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Convergence Culture

Where Old and New Media Collide



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Spoiling Survivor

The Anatomy of a Knowledge Community

Survivor (2004)—the astonishingly popular CBS show that started the reality television trend—does not just pit sixteen strangers against one another. Around each carefully crafted episode emerges another contest—a giant cat and mouse game that is played between the producers and the audience. Every week, the eagerly anticipated results are fodder for water cooler discussions and get reported as news, even on rival networks. *Survivor* is television for the Internet age—designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted, and critiqued.

The *Survivor* winner is one of television's most tightly guarded secrets. Executive producer Mark Burnett engages in disinformation campaigns, trying to throw smoke in viewers' eyes. Enormous fines are written into the contracts for the cast and crew members if they get caught leaking the results. And so a fascination has grown up around the order of the "boots" (the sequence in which the contestants get rejected from the tribe), the "final four" (the last four contestants in the competition), and especially around the "sole survivor" (the final winner of the million-dollar cash prize).

The audience is one of the largest in broadcast television. In its first eight seasons, *Survivor* rarely dipped out of the top ten highest-rated shows. The most hard-core fans, a contingent known as the "spoilers," go to extraordinary lengths to ferret out the answers. They use satellite photographs to locate the base camp. They watch the taped episodes, frame by frame, looking for hidden information. They know *Survivor* inside out, and they are determined to figure it out—together—before the producers reveal what happened. They call this process "spoiling."

Mark Burnett acknowledges this contest between producer and fans is part of what creates *Survivor*'s mystique: "With so much of our show shrouded in secrecy until it's broadcast, it makes complete sense that many individuals consider it a challenge to try to gain information

before it's officially revealed—sort of like a code they are determined to crack. While it's my job to keep our fans on their toes and stay one step ahead, it is fascinating to hear some of the lengths these individuals are willing to go."¹

Into this intense competition entered ChillOne. Before his sudden fame within the fan realm, he claimed to be a lurker who has never previously posted to a discussion list. On vacation in Brazil for New Years 2003, he said, he stumbled into a detailed account of who was going to get bumped from *Survivor: Amazon*, the series' sixth season. He posted this information on the Internet and lived through months of intense grilling by the spoiling community to defend his reputation. To some, ChillOne was a hero, the best spoiler of all time. For others, he was a villain, the guy who destroyed the game for everyone else.

As we have seen, the age of media convergence enables communal, rather than individualistic, modes of reception. Not every media consumer interacts within a virtual community yet; some simply discuss what they see with their friends, family members, and workmates. But few watch television in total silence and isolation. For most of us, television provides fodder for so-called water cooler conversations. And, for a growing number of people, the water cooler has gone digital. Online forums offer an opportunity for participants to share their knowledge and opinions. In this chapter I hope to bring readers inside the spoiling community to learn more about how it works and how it impacts the reception of a popular television series.

My focus here is on the process and ethics of shared problem-solving in an online community. I am less interested, ultimately, in who ChillOne is or whether his information was accurate than I am with how the community responded to, evaluated, debated, critiqued, and came to grips with the kinds of knowledge he brought to them. I am interested in how the community reacts to a shift in its normal ways of processing and evaluating knowledge. It is at moments of crisis, conflict, and controversy that communities are forced to articulate the principles that guide them.²

Spoiling as Collective Intelligence

On the Internet, Pierre Lévy argues, people harness their individual expertise toward shared goals and objectives: "No one knows everything,

everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity."³ Collective intelligence refers to this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively. And this organization of audiences into what Lévy calls knowledge communities allows them to exert a greater aggregate power in their negotiations with media producers. The emergent knowledge culture will never fully escape the influence of commodity culture, any more than commodity culture can totally function outside the constraints of the nation-state. He suggests, however, that collective intelligence will gradually alter the ways commodity culture operates. Lévy sees industry panic over audience participation as shortsighted: "By preventing the knowledge culture from becoming autonomous, they deprive the circuits of commodity space . . . of an extraordinary source of energy."⁴ The knowledge culture, he suggests, serves as the "invisible and intangible engine" for the circulation and exchange of commodities.

