

Chapter 19

Unauthorized Comic Book Scanners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses theories of circulation, subculture, and materiality to discuss the activities of unauthorized comic book scanners or “pirates,” and the mechanisms by which they structure their community. The discussion is drawn from a body of quantitative data collected by observing the circulation of unauthorized comic scans through several BitTorrent Websites between 2005 and 2012. The authors also examine the public discourse of scanners themselves—showcased through various anonymous interviews—as part of an investigation into the scanners’ identification with a system of ethics that validates their dissemination of unauthorized content in the name of preservation or “digital archiving.” Lastly, the authors propose a methodology for the study of digital media as “space-biased” and circulatory rather than archival. Though comic book scanners may identify themselves as digital archivists, they are somewhat unreliable for actual preservation. However, the ongoing existence of their community, despite the illegal, anonymous, and ephemeral nature of their work, invites one to consider the merits of a knowledge propagation model based on dissemination over preservation.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is part of a larger, ongoing body of research into the online activities of unauthorized digital comic book scanners, sometimes referred to as “comic book pirates.” In this collection, we focus

on the aspects of our research that deal explicitly with the constitution of online scanning communities themselves. We argue that these communities are “cultures of circulation,” whose entire reason for existence is the production and dissemination of a specific type of object: the digital comic book scan. The production, circulation, and reception of digital comic book scans brings into being not only the objects themselves, which are distinctly

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different from print comic books, but also the larger communities, which are in effect, products of the circulatory trajectories through which the comic book scans pass. Moreover, subjects within these communities are also constituted by these circulatory practices, defining and redefining themselves in very specific and observable ways as a result of how they choose to participate within a given community's circulatory system. Studying the circulatory practices of these communities is the best way to gain insight into the roles that individuals play within it, and how they come to imagine themselves within their particular mores and ethics.

Our approach to niche online communities is informed by our conviction that the signature gesture of 21st century culture is circulatory rather than archival; the metaphors of archiving and curating are everywhere in contemporary culture, both within academic discourse and the popular press. Nevertheless, we contend that digital media is profoundly "space-biased" in the sense that Harold Innis (1986) uses the term: "it facilitates the rapid and promiscuous propagation of content across networks, usually in the interest of some form of organized force, but it's notoriously unreliable for actually *saving* anything" (p. 5). The notion of a "digital archive" may itself be an oxymoron, requiring us to consider the relative merits of a model of knowledge propagation based on dissemination (and the attendant risk of loss) rather than preservation; we are surrounded by people doing interesting things with space-biased media because they've figured out ways to flow with it rather than fight against it, and we want to know more about how that works. The study of comic book scanners is an initial foray in that larger project.

At first glance, comic book scanning communities appear to be subcultural in the sense that Dick Hebdige defined them in his classic work, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (1979). For Hebdige, subcultures are subordinate groups with their own expressive forms and rituals, whose significance

is always in dispute. Subcultures appear as the manifestation of a breakdown in societal consensus; from this perspective, comic book scanning is a closed community that remains largely hidden by virtue of its constitution around an infringing activity. However, following the critique of David Hesmondhalgh (2005), we have detailed at length elsewhere (Wershler, Sinervo, & Tien, 2013) the ways in which Hebdige's formulation of subculture and its various successors – Andy Bennett's notion of "neo-tribalism" and then Barry Shank's and Will Straw's respective descriptions of "scenes" – create more problems for us than they solve. Subculture implies something more rigid and permanent than our object; the notion of neo-tribalism was developed from qualitative data only, whereas we use both quantitative and qualitative materials; and scene has been used in too many different contexts to maintain the degree of theoretical nuance with which Straw in particular carefully invests it. Rather than offering a new master concept, Hesmondhalgh argues that what we need is a diverse set of tools that will allow us to examine the complex assemblages that this theoretical tradition addresses. For us, Straw's (2009) more recent work on circulation, following on that of Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli (2003), is one such tool. Another complementary tool is the notion of format, particularly as Jonathan Sterne (2012) describes it in his work on MP3s. In combination with Straw's work on circulation, Sterne's notion of digital format as a hardened and therefore circulable set of material and social relations provides us with a way to describe the interrelated nature of objects, their circulation, and the social assemblages that the circulation generates. Where Hebdige (1979) argues that "objects are made to mean things" (p. 3) by subcultures, from our perspective, subjects, objects and the cultural assemblages through which they circulate are mutually constituted and continually transformed by circulatory processes.

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