

Internet to Public: “You’re the Man Now, Dog!”  
The YTMND Fad and the Empowerment of Media Consumers  
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It began with a simplistic parody of the film *Finding Forrester*. Bemused by Sean Connery’s Scottish-accented appropriation of African-American slang, Max Goldberg threw together a webpage with a picture of Connery accompanied by a looping audio file of his line “You’re the man now, dog” and the overlaid text “YOURE [sic] THE MAN DOG DOT COM.” Other Internet denizens then created their own mimetic parodies based on Goldberg’s minimalist production. Goldberg listed the new webpages on his site, YTMND.com, and soon YTMND humor spread across the Internet. In five years, YTMND.com has grown to more than 150,000 user-created pages, with more added every day. One must be careful not to read too much into the YTMND phenomenon; crude, adolescent humor, YTMND’s bread and butter, seems an unlikely source of cultural liberation. However, both fannish and culture-jamming contributions have molded ytmnd into a robust breeding ground for active producer-consumers.

The YTMND formula is profoundly anarchic. The YTMND template--a picture or animated GIF, a few words of text, and a looped soundtrack--is simple enough that anyone familiar with basic computer media technology can make one (Rutkoff). Hosting the picture and sound files for YTMND pages is free--and, except for a few prohibitions against pornography or extremely offensive content, offered with no strings attached. YTMND.com effectively enables anyone with a computer to upload anything from a simple picture to a detailed GIF mini-movie with a soundtrack for free, without requiring anyone’s approval. While other free hosting sites exist, this level of user freedom is rare

on the Internet and it fosters a strong sense of freedom of speech in the YTMND community.

Many fan groups contribute to the YTMNDs. YTMND.com's most visited site, "The Picard Song," pays homage to Star Trek character Jean-Luc Picard<sup>1</sup>. However, the bulk of YTMND work involves participants juxtaposing multiple cultural artifacts in humorous and interesting ways. As Jenkins notes,

Media fan culture, like other forms of popular reading, may be understood not in terms of an exclusive interest in any one series or genre; rather, media fans take pleasure in making intertextual connections across a broad range of texts. ...[T]heir pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they create between specific program content and other cultural materials. (Jenkins 36-7)

YTMND is full of quotations and mash-ups of Star Wars, Batman, the Simpsons, and other cultural icons popular in the nerd community. Some of these combinations end up rather ridiculous, as a few users try to cram in as many of their favorite works as possible<sup>2</sup>, but most of the best YTMNDs are intertextual.

Some instances of this cultural "poaching" are so sociopolitically charged that they qualify as examples of full-blown culture-jamming. One YTMND depicts an instant message window with a conversation between a 16-year-old girl and Jesus Christ. As a popular Christian rock song plays in the background, the girl fails to recognize Jesus, and then decides to block him after learning his identity.<sup>3</sup> The juxtaposition suggests that, for all the power Christianity appears to hold in modern American society, Jesus himself would still be ignored or rejected. Another YTMND functions as an infomercial for a "Vader Sings the Hits" compilation CD, where Vader is made to sing popular songs

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<sup>1</sup> <http://picard.ytmnd.com/>

<sup>2</sup> An example: <http://khanstaplerbitchnazi.ytmnd.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://jesus28m.ytmnd.com/>

ironically juxtaposed with frames from Star Wars (e.g. “I Just Died In Your Arms Tonight” with a dying Darth Vader being cradled by Luke Skywalker).<sup>4</sup> The animation parodies not just at the average CD infomercial, but also at Star Wars franchise itself:

You’ve seen his movies  
You’ve seen his YTMNDs  
But now...  
Hear him sing

The infomercial’s implicit expectation is that diehard fans would automatically desire any piece of media or merchandise featuring Darth Vader, including such a silly compilation CD. It mocks the hyperconsumerist reality of the Star Wars franchise, which has peddled virtually every piece of merchandise that could have a Star Wars character put on it. Finally, another animation mocks the ubiquitous “...win a free iPod” Internet banner ads. These ads have burned through gimmick after gimmick to get web surfers to click on them: “Shoot the terrorist!”, “Give Bush his flu shot!”, “Slap the celebrity!” and so forth. User jakesmash suggests a new theme: “Shoot the President!”, framing footage of the Kennedy assassination with the flashy sleaze of the typical banner ad<sup>5</sup>. This provocative animation portrays all such ad gimmicks as purely excuses to get users to click on them, without any regard for decency. YTMND covers the whole spectrum of cultural appropriation--from tributes to the original work to merciless criticism thereof.