The new knowledge culture has arisen as our ties to older forms of social community are breaking down, our rooting in physical geography is diminished, our bonds to the extended and even the nuclear family are disintegrating, and our allegiances to nation-states are being redefined. New forms of community are emerging, however: these new communities are defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from one group to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time. These communities, however, are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge. As he writes, such groups "make available to the collective intellect all of the pertinent knowledge available to it at a given moment." More importantly, they serve as sites for "collective discussion, negotiation, and development," and they prod the individual members to seek out new information for the common good: "Unanswered questions will create tension . . . indicating regions where invention and innovation are required."⁵

Lévy draws a distinction between shared knowledge, information that is believed to be true and held in common by the entire group, and collective intelligence, the sum total of information held individually by the members of the group that can be accessed in response to a specific question. He explains: "The knowledge of a thinking community

is no longer a shared knowledge for it is now impossible for a single human being, or even a group of people, to master all knowledge, all skills. It is fundamentally collective knowledge, impossible to gather together into a single creature."⁶ Only certain things are known by all—the things the community needs to sustain its existence and fulfill its goals. Everything else is known by individuals who are on call to share what they know when the occasion arises. But communities must closely scrutinize any information that is going to become part of their shared knowledge, since misinformation can lead to more and more misconceptions as any new insight is read against what the group believes to be core knowledge.

Survivor spoiling is collective intelligence in practice.

Each fan I spoke with had their own history of how they became a spoiler. Shawn was a history major who loved the process of investigation and the challenge of weighing different accounts of a past event. Wezzie was a part-time travel agent who became fascinated with the faraway locations and the exotic people represented on the series. As for ChillOne, who knows, but it would seem from the outside to have to do with the ability to make the world pay attention to him.

Survivor asks us to speculate about what happened. It practically demands our predictions. Media scholar Mary Beth Haralovich and mathematician Michael W. Trosset describe the role chance plays in shaping outcomes: "Narrative pleasure stems from the desire to know what will happen next, to have that gap opened and closed, again and again, until the resolution of the story. . . . In *Survivor*, unpredictability whets the desire to know what happens next, but how that gap will be closed is grounded in uncertainty due to chance. . . . In its invitation to prediction, *Survivor* is more like a horse race than fiction."⁷ At the same time, for those viewers who are most aware of the production circumstances, there is also an "uncertainty due to ignorance," which is what galls these fans the most. Someone out there—Mark Burnett for one—knows something they don't. They want to know what can be known. And that's part of what makes spoiling *Survivor* such a compelling activity. The ability to expand your individual grasp by pooling knowledge with others intensifies the pleasures any viewer takes in trying to "expect the unexpected," as the program's ad campaign urges.

And, so, *Survivor*'s spoilers gather and process information. As they do so, they form a knowledge community. We are experimenting with new kinds of knowledge that emerge in cyberspace. Out of such play,

Pierre Lévy believes, new kinds of political power will emerge which will operate alongside and sometimes directly challenge the hegemony of the nation-state or the economic might of corporate capitalism. Lévy sees such knowledge communities as central to the task of restoring democratic citizenship. At his most optimistic, he sees the sharing of knowledge around the world as the best way of breaking down the divisions and suspicions that currently shape international relations. Lévy's claims are vast and mystifying, he speaks of his model of collective intelligence as an "achievable utopia," yet he recognizes that small local experiments will be where we learn how to live within knowledge communities. We are, he argues, in a period of "apprenticeship" through which we innovate and explore the structures that will support political and economic life in the future.

Imagine the kinds of information these fans could collect, if they sought to spoil the government rather than the networks. Later, we will look at the roles collective intelligence played in the 2004 presidential campaign and we will see signs that players of alternative reality games are beginning to focus their energies toward solving civic and political problems. Having said that, I don't want to seem to endorse a very old idea that fandom is a waste of time because it redirects energies that could be spent toward "serious things" like politics into more trivial pursuits. Quite the opposite, I would argue that one reason more Americans do not participate in public debates is that our normal ways of thinking and talking about politics requires us to buy into what we will discuss later in this chapter as the expert paradigm: to play the game, you have to become a policy wonk, or, more accurately, you have to let a policy wonk do your thinking for you. One reason why spoiling is a more compelling practice is because the way knowledge gets produced and evaluated is more democratic. Spoiling is empowering in the literal sense in that it helps participants to understand how they may deploy the new kinds of power that are emerging from participation within knowledge communities. For the moment, though, the spoilers are just having fun on a Friday night participating in an elaborate scavenger hunt involving thousands of participants who all interact in a global village. Play is one of the ways we learn, and during a period of reskilling and reorientation, such play may be much more important than it seems at first glance. On the other hand, play is also valuable on its own terms and for its own ends. At the end of the day, if spoiling wasn't fun, they wouldn't do it.

