies like television which many enlightened people tell us will rot our brains, prevent families from bonding, and make us passive sheep to be controlled by advertisers and spin doctors. I respect the sentiments behind parents who refuse to let their children watch TV, and campaigns that encourage people to leave their TVs off for a day or a week to see what positive life changes will occur. I respect those sentiments, but I don't agree that their strategy is a universally good one, and certainly not for myself.

My wife and I have an ongoing discussion about the place of television and other media in the life of our son. I am of the opinion that my son will be an active consumer of popular culture and mass media, and he will be strongly encouraged to be highly engaged, as opposed to being only a casual watcher/observer. The monastic life, devoid of access to mass media and popular culture, is a legitimate alternative, but one that requires a person to deliberately isolate oneself from worldly and, in my opinion, important conversations and actions that could positively effect change where it is greatly needed.

To be fair, the Franciscan friars will be the first to tell you that their way of life is not for everyone, and those who join do not always stay if they are "called elsewhere" (as a brother might put it). The Catholic Church is a large and diverse organization, and it has branches that are far more secular than religious orders such as the Franciscans. My brother-in-law, Brother Paulo (whose given name is Paul), explained to me how he believed that everyone is called to serve in different ways, that even though he and his

fellow brothers might be unable to effect change in certain sectors of society, other Catholics (in the business world, for example, or at more mainstream parishes) are called to do just that. That informal organization model makes sense to me, and it may help us to understand the way in which different subcultures and subcultural actions, despite not being universally perfect and self-contained solutions to living, might be able to coexist and be strong and effective in areas where others are weak.

Before I give the impression that otaku and religious life are simply two sides of the same coin, I need to clarify that they are in fact very different at heart. Although they exist at two ends of a spectrum defining means of resistance, they are also different in terms of their fundamental attitude. Very often, people will see otaku obsessiveness as bordering on or being another type of cult-like fanaticism. The idea of otaku as being 'cult' fans further contributes to such a perception. However, while those in religious life focus heavily on dogma and received truth, otaku are exactly the opposite[199]. Dogma, or information that is widely available and well-known, is of little importance to otaku who instead favor novelty—information that is different from what is known and available. New knowledge acquired from difficult and/or skillful processes of discovery is valued more highly than knowledge received from authorities upon high. Even the Otaku Ethic, intended to solidify vague notions of what counts as otaku, is intentionally open-ended. Information, as we have seen, is relative and non-absolute. Networks change in character over time, and new networks form all the time. Resistance takes different forms depending on the circumstances, and appropriation can apply to many different things in many different circumstances. The Otaku Ethic, therefore, expands the scope of inquiry surrounding otaku as much as it delimits it.

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[199] This brings up the question of whether adhering to a philosophy that rejects received truth is itself dogmatic, and evokes philosophical debates regarding the differences between science and religion. Some consider science as being its own form of religion with its own set of dogmatic truths. (See Phillip Johnson's *Darwin on Trial,* 1993). Others view scientific enterprise, where all truth is held as provisional at best, as being fundamentally different from those religious beliefs that are said to be absolutely true. One starting point for this debate is Popper's discussion of what separates science from pseudoscience, where the latter starts with certain truths and adjusts all data acquired to fit into the pre-established worldview. See Karl Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963).

It is important that we distinguish obsessive otaku from those who belong to cults surrounding commodities. When all is said and done, otaku do not give themselves fully to their objects of obsession; they do not make the final leap from fan to fanatic (though outside observers might disagree). They use those objects with great seriousness insofar as they have information value *at the time*. Subcultures, otaku included, whose products and activities become co-opted by the mainstream move onto other things in order to remain subcultural. Otaku culture, therefore, is dynamic and has no closure—no final destination or goal. Otaku exist, by definition, at the frontiers of knowledge. In order to navigate those uncharted waters, otaku have appropriated technoscientific philosophies and networks of knowledge and information. Like science as it exists within the halls of academia, otaku culture is a form of organized skepticism that is simultaneously about the growth of knowledge.

Otaku culture, therefore, provides a model for lay people (non-accredited scientists) to approach information critically but with an open mind, retaining an attitude of wanting to learn more about the world as opposed to retreating from it[200]. How to approach information has been and will continue to be a crucial skill in today's information society where data, though more accessible than ever, is fragmented, thrown out-of-context, fraught with error, and easily misleading (either by accident or by intention). Otaku also offer up some novel solutions to the problem of how to strategically respond to (and avoid being controlled by) advertising and marketing, both of which are becoming increasingly sophisticated (informed by cutting-edge social science research) and ubiquitous in the information ecology inhabited by middle class Americans.

