

Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York University Press, 2013, 352 pp., \$22.75 (hardcover).

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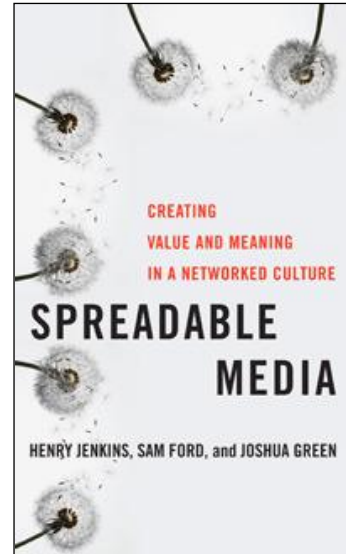
As a marketing communications professional, I find it refreshing to read a book by a team of media experts who truly seem to understand the state of the media. Jenkins, Ford, and Green analyze the media for purposes other than economic benefit, and they resist the impulse to reduce complex cultural phenomena to overly simple metaphors and buzzwords that will ensure a lot of retweets and Google “hits,” but probably not a lot of meaningful work.

The subject of this review, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, is a follow-up to Jenkins’ acclaimed 2008 book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, which examines a range of cultural issues that stem from the convergence of old and new media. He discusses the relationship between online producers and consumers, including new expectations from both parties—that producers will share their “stories” on multiple platforms, that consumers will join in the storytelling process, that content will be available without barriers, and that businesses will still retain some kind of control over their work. Jenkins predicted that these phenomena would change American pop culture.

They have—and they still are. *Spreadable Media* is in many ways a continuation of this work, but with a focus on one aspect of the convergence of old and new media: what the authors call networked culture, and why media spreads throughout these networks.

The authors build their work around the question of why people spread material. They begin this exploration with a key discussion of language, declaring that they will use “spreadability” and related terms to describe the pervasive media circulation in our networked culture. They write, “‘Spreadability’ refers to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes” (p. 3).

They contrast “spreadability” to the term “stickiness,” which assumes content or products should draw readers to a given place. For example, a television show that’s accessible only on a specific network at a certain time needs to be “sticky”—draw viewers in to secure ratings. An online webisode of the same show, available on the network’s website that could be shared and entice other people to share, amassing many thousands of views, would be spreadable.



In discussing the concept of “spreadability,” they point out the limitations of the word “viral,” which is often used to describe content that spreads widely. The problem with the word, they argue, is that it disempowers the people using or consuming the content. It also fails to account for the social and cultural realities that contribute to someone’s decision to share a piece of content. The authors write, “As we question how and why content circulates today, it is all too easy to accept an inadequate answer, a theory of media distribution that makes a media text sound more like a smallpox-infected blanket” (p. 16).

It’s an apt statement. Indeed, media doesn’t spread because it’s afflicted or because something about it causes audience members to lose control of their ability to hit the share button. Media is spreadable because people make it so—but why?

To begin to answer this question, the authors critique the concept of Web 2.0: “The flaws in Web 2.0, at their core, can be reduced to a simple formulation: the concept transforms the social ‘goods’ generated through interpersonal exchanges into ‘user-generated content’ which can be monetized and commodified” (p. 83).

Regarding shareable media as a commodity oversimplifies the user, reducing him or her to a marketing target and failing to recognize the social reasons why people share content. This commodity-oriented approach also results in a struggle with content sharing. On one hand, producers want to retain ownership of their content—they’re hesitant to relinquish control. On the other hand, they acknowledge that content sharing is useful for marketing and other purposes. A balance that pleases producers and consumers alike has proven elusive.

The authors also state that web users engage in curation every time they make a decision about whether to share content, and go on to discuss how users determine value, whether economic, cultural, or sentimental, by assessing whether the content meets a need. For a business to profit from shared media, its interests will need to align with the interests of the user.

Additionally, the authors discuss the value of media engagement by exploring how television networks have measured viewership of programming. They ask whether unauthorized viewing has commercial value. While many of those from the “broadcast era” hold that it doesn’t, the authors say that it can: “Traditional television ratings represent the audience as the primary commodity exchanged through practices of broadcast media,” they write. “By contrast, engagement-based models see the audience as a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value” (p. 117).