The word, spoiling, goes way back—or at least as far back as you can go—in the history of the Internet. Spoiling emerged from the mismatch between the temporalities and geographies of old and new media. For starters, people on the East Coast saw a series three hours earlier than people on the West Coast. Syndicated series played on different nights of the week in different markets. American series played in the United States six months or more before they broke in international markets. As long as people in different locations weren't talking to each other, each got a first-time experience. But, once fans got online, these differences in time zones loomed large. Someone in the East Coast would go online and post everything about an episode and someone in California would get annoyed because the episode was "spoiled." So, posters began putting the word "spoiler" in the subject line, so people could make up their own minds whether or not to read it.

Over time, though, the fan community turned spoiling into a game to find out what they could before the episodes even aired. Again, it is interesting to think about this in terms of temporality. Most viewers experience *Survivor* as something that unfolds week by week in real time. The show is edited to emphasize immediacy and spontaneity. The contestants don't appear publicly until after they are booted and often they speak as if the events hadn't already happened. They can only speak concretely about things that have already been aired and seem at times to speculate about what is yet to come. Spoilers, on the other hand, work from the knowledge that the series has already been shot. As one fan explains, "The results were determined months ago and here we wait for the official results. And a few people out there who participated know the results and they are supposed to keep it under lock. Hahahahaha!"

They are searching for signs of the aftermath, trying to find out which contestants lost the most weight (thus, indicating that they spent more time surviving in the wilds) or which came back with full beards or bandaged hands; they seek leaks who are willing to give them some "small hints" about what took place, and then they pool their information, adding up all of the "small hints" into the "Big Picture." Chandia Johnson (*Survivor: Thailand*) thought she was smarter than the fan boards; she would post what she thought were tantalizing tidbits nobody could figure out. It turned out that the community—at least as an aggregate—was a whole lot smarter than she was and could use

her "hints" to put together much of what was going to happen on the series. More recently, a news crew interviewed a *Survivor* producer in front of a white board that outlined the challenges for the forthcoming season; the fans were able to do a "frame grab" of the image, blow it up, and decipher the entire outline, giving them a road map for what was to come.

On one level, the story of *Survivor: Amazon* was done before ChillOne arrived on the scene; his sources at the Arianu Amazon Hotel were already starting to forget what had happened. On another level, the story hadn't begun, since the cast hadn't been publicly announced, the show was still being edited, and the episodes wouldn't air for several more weeks when he made his first post at Survivor Sucks (<http://p085.ezboard.com/bsurvivorsucks>).

ChillOne knew he had some hot inside information and so he went where the hard-core fans hung out—Survivor Sucks, one of the oldest and most popular of the many discussion lists devoted to the series. The name bears some explanation, since clearly these people are dedicated fans who don't really think the show sucks. Initially, Survivor Sucks was a forum for "recaps," snarky summaries of the episodes. On the one hand, a recap is a useful tool for people who missed an episode. On the other hand, the recapping process was shaped by the desire to talk back to the television set, to make fun of formulas and signal your emotional distance from what's taking place on the screen. Somewhere along the way, the Sucksters discovered "spoiling," and the boards haven't been the same since. So, it was here—to these people who pretended to hate *Survivor* but were pretty much obsessed with it—that ChillOne brought his information.

Anticipating some reaction, he started his own thread, "ChillOne's Amazon Vacation Spoilers." Surely, even ChillOne never imagined that the full thread would run for more than three thousand posts and continue across the full season. ChillOne made his first post at 7:13:25 p.m. on January 9, 2003. By 7:16:40 p.m. he was already facing questions. It wasn't until 7:49:43 p.m., that someone implied that he might be connected to the show. A few minutes later, someone asked whether this might be a hoax.