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[200] Outside the context of subcultures, there also exist more formal movements that encourage critical thinking, such as The Foundation and Center for Critical Thinking: http://www.criticalthinking.org/ . The main difference, of course, is that such institutions teach critical thinking and encourage its broad application, whereas participating in otaku subculture may teach or encourage critical thinking skills without ever mentioning those skills explicitly. Encouraging youth to participate in critical subcultures, therefore, may have an indirect educational benefit, such as described by Mizuko Ito (2002) and Julian Sefton-Green (2003).

Otaku, like the Franciscan friars I wrote about in the beginning of this chapter, are reluctant insiders who seek to change the *status quo* of society—the friars adopting a basic strategy of severe disengagement with technology (especially mass media), and otaku adopting a basic strategy of intense engagement with said technology. I have already described the ways in which otaku, unlike the friars, resist dogma, but it is especially important to understand that dogma exists well beyond monastery walls. There now exists a powerful group of technorati prophesizing and actively crafting the future of the internet. They are motivated by a fresh dogmatic ideal (informed by the tenets of Cyberlibertarianism and inspired by new technological capabilities) that only a few have begun to seriously question. It is in this domain, this new cultural battlefield that will define the nature of information in society, that otaku may yet have something important to say.

12.2 The new religion of information

In "Mythinformation", Langdon Winner (1986) sought to dispel some of the common myths regarding the societal changes that people proclaimed would occur with widespread access to and use of computers and information. One of his primary arguments was that there are no guarantees that widespread computerization and access to information will result in a more participatory and democratized society where social equality prevails. He writes:

> Current developments in the information age suggest an increase in power by those who already had a great deal of power, an enhanced centralization of control by those already prepared for control, an augmentation of wealth by the already wealthy. Far from demonstrating a revolution in patterns of social and political influence, empirical studies of computers and social change usually show powerful groups adapting computerized methods to retain control...Thus, if there is to be a computer revolution, the best guess is that it will have a distinctly conservative character. (107)

Winner acknowledges that such trends may be altered, but also cautions that the techno-optimists who write about the so-called "computer revolution" rarely consider the difficult obstacles that stand in the way of a technology-mediated open society. Instead, those authors are more likely to presume that social progress will flow naturally and

inevitably from technical progress in the domain of computers and other information technologies.

In these early years of the 21st Century, we do see highly motivated and politically active movements to ensure that the computer revolution does indeed bring power to everyday people, increase participation, and make society more democratic. Cyberlibertarians, as I have described previously, are at the forefront of that movement, and those of us who share in their values may commend them for their sincere and good-faith efforts to keep technologies like computers and the Internet as free as possible, not just in the sense of being monetarily inexpensive, but free in the sense of unfettered expression, of destabilizing authoritarian and centralized power structures, subverting forms of social control and putting power into the hands of ordinary citizens who will ideally work and be bound together in decentralized networks where information is available to all.

For all its good intentions, however, the Cyberlibertarian movement contains some of its own dogmatic viewpoints regarding the future of the internet—viewpoints that are new, attractive, and full of utopian promise. Unfortunately, those viewpoints are only rarely challenged or critically examined in detail. Some of the more vocal critics of the movement are derided or dismissed as being alarmists or accused of taking a stance against technology (and therefore progress) in general. While Cyberlibertarianism has evolved into a powerful grassroots movement, a similarly powerful grassroots movement has *not* arisen to provide an alternative to the Cyberlibertarian worldview. Opposition to Cyberlibertarianism mostly takes the form of those large and powerful corporate and government interests that feel directly threatened by notions of decentralized power and control. Grassroots movements providing alternatives to Cyberlibertarian thinking are underdeveloped, at best. Those who have not been exposed to Cyberlibertarian rhetoric and/or those who *have* been exposed to corporate campaigns against Cyberlibertarianism may find themselves generally on the side of corporate interests, but are rarely part of any subcultural movement that seeks to challenge problematic Cyberlibertarian precepts.

Otaku culture at the time of this writing does not constitute a powerful social movement, but if there is to be a truly informed good-faith discussion of the issues and proposed policies put forth by the Cyberlibertarian movement, there needs to be an

equally powerful, informed, and non-dogmatic counter-movement that is non-corporate and non-governmental in nature. Otaku culture could either become that counter-movement, or at the very least inform it to a high degree. As discussed in Chapter 7, otaku information philosophy differs significantly from the information philosophy held by Cyberlibertarians, making them an ideal foil to fully work out Cyberlibertarian ideas and proposals instead of zealously buying into them simply because technology makes those ideas and proposals possible. In the following section, we will examine how otaku perspectives may shed new light on current issues in information technology.