Counter to most textual-approach theories, YTMND blurs the line between producer and consumer. Jenkins warns against exaggerating the power of cultural “poachers,” pointing out that they are usually disenfranchised and dependent:

Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness. Like other popular readers, fans...have

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<sup>4</sup> <http://vadersings.ytmnd.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://stpwwifi.ytmnd.com/>

only the most limited resources with which to influence entertainment industry's decisions... [C]ontrolling the means of cultural reception, while an important step, does not provide an adequate substitute for access to the means of cultural production and distribution. (Jenkins 26-7)

In the YTMND context, however, these protestations are dampened. While YTMND participants are still dependent on the media industry for raw material (though improving consumer technologies are starting to allow YTMNDers to produce their own work), they have extraordinary freedom to interpret those materials however they want. YTMND's mimetic structure--users building on copies built on copies built on copies of some original work--is effective in quickly alienating a fragment of a media artifact from its context. About 480 different YTMNDs include Captain Kirk's famous scream from *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* ("KHAAAANN!"). While the first people to use the scream were probably aware of its context, many of its current quoters have never seen the movie; they just see it as a humorous yell. The number of iterations between the original work and its parodies and clones is high enough to completely decontextualize the work. The only power the work's original producers have over these quotations is the power of copyright--and, because of fair use legal protections and apathy on the part of the producers, this power to sue has only been used rarely (Rutkoff). YTMND participants also escape the usual reliance on media industry distribution. Because YTMND.com hosts pages for free, users' works are available to the entire World Wide Web without costing their creator a cent. As technology and low barriers to entry give YTMND participants powers previously held exclusively by the media industry, the industry's cultural monopoly is eroded in turn.

Given this level of audience power, the optimistic uses and gratifications approach works well in the YTMND context. Production and consumption of YTMNDs

usually occurs to fulfill three needs of the participants. First and foremost, people come to YTMND because the images and animations are funny. Whether a member is watching or creating, he or she usually derives pleasure from the humorous content involved. Second, popular YTMNDs often turn into quasi-conversations. Viewers can trace the genealogy of a theme by looking at all the YTMNDs involved. They can also join the conversation by creating their own version of the meme, as seen in the series of “Math Is Pwned” spin-offs and arguments<sup>6</sup>. Finally, some participants create (and read) YTMNDs as a form of quick political expression. YTMNDs exist for most any major current event or national political figure, including some commentators like Ann Coulter or Michael Moore. One YTMND rose to prominence though its stark critique of the Bush administration’s maligned response to Katrina.<sup>7</sup> The page shows a sobbing woman at the Superdome, with a light-hearted, guitar-playing President Bush pasted in next to her.

The vast majority of YTMNDs are not so serious. Most are just looking for a quick laugh. However, YTMND.com is an easy-to-use forum for democratic expression in the broadest sense--both political and apolitical production. YTMNDs have the potential to combine fandom’s characteristic active production with culture-jamming’s tradition of active (and critical) interpretation. Even if only production is present (without the critical side) most of the time, YTMND still blurs the lines between producer and consumer by enabling participants to do their own media. By contributing to a sea change in how Americans view culture (not as a top-down behemoth, but as a more low-level

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<sup>6</sup> The original: <http://mathpwned.ytmnd.com/>.  
One of several replies: <http://teacherpwnsmathguy.ytmnd.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://bushlobster.ytmnd.com/>

viral network), the YTMND phenomenon works to make production a public, communal process, encourage active consumers, and disperse media power.

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