It began innocently enough: "I have just returned from Brazil and a trip to the Amazon. . . . I will begin by saying that I do not have all the answers, or all the information about S6 [*Survivor* 6], but I have enough credible, spoiler type, information that I'd be open to sharing."⁸

Images from Space

We would learn later that ChillOne had gone on vacation with a bunch of friends to Rio to celebrate the New Year but had wanted to see more of the country. He made his way to the Amazon and then learned that the Ariau Amazon Towers had been the headquarters for the *Survivor* production staff, and as a fan of the series he wanted to see the locations firsthand. He wasn't a spoiler; he mostly asked questions of the hotel staff trying to figure out what might be meaningful sites on a *Survivor*-themed tour of the Amazon. Where-as most of the people who came there were eco-tourists who wanted to see nature untouched by human presence, he was a tele-tourist trying to visit a location made meaningful because it was transmitted by television.

His first post focused primarily around the shooting location: "First off, the map posted by Wezzie is very accurate. Let me start by filling in some of the gaps." This was a bold opening move, as "Wezzie" is one of the most respected members of the *Survivor* spoiling community. She and her partner, Dan Bollinger, have specialized in location spoiling. Offline, Wezzie is a substitute teacher, an arboretum docent, a travel agent, and a freelance writer. Dan is an industrial designer who runs a factory that makes refrigerator magnets. They live halfway across the country from each other but they work as a team to try to identify and document the next *Survivor* location—what Mark Burnett calls "the seventeenth character"—and to learn as much as they can about the area. As a team, Wezzie and Dan have been able to pinpoint the series location with astonishing accuracy. The process may start with a throwaway comment from Mark Burnett or a tip from "somebody who knows somebody, who knows somebody, who works for CBS or a tourist company."⁹ Wezzie and Dan have built up contacts

with travel agencies, government officials, film bureaus, tourism directors, and resort operators. As Dan notes, "Word gets around the tourism industry very quickly about a large project that will be bringing in millions of American dollars."

From there, they start narrowing things down by looking at the demands of the production. Wezzie describes the process, "We look at latitude, climate, political stability, population density, road system, ports, accommodations, attractions, culture, predominant religion, and proximity to past *Survivor* locations." Dan notes, "In Africa I overlaid demographic maps of population, agricultural areas, national reserves, tourism destinations and even city lights seen from satellites at night. Sometimes knowing where *Survivor* can't be is important. That's how I found Shaba Reserve."

Wezzie is the people person: she works their network to pull together as much data as she can. Wezzie adds, "Then Dan works his magic!" Dan has developed contact with the Denver-based Space Imaging Company, owner of IKONOS, a high-resolution commercial remote-sensing satellite. Eager to show off what their satellite can do, IKONOS took snapshots of the location for *Survivor: Africa* that Dan had identified from 423 miles in space, and upon closer scrutiny, they could decipher specific buildings in the production compound, including the temporary production buildings, the tribal council site, and a row of Massai-style huts where the contestants would live, eat, and sleep. They take the snapshots from

papers; they used the Internet to locate tapes if they missed episodes; they traced through the complex grid of references to other films, television series, songs, novels, and other popular texts, matching wits with what they saw as a trickster author always trying to throw them off his trail. But, more than anything else, the list functioned as a space where people could pull together the clues and vet their speculations concerning the central narrative hook—who killed Laura Palmer? The pressure on the group mounted as the moment of dramatic revelation approached: "Break the code, solve the crime. We've only got four days left." In many ways, *Twin Peaks* was the perfect text for a computer-based community, combining the narrative complexity of a mystery with the complex character relationships of a soap opera and a serialized structure that left much unresolved and subject to debate from week to week.

The online community was fascinated to discover what it was like to work together, several thousand strong, in making sense of what they were watching, and they were all using recently acquired VCRs to go back through the tapes, again and again, looking for what they had missed. As one fan commented, "Video recording has made it possible to treat film like a manuscript, to be pored over and deciphered."

Those on the periphery were astonished by the kinds of information they could compile and process, sometimes confusing the combined knowledge of the group with individual expertise: "Tell me! Tell me! How many times are people watching TP? Do you take notes on every subject as you are watching? Or, when a question comes up do you drag out each of the episodes, grab a yellow pad, some popcorn and start watching? Do you have a photographic

¹ For a fuller discussion of *Twin Peaks*' on-line fan community, see Henry Jenkins, "'Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?': alt.tv.twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery," in *Fans, Gamers, and Bloggers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

memory? ... Do you enjoy making the rest of us feel stupid?"