12.3 Otaku and the future of information

In a later article, Winner himself sought to deconstruct various cyberlibertarian myths[201]. His critique focuses heavily on the unfulfilled promises of Cyberlibertarianism, the ways in which the movement overestimates and over exaggerates the power of its ideals to actually effect social change against serious resistance from the powers that be. Furthermore, he questions whether or not Cyberlibertarian conceptions of virtual community result in any worthwhile communities at all, and while online commerce (such as Web-based bookstores) may offer numerous advantages over brick-and-mortar stores, Winner asserts that not enough attention is being paid to what is being lost in the process (i.e. real human interaction between members of real communities that are diverse but are also bound together by shared resources and mutual obligation).

I have participated in enough "virtual communities" to agree that most of them barely qualify as communities except according to very loose standards. I have, however, participated in more than one online community where I felt a true connection with other users and made close friends that I would not hesitate to meet in person. Such communities are the exception, to be sure; few programmers are brave enough and possess the necessary human insight to create community software that truly fosters meaningful relationships between strangers on the internet, but the task is far from impossible. For introverts like me, or people who otherwise feel isolated for any reason (geography, social stigma, physical handicap, etc.), virtual communities done right offer

[201] Winner, Langdon. 1997. "Cyberlibertarian myths and the prospects for community". *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society*. 27(3): 14-19.

a lot of promise that I still believe in, even if most people (including heavy internet users) have not yet experienced such communities firsthand.

Winner's criticisms of the unfulfilled promises of Cyberlibertarianism are compelling, but I think we can take them even further. Instead of just questioning the movement's (in)ability to gain significant traction against powerful interests, we should also question what will happen if the movement actually succeeds. Of course, I am a proponent of things such as participatory democracy, decentralized control, free speech, and civil liberties, but simply naming those things does not give us anything more than vague concepts. The devil, as they say, is in the details, and the Cyberlibertarian movement, should it succeed, will have very specific implications, and the resulting freedom we may gain may not be what we expected, and it will almost certainly be accompanied by a host of unintended consequences. In his example of online bookstores, Winner touches on this—the hidden costs of success on the Cyberlibertarian front. The movement has progressed much further than putting bookstores online, and we are forced again to look at the possible negative consequences of Cyberlibertarian "success".

High speed networks, rapidly growing data storage capacity, and new software paradigms that allow new forms of online interaction are changing the very nature of what counts as information, and that may be the biggest revolution of them all. Cyberlibertarianism has gained significant momentum, so much so that many corporate and government interests are beginning to fall into line, or at least are starting to recognize the money-making (and/or surveillance) possibilities inherent in tapping into technologies favored by Cyberlibertarians. Otaku, though fragmented and disappointingly apolitical at this time, may offer a necessary voice of dissent, not questioning so much the inability of Cyberlibertarianism to succeed, but questioning whether the proposed changes are actually positive. Otaku, whether they know or it or not, have a serious stake in the future of information.

There are many current trends informed by Cyberlibertarian ideals that are reconfiguring our understandings of information in everyday life. The most significant of those trends are related to technologies that require a serious reconsideration of how to deal with intellectual property. In discussing the information philosophy of otaku, I

explained how otaku are engaged in information sharing activities, but retain a strong ethic in favor of intellectual property. Fansubs, even though they appear (at first glance) to represent a culture of unmitigated information sharing, are actually produced and distributed according to strict guidelines defined by the norms of otaku culture. Those guidelines place significant value on the exclusive rights of creators and copyright holders.

Cyberlibertarians, on the other hand, with their philosophy of information wanting to be free and cheap, often protest the unnaturalness and general undesirability of artificial scarcity—that is, deliberately limiting access to goods and services even though they are (or easily could be) widely abundant. Given the ease of copying and storing digital information, all protections of said information (whether those protections are legal and/or technical) are thereby viewed as enforcing artificial scarcity. Otaku, who value information differently from Cyberlibertarians, have fewer problems with the concept of artificial scarcity. For otaku, artificial scarcity is not just a government/corporate conspiracy to keep control over information in order to maintain social control and/or to keep wealth out of the hands of the masses. In addition to the basic philosophy behind intellectual property law that seeks to ensure that content creators are properly compensated for their work (via incentives such as temporary exclusive rights to publish and perform their works, plus the right to create derivative works), otaku understand that scarcity—artificial or otherwise—is necessary for information to have high value. Unrestricted abundance devalues all information.