This “labor” might take the form of tweeting or blogging about a television show—something most network executives are comfortable with. On the other hand, they may be less comfortable with the idea of users employing network content for parody videos or downloading it illegally for viewing in another location—perhaps a country where the show isn’t available. The authors maintain that, while networks struggle with what they might call copyright infringement, there is intrinsic value—even economic value—in these practices. Such viewer engagement expands the reach of network media content, which can lead to increased demand and other business opportunities.

The authors note that producers should look beyond pure profit when assessing the value of a certain type of engagement. They give the example of a recording artist who gave away his music for free on his website as a way of thanking his fans. The nature of the gift economy is that the music wasn't truly free—there was an expectation of reciprocity. Many listeners would have provided something of equal or greater value—if not by buying the recording, perhaps by purchasing a concert ticket or telling a friend about the music.

After this discussion of why people share content, the authors go on to discuss what makes content spreadable. They note the importance of characteristics such as "quotability" (Can users easily use part of it, such as a clip or an excerpt, when generating their own content?) and "grabbability" (Can a user easily share it using technology such as YouTube's embed code?). They underline the fact that there is no "magic formula" (p. 195) for engaging a huge audience with a piece of content; rather, producers must deeply understand their audience, as well as their audience's needs and desires. Spreadable content is meaningful, provides fodder for conversations, gives users something unique and relevant to share within their communities, is easily accessible, and allows users to "convey something of themselves" (p. 201). In short, as the authors write, "'post and pray' is not an option" (p. 195).

This book raises an interesting question about the nature of audiences and publics, drawing attention to the importance of producers understanding their publics as they seek to generate spreadable media. Are viewers passive audience members? Collaborators? Or citizens? Nancy Fraser championed the idea of publics and counter-publics who had multiple ways of "accessing public life and a multiplicity of public arenas" (1990, p. 61). Her understanding of there being more than one form of public discussing matters of common concern is helpful in understanding shareable media from the producers' perspective. During the "broadcast era," producers were concerned with reaching the invisible masses. But in this age of spreadable media and engagement, producers have no choice but to recognize their audiences as more—as different publics with voices, agendas, and valuable contributions.

As I mentioned earlier, much of what Jenkins, Ford, and Green write in this work is immensely helpful. In particular, their discussion of spreadable media versus sticky media is vital. If producers have any hope of truly engaging those they hope to reach, they must have a clear understanding of the cultural practice of sharing media. Rather than reducing spreadability to a flat buzzword like "viral," they must see audience members not as consumers, but shapers (p. 1).

It's also worth noting that the prose throughout this book is engaging and accessible to practitioners as well as academics, drawing on examples from pop culture to which many will relate. The work is not without flaws, however. The authors occasionally delve into so much detail that the reader loses sight of their thesis. The second chapter's in-depth case study on World Wrestling Entertainment's journey to discovering new revenue opportunities within previously discarded material is an example of this. While learning how audiences measure value is relevant to the book's thesis, the discussion of monetization of television in the age of spreadable media is less so. Indeed, the authors often move into discussions of business models, profit, and the argument that illegal downloading of media is not without value. This positions the work as more of a marketing text and less of an academic analysis of media culture.

Another flaw is the little value the authors place on technology in the discussion of why people spread media. In discussing engaged soap opera fans, the authors write, "The rise of digital platforms has only amplified and widened the scope of activities of this already socially networked and participatory audience" (p. 167). It is true that sharing media, such as magazine clippings, was part of our culture long before someone coined the term "social media." The authors fail, however, to recognize the importance of the social media movement in shaping culture. It has done far more than amplify and widen existing activities—it has championed a new way of thinking. According to Facebook, which is arguably the first social networking platform that made the concept of social media mainstream, "Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" ("Facebook," n.d.). What other tool valued sharing and connection for the sake of sharing and connection? We mailed clippings to our families and friends because they contained something important. We gave our significant others mix tapes because they contained a romantic message we couldn't articulate. After the Internet became popular, online forums were organized around a specific interest—a television show or video game. Facebook, though, was for everyone, and it asked users a general question: "What's on your mind?" Yes, such new technological platforms amplified what was already happening, but they also modeled and popularized the cultural practices of mass sharing and discussing, leading more people to value them. Perhaps a future work of these authors will focus more on this concept.

### References

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