While most critics complained that *Twin Peaks* became so complicated that it was nearing incomprehensibility as the season continued, the fan community began to complain that the series was becoming too predictable. The community's ability to pool its collective resources were placing new demands on the series that no television production of the time would have been capable of satisfying. To keep themselves entertained, they were spinning out elaborate conspiracy theories and explanations that were more interesting, because they were more layered than would ever be aired. In the end, they felt betrayed because Lynch could not stay one step ahead of them. This should have been our first sign that there was going to be tension ahead between media producers and consumers. As one disappointed fan protested, "After so much build up, so much analysis, so much waiting and so many false clues, how can any answer totally satisfy the anticipation that has built up. If WKLP is firmly resolved on the 11/10 episode we will all be in for a huge let down. Even those who guessed right will only celebrate and gloat briefly and then be left empty inside." Television would have to become more sophisticated if it wanted to keep up with its most committed viewers.

message and Wezzie and Dan were able to authenticate those images on the basis of weather conditions, tide level, and other geographical details. Over and over, people said they wouldn't have believed ChillOne if he hadn't been able to prove, beyond reasonable doubt, that he had actually been to the production location.

Over time, the Sucksters develop an intuition about whether alleged "intel" smells right or not. Shawn, a longtime spoiler, explained:

space because the security-conscious Burnett negotiates a "no fly zone" policy over the location. Dan uses the Com Sat (Communications Satellite) images and sophisticated topographical maps to refine his understanding of the core locations. Meanwhile, Wezzie researches the ecosystem and culture. Everything she learns ends up on *Survivor* maps and becomes a resource for the fan community. And, after all of that, they still sometimes get it wrong. For example, they focused a lot of energy on a location in Mexico, only to learn that the new series was going to be filmed in the Pearl Islands near Panama. They weren't totally wrong, though—they had identified the location for a production company filming another reality television series.

The fan community has come to trust Wezzie and Dan to do an incredible amount of homework and ensure the accuracy of their posts. They also have a reputation as neutral observers who speak from above the fray. On the one hand, it was pretty cheeky for ChillOne to try to correct their map on his first post, a volley over the bow of the established spoiling community. On the other, it was smart, because the geographical information was the most easily confirmed. He posted some images with his very first

If it is a first time poster, it is normally written off as not very credible. You don't trust first time people. You have to wonder why NOW of all the times they could have posted. If the person has posted before and has been involved with the spoiling before, that would add credibility to their posts. ... Nobody can know for sure the poster is lying until after the fact but once that person is found to be lying, they are never trusted again and they are pretty much blacklisted.

Many people felt that ChillOne knew the form and rhetoric of spoiling a little too well for a first-time poster, even one who had lurked for a while, and so they were convinced that the name, ChillOne, was a second identity—a "sock puppet"—for a longtime poster. Tell us who you really are, they begged, so we can check out your previous posts. ChillOne, however, never indulged such requests and continued to give bits of information. The community wasn't going to be satisfied with some tidbits about the location and a few photographs, though. They wanted the "good stuff" and they had every reason to think ChillOne was holding out on them. The issue was already on the table with the very first response to his original post: "Were there any Survivors that stayed at the hotel (i.e. loser lodge)? Were you able to get any leads on who might have been on the show?"

And then, at 7:55 P.M. on January 9, just a few minutes after his first post, ChillOne opens a can of worms:

As far as contestants. ... Yes, I do have information on this as well. What I can share is that you will find your first physically handicapped contestant on S6. ... a woman who is hearing impaired (deaf). I will share more contestant information over the coming months. I will tell you that I do NOT know the entire "cast list." I do NOT know last names either. I only know the first names of about a handful of contestants and the basic descriptions of a few more.

From there, the next response from the Sucksters is predictable:

I don't want to cause you any burden or trouble, but why wait? Can you tell us.

Why are you holding out on the contestants' names and descriptions? Let's have 'em!

It would be fantastic to have the first names before the official release on Monday.

If you do not wish to release the names that you do know, then could you give us a hint to whether any of the speculated contestants we have are on the show?