Otaku attitudes regarding intellectual property such as anime also extend to other artworks produced by professionals and fans alike. In general, even though otaku may engage in their fair share of copyright infringement (even more than the average person, since otaku have the technological knowledge and means to do it), they are also likely to self-justify their behavior as aligning with the aims and spirit of copyright laws, even if they are breaking the letter of those laws. An example of this is when anime fans who download fansubs talk about buying more anime in the future when they can afford it, as opposed to those people who download music illegally with the rationale that nobody should have to pay for music, or that musicians only deserve to be paid for their live performances and not the sales of compact discs.

In trying to understand the difference between otaku attitudes towards intellectual property versus Cyberlibertarian attitudes, perhaps we can note that Cyberlibertarians are very often amateur computer programmers who do not write software for a living. Programs that are easily copied are not considered highly protected intellectual property. Those programs that *are* copy-protected and cost a lot of money are not always looked upon well by the hacker community. The intellectual property Cyberlibertarians create, therefore, is very different from the intellectual property they like to consume, such as music, movies, and books.

Otaku, however, are heavily involved in more traditional forms of intellectual property: TV shows, movies, music, drawn artworks, books, etc. Instead of just being consumers of these things, their heavy involvement in those things makes them co-producers of a sort. Having made an effort to learn about the context of production behind the products they love, they have a real sympathy towards the official creators of content. Furthermore, otaku engagement also includes amateur production of their own derivative works, making otaku even closer in spirit to professional content creators. Some extreme Cyberlibertarians make the argument that intellectual property is not real property at all, cannot be truly "stolen" (since illegal copying and distribution of said property does not deprive the original owner of anything), and does not merit paying money for. Otaku, who have dedicated so much time and energy to the intellectual property of others as well as creating so much of their own, might wonder why anyone would have such a dismissive attitude towards intellectual property, but then, computer programmers have seldom been viewed as artists in the same way that illustrators, filmmakers, writers, and musicians have.

Certain intellectual property laws in the United States are clearly in need of reform, or at least serious rethinking, especially in the domains of patent law, the length of copyright terms, and the difficulties of claiming Fair Use—especially when there is a real risk that a corporate entity may sue you if it does not acknowledge that your use was indeed 'fair'[202]. With regards to the new digital environment, however, there exists a

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[202] Even when the corporations are wrong, the prospect of expensive lawsuits is enough to create a chilling effect where people are afraid to exercise their Fair Use rights. When that happens, the corporations have

whole new set of challenges to intellectual property law that are heavily connected to new technological capabilities. With new technologies, in other words, Cyberlibertarians are claiming that new laws are necessary to accommodate the new technical capabilities, and those who would create new laws to protect against misuses of those capabilities are accused (at worst) of catering to the *status quo* preferred by the power elite, and (at best) of trying to stuff the proverbial genie (technological change) back into the bottle. These new challenges to intellectual property law need to be considered very carefully and counter-challenged where appropriate, especially when we consider that the radical changes being proposed are based on a possibly overzealous faith in the technology and a strong adherence to a philosophy that is convinced that sharing information widely will naturally benefit society. Otaku, in response, may offer up a voice of reasoned restraint[203]. Their voice is important not because they preach restraint from the perspective of those who avoid new technologies at all costs, but because their policy of restraint comes from the ironic position of being some of the earliest and heaviest adopters of all sorts of new technology.

There are numerous IT intellectual property issues and debates that might benefit from an otaku perspective. In addition to the aforementioned issue of illegally sharing copyrighted content (such as via peer-to-peer networks), related issues include the role of The Internet Archive[204], Google caching and image thumbnailing, and Google's digital book project. All of these issues represent Cyberlibertarian success stories, and not just unfulfilled promises. In each case, information has been made freer, but we must also ask 'what have we lost in the process?'

The Internet Archive is a project intended to keep a record of the Web as it evolves. Web pages are typically more ephemeral than print media. Pages change, get added, and

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even further incentive to pursue lawsuits they would lose if the defendants actually had the resources and motivation to stand up to them.

[203] It is important to note that such an attitude of restraint does not necessarily imply that otaku subculture is conservative, *per se*. The political dimensions surrounding Cyberlibertarian concerns (and libertarianism, in general) are complex. As such, one can not presume that opposition and/or alternatives to Cyberlibertarianism can simply be classified as being "conservative".

[204] http://www.archive.org

are removed, such that the Web in 1996 looked very different to what the Web looks like in 2006. While copies of copyrighted books presumably make it into the Library of Congress for safekeeping, Web sites can disappear very easily, and if nobody made an archival copy, that piece of our culture would disappear forever. Similarly, books cannot be changed easily. When new editions are published, old editions are (for all intents and purposes) available for those who want to see the original, perhaps to compare the two versions. When a Web site changes, and it has not been archived, the original version is also lost forever. The Internet Archive, therefore, scours the Web for pages and archives them according to date such that for any given Web page, the Archive may contain many different versions of the page. Clearly, this is a very useful service and has an important role in preserving our culture. One major problem, however, is that it may infringe upon the rights of the page authors/publishers.

Critics of the archive are few and far between, but their main concern is not insignificant. The problem with the archive, they assert, is that the archive collects and republishes Web pages without explicit permission from the copyright holders (usually the site owners). The actual archiving itself is not generally considered problematic, because anyone with a Web browser may easily copy a Web page to his or her own computer[205]. It is the republishing of Web content without permission that has some observers and critics wondering how and why the Internet Archive is able to get away with what would normally be considered an egregious and massively large-scale breach of copyright. Archiving Web pages without republishing them would still allow the archive to fulfill its purpose of preventing the loss of our cultural heritage. To avoid any legal ambiguity, the archive could wait until the copyright terms of the archived Web pages expire before republishing them. Republishing the work without waiting for that to happen certainly provides a useful service, but at what cost? What about the exclusive rights of the original content creators? Having multiple copies of a Web page on the internet may devalue the original content, and provide less incentive for such content to be made in the first place. A person who published something on the Web but no longer

[205] In fact, due to the caching mechanisms of most modern browsers, users making local copies of Web pages is a very common occurrence.

wants to have it available on the internet may have to deal with unauthorized copies still being available on the Internet Archive. Does the Internet Archive therefore set a dangerous precedent?

In response to such criticisms, proponents of the archive point to how valuable and unique a service it provides. Also, the archive uses automated processes to collect and republish Web pages, and is run without the intention of making a profit. All of these things taken together are used to assert that the archive's practices clearly fall under the rubric of Fair Use, though others would argue that the archive is really pushing (or breaking) the envelope of what counts as Fair Use. Further complicating the situation is the fact that those who do not want to have their Web pages archived may opt out of it by sending an email to the archive administrators. While this is an acceptable out for some, others argue that this is very different from how copyright works in just about every other domain, where all works are protected and cannot be used by others without *explicit* permission from the copyright holder. Having to opt-out of the Internet Archive creates a situation where the archive assumes that copyright holders have given them *implicit* permission, and will not curtail their archiving/republishing activities unless they are told not to. Having to opt out of all such services may provide an undue burden on the part of the copyright holders, but having to ask for permission might also place an undue burden on those who run the archive.

How these conflicting interests will play out in the long run will be determined in the courts, but in the meantime, in terms of public opinion, generalized support from otaku of copyright holders may be a necessary countervailing force against those who argue that the archive is necessarily a utopian force for good. Some extreme Cyberlibertarians even make the argument that information on the internet, by the very nature of its network architecture, is meant to be shared, and to artificially (by means of additional technologies or legal restrictions) prevent unmitigated sharing is an aberration that goes against the very point of the technology. Those who want free content benefit the most from this techno-deterministic worldview, but those otaku who have vested interests in the protection of their own intellectual property and that of others reject that deterministic view of the so-called "nature" of the internet. Otaku have developed complex and rigidly enforced social norms regarding what is appropriate use of

information technology within their communities. Even though the technology would enable them to do a lot more than they are currently doing (e.g. in terms of pirating copyrighted content), otaku show a remarkable level of restraint, understanding, and exploration of the consequences of their actions on the information ecology that they use and inhabit.

Other intellectual property issues that are being debated and might benefit from otaku insights include those surrounding certain technologies deployed by Google. I already mentioned Google earlier in terms of the search engine's PageRank mechanism and how that affects information and networks on the Web. Other Google services, however, deal more explicitly with the intellectual property owned by others. The Google Cache, for example, is quite similar to the Internet Archive. When a site goes down temporarily, Google will usually keep a recently cached copy of that site so people can visit it during the downtime[206]. Like the Internet Archive, the Google Cache archives and republishes content without permission, but also provides a useful service to the community, it completely automated, and allows individual page owners to opt out of the service. The intellectual property issues are similar to those encountered when dealing with the Internet Archive. The same can be said regarding Google's Digital Books project, where they are trying to digitize as many books as possible so that they may be searchable online. Organizations representing American publishing interests are trying to sue Google, but again, we will have to see how that plays out in the courts, and otaku once again may provide some insight into the matter from a non-corporate perspective that does not necessarily believe that all information should be digitized and easily shared, whether they are Web pages, books, or images[207]. In addition to solving fewer problems than some would hope for, information abundance might simply be less desirable (in certain cases) than information scarcity, "artificially"-created or not.

Another major trend informed by Cyberlibertarian ideals has to do with the value of collaborative works versus those created by single authors. (One example of this was discussed in Chapter 8). Previous discussions regarding written works in the electronic

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[206] Cached versions of pages are also available when the original page is not down.

[207] See Google versus "Perfect 10": http://www.technewsworld.com/story/qECCPPOun6rHjL/Sides-Line-Up-in-Google-Perfect-10-Fight.xhtml

age focused on the formats within which those works would be presented. At that time, the idea of reading text online was a fairly new phenomenon for most people, and the main question was whether or not physical books would be replaced by online ones. Now that online text has become commonplace, the emphasis has shifted. The current debate has more to do with changing notions of authorship. The new Web, Cyberlibertarian prophets proclaim, will be one in which information is no longer presented by singular authoritarian sources. Static books that cannot be edited after the fact will become a thing of the past. Books that only have one author will be replaced by highly collaborative works, where everyone has a say regarding content and editorial decisions. Expert opinions are not worth as much as aggregated and averaged opinions representing "the wisdom of the crowd". Working together is almost always better than working alone, and opening up the process to everyone at all steps along the way benefits everyone in addition to the quality of the work itself.

There is certainly something positive to be said about collaborative works. Working together can be more fruitful than working alone; civil society would be impossible without it. Synergy may be a buzzword, but it is also a real phenomenon with desirable effects. Likewise, "the wisdom of the crowd", can be useful when it means that people can share information that helps others. It is useful to know, for example, when a book sold online has received a large number of bad reviews. Perhaps those reviews are not made by experts, but the sheer quantity of reviews makes the data more reliable, and most readers are not experts anyway, so expert advice might be inappropriate in that context. In hunting for an apartment recently, I benefited greatly from online reviews telling me that my first choice was much worse than I thought, and that the management was poor (something I had guessed on my own, but was confirmed by the experiences of others).

Also, having access to online information that is fresh and up to date may make printed books seem antiquated, obsolete as soon as they are printed. Printing the books prevents changes from being made, and therefore the quality of the work (good or bad) is set in stone. Corrections, either by the author or readers, are impossible unless another edition is printed, but that can take a long time and it is expensive to reprint books, not to

mention the generally prohibitive cost of buying a replacement book for an outdated edition. Online works that are easily editable completely sidestep that problem.

In addition, single "expert" authors are not always trustworthy. It is easy to pass oneself off as an expert, and any expert on a topic will be invested in how people understand that topic, making the expert an impartial witness, and possibly possessing an agenda. Since the expert author benefits from people agreeing with his or her opinion, there may be an inherent conflict of interest. Arguably, amateurs (without that conflict of interest) who work together to publish information on a subject are able to produce more trustworthy texts. Oftentimes, they do it for free, taking money out of the equation, making them even more trustworthy in many people's eyes.

There is a lot going for the Cyberlibertarian worldview that favors collaboration and dynamic texts. It is unfortunate, however, that the older forms of print media are presented as being so anachronistic. New incarnations of textual information can certainly benefit society, but the older forms deserve recognition as well, and a society without them will be much poorer. Again, there are some critics of this new Cyberlibertarian vision of information, but not much of a grassroots movement, and here too otaku may play an important role. Otaku, being experts themselves, may point out that singular expert opinions are being undervalued in favor of projects with many collaborators. While it is true that experts may have agendas, it is a mistake to think that people in collaborative situations necessarily write from completely neutral points of view. Writing is never objective, and it is often very difficult to tell when someone (who is a joint author on a collaborative work) is intentionally and subtly trying to alter public perception of a topic. More frequently, author bias is introduced subconsciously. When it comes to writing, this comes with the territory, but people presume that authors of collaborative works are somehow less motivated by agendas when that is not necessarily the case. In fact, those with agendas can influence collaborative works without the fear of being singled out as biased sources of information. Even if a work by a single expert author is full of subjective bias, at least the reader knows exactly what is being said by whom. Single author works, even if they are not more or less trustworthy than collaborative works, can at least be held accountable in a way that collaborative works cannot.

Furthermore, it is strange to consider that those who are most invested in a topic are the ones who are most discouraged from writing about it[208]. While there may be a conflict of interest, is it wise that we discourage people who have really studied a subject and made it part of their lives from sharing their insights with others? It is true that they benefit directly (monetarily or otherwise) from people agreeing with their perspectives, but is the alternative (relying on disinterested and amateur scholars to provide information) really a better solution? In the American political system, most agree that partisan politics with as many self-interested voices as possible is the only reasonable way to govern a diverse population with needs that are frequently in conflict with each other. Instead of encouraging disinterested non-experts (amateur or professional) to contribute to collaborative works so that objective texts can be produced, we should be encouraging more impassioned experts to make their viewpoints known so that many points of view will be represented in the larger public discourse and important issues can be hotly debated instead of presented in sterile fashion. In other words, we should be encouraging otaku expertise, with their emphasis on elite information, meritocracy, and hierarchies, as opposed to knowledge that is based on what everyone (on a level playing field) knows. Common sense, being altogether too common, is not enough.

Collaborative texts that are dynamic and easily editable have their place, but so do "static" works with single authors. The latter represent the perspectives of fewer people localized within a specific period in time, but that does not make them less valuable. On the contrary, such works are very valuable for those (i.e. otaku, academics, and others) who seek specific historical perspectives. What everyone is thinking right now on any given subject is useful, but so are the thoughts of a single author writing from his or her own uniquely personal perspective at a fixed point in history. It is good when information sources are updated and corrected, but not at the cost of history. In that sense, Wikipedia does at least one thing right; the site keeps copies of and makes available all the changes that are made to it.

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[208] Wikipedia has such a policy

12.4 Expanding the scope of otaku engagements

Information technology will continue to evolve, and otaku are amongst those who will feel the first effects of those changes. As other more active social movements and the forces of American commerce seek to change the landscape of our information ecosystem, otaku will either ride out those changes and adapt in silence, or they will become more vocal and give much needed alternative feedback so that the debate does not become only two-sided. It is difficult to predict what will happen. As otaku communities expand, perhaps that will provided impetus for them to mobilize and orchestrate new forms of collective social action. Yet, while the stereotype of the isolated, lonely, and ineffectual individual otaku has surely been debunked, it is still difficult to imagine large groups of otaku expanding out of their insular communities to effect broader social changes. Something major would have to happen (i.e. new legislation, a moral panic, and/or stronger enforcement of existing laws) to make otaku shift from engaging in oblique resistance to engaging in actual participatory democracy, or even outright countercultural rebellion. At that point, however, we might (for better or worse) stop calling them otaku.

Even if otaku never actively engage the IT issues discussed above, we can still use the Otaku Ethic to consider alternative viewpoints that greatly inform what have mostly been one-dimensional debates. For the otaku themselves, they may be somewhat at the mercy of others, but (as reluctant insiders) they have found meaningful ways to resist social control so that they may live as much as possible according to their own terms. This may be a modest response to very high-stakes societal concerns, but it is a significant first step that might very well lead to more active and socially powerful forms of engagement. Otaku are a youth subculture, after all, and youth are traditionally less powerful and only have relatively insignificant ways to effect change in their lives. Compared to many forms of youth rebellion / identity formation, however, otaku do pretty well for themselves. The otaku I have met have been happy, intelligent, resourceful, self-aware, and knowledgeable. Only time will tell what will happen to the Otaku Generation (in America) in the long run, but I am optimistic. In general, I think it is a good time to be an otaku. There are so many things to research and be inquisitive

about, so many intelligent people to converse and commune with, and so many ways to achieve self-understanding, the latter being the Platonic goal of all learning.

12.5 The future of otaku studies

Clearly, this dissertation is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the topic of otaku studies. Methodologically and theoretically, there are many ways that otaku can be studied, and I have only presented one, though I hope (as any scholar does) that it will prove useful to others who seek to study otaku and related subjects. Starting with this preliminary analysis, many other aspects of otaku culture can be examined, and using different tools, different perspectives on those aspects already studied can be gleaned as well.

The community of English-language scholars looking at the global anime and manga phenomenon is small but growing. The same can be said regarding those who specifically study anime fandom. The community of scholars looking specifically at otaku, anime-related or otherwise, is even smaller. When asked if I am an otaku, I usually respond that I am an otaku-of-otaku, a response I also have heard from some Japanese scholars (such as Toshio Okada) who study otaku. To be a true otaku of otaku, however, I would argue that one would have to belong to a large network of otaku scholars (of all levels). With increased public interest in otaku, we are beginning to see signs of such networks forming, but they are still young at best. Unfortunately, understandings of otaku have not improved much in fifteen years or so. While I hope this dissertation is a positive step towards a new general understanding of otaku, it will take much more than an obscure academic work buried in a library to make large impact. So far, in terms of influencing public perceptions of otaku, works of fiction in the mass media have been the most successful. Writing novels (or screenplays) is not usually considered serious and productive academic work, but perhaps the ends are more important than the means? (A blockbuster otaku novel or movie might already be in the works, but I don't know about it, and I certainly don't have time to write one any time soon.)

In the meantime, some of the most nuanced understandings of otaku will come from outside of academia and even outside of otaku culture itself. Companies who hope to

create profitable relationships with their otaku fan/customer base will be amongst those who really seek to understand what makes otaku tick, and will try to use them to drive business. In this context, otaku are viewed as little more than a way to make money, making self-knowledge amongst otaku and knowledge of those who seek to exploit them even more important (which is one reason I have conducted this academic study of otaku).

Otaku have always been resistant to marketing, and have stayed ahead of even the most savvy marketers, but before we paint a bleak picture of vigilant otaku on one side and exploitative companies on the other, there is a positive side to corporate recognition of otaku. Not all companies seek to exploit otaku. Instead, some seek to create mutually beneficial relationships with them, where the otaku use the companies for their own self-interest which simultaneously works in the best self-interest of the companies. Done in good faith and without deception, these relationships can allow for unprecedented levels of user input in the design of products and the development of marketing campaigns, benefiting both producers and consumers. Otaku are eager to help companies design products that they (and average users) really need and want, and have the expertise to give highly informed feedback. As such, maintaining positive and honest relationships with their otaku fan base should be a priority for many high-profile companies. The growth of otaku culture may come to define a new trend in producer/consumer interaction.

12.6 Putting down the pen (for now)

As I began this dissertation with an autobiographical sketch, I will end it in the same way. At the time of this writing, I will soon be joining an internet company as a market researcher. Undoubtedly, they hope to utilize my knowledge of otaku and fan cultures in general in order to better expose their products to more people and to foster meaningful relationships and communications between the company and the users of its products. I do not feel that my role will be exploitative in any way whatsoever. I legitimately look forward to bridging any gaps that may exist between the company and its fans. As an otaku of the company and its products myself, I feel quite privileged to help them create and market a product that will help others have the best possible internet experience.

With regards to anime, I expect that my consumption of it will actually increase as I will have more time to enjoy it. On that note, I will probably interact with anime fans and track anime community activities far less on a daily basis than I have been for over a year now. I have made quite a few friends along the way, and have not been able to devote as much time to fostering those relationships as I would have liked, so it will be nice to reconnect with them, not to mention everything else I have been avoiding in order to finish this work.

It is said that making your hobby your job is the quickest way to kill your passion for it. In studying and immersing myself in otaku culture and its lifestyle, I still find myself passionate about it, but I do think that I would like a break from anime fandom specifically (except for conventions and conferences where I hope to further present my work and maintain the dialogue around it). There are many other domains in which there are active otaku, and it will be interesting to look at those (academically or otherwise), participate in a few, and even enjoy some things casually in a very un-otaku-like way.

Otaku obsessiveness and the tendency towards depth over breadth are difficult things to shake. There is no doubt in my mind that I will keep at least one eye on the anime fan community, the ever-changing nature of otaku identity politics, and the general state of youth in America. Future work on my part will almost certainly be related to otaku of some sort or other, even if they have nothing to do with anime, manga, or any type of imported product. Even if the word 'otaku' eventually disappears from the English (and/or Japanese) language, it seems likely that otaku (or otaku-ish people) will always exist, at least until one of two things happens. In the first hypothetical case, resistance and appropriation (and therefore otaku and other subcultures) are no longer necessary because society has finally become a pluralistic utopia, where there is no such thing as hegemony or an oppressive *status quo*, and all citizens are able to find happiness and self-fulfillment without being expected to conform to any type of social order (except that which is freely chosen). Imagining such a world is difficult, and it seems very far off, even if we accept utopian visions as being

useful at all[209]. In the second hypothetical case, studying otaku will be rendered unnecessary because everybody has become otaku in a sense, some more than others, but otaku all the same. This too is hard to imagine, and while I would recommend certain aspects of otakuism as having positive value to individuals and society as a whole, I do not take seriously calls to otakunize the entire human race. Open societies definitely need more than just otaku, but I hope otaku will always have a place within them.

[209] In *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), Popper asserts that trying to reduce human suffering is more important than trying to achieve utopia (which more often that not requires totalitarianism).

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