Spoiling follows a logical sequence. The first phase is focused on identifying the location, because the impact of the production is felt first where the series was shot. The second phase is focused on identifying the contestants, since the second impact is felt on the local communities where these "average Americans" come from. The collective has its feelers out everywhere and responds to the slightest brush. As Shawn explained, "The locals can never keep their mouths shut." Milkshakey explained, "The locals can never keep their mouths shut." As Shawn hears a rumor that a girls PE coach at his local high school might be on *Survivor* and starts pumping her current and former students for any information he can get. A small-town newspaper hints that some local might have been in the running for a million dollars. Sooner or later, it comes back to the Sucksters.

Sometimes, it takes a little effort. The Ellipsis Brain Trust tracked down the name of the person who designed the CBS *Survivor* Web site, hacked into their hotmail account, and found a single entry, a list of URLs that were to be acquired immediately, sixteen in all, each bearing the name of a man or woman. (There are sixteen contestants on each series of *Survivor*.) From there, the members of the EBT divided the listed names and began to investigate to see if they were real people. In most cases, there were many people who had that name, some deceased, some young and healthy, and the task was to find out as much about each of them as you could. In an age where all information sources are interconnected and where privacy is breaking down at an alarming rate, there is an immense amount that a team of several hundred people can dig out about a person, given enough time and determination. Armed with their hacked documents, the EBT successfully confirmed all sixteen contestants before CBS released a single name. Sometimes, though, the spoilers get the names wrong and spend lots of time collecting data on totally innocent people. And sometimes, people seeking attention leak their own names just so they can watch the community talk about them.

And even when the spoilers get it right, there is a thin, thin line here

between investigating those who have chosen to insert themselves into the public spotlight and stalking them at their home or workplace. For example, one ambitious fan found out where they were running the initial interviews for *Survivor: Pearl Island*, booked time at the hotel before CBS did, and refused to move when they wanted to buy out the hotel for the weekend. She was able to take photographs of everyone interviewed, using a long-range telephoto lens, and her photographs were used to check any names that surfaced. The community spends a great deal of time debating exactly where you draw the line.

Sometimes, they really hit the jackpot during this phase. Quartzeye showed up at the used car lot where Brian (*Survivor: Thailand*) worked, pretending to want to buy a car, and took pictures of him standing next to the vehicle. Once the group compared her pictures with the official publicity shots, they could see that he had lost an enormous amount of weight and it was then clear that he had been out there in the wilds for longer than most. Someone looked on the corporate Web site for Mike Skupin (*Survivor: The Australian Outback*) and found a picture of him standing with a business associate, his arm in a cast, and that led the group to detect early on that there was going to be an accident. Some local Photoshop experts remained unconvinced, diagramming various ways the image could have been doctored. As it turned out, Mike fell into a fire and had to be evacuated for medical attention.

With each season, Mark Burnett, CBS, and the production team have tightened security, further closed off leaks, anticipated hackers, and made it that much harder to play the game. For Season Six, the community had been working hard trying to get names and coming up largely empty-handed. They had a few confirmed names—Heidi, the gym teacher, most prominently—and some of the ones being currently proposed later turned out to be wrong. (The community places a high standard on confirming names. Only once has the community confirmed someone who did not appear in the show and only rarely does the group discard the name of someone who turns out to be a real contestant. During this early stage, however, many names are proposed and investigated.) So, when ChillOne implied that he knew at least partial names or might be able to confirm some of the names that were already in circulation, the group went wild. Here was the breakthrough they had been waiting for, and it came only one day before the official announcement.

But ChillOne played with them, saying that he didn't want to post inaccurate information, that they would have to wait till later in the day

when he could get home and double-check his notes. Later, some would find this timing suspicious, wondering if he had access to early copies of *TV Guide* or *USA Today* accounts that would be released in a matter of hours, or if he had a source at *The Early Show*, where the official announcement was going to be made. Maybe he was stalling for time.

"Gated [Knowledge] Communities"

"If you are eager to share information but are hesitant to spill it all out here, I suggest contacting someone privately," a poster suggests early in the process, nominating themselves for the task. The most sensitive personal information about the contestants doesn't get aired on *Survivor* Sucks, where it could be read by anyone with Internet access. Over the first five seasons, "brain trusts," which may be as small as twenty people or as large as a few hundred participants, had emerged as offshoots of the *Survivor* Sucks site. These "brain trusts" do much of their most hard-core investigation through password-protected sites. Think of these "brain trusts" as secret societies or private clubs, whose members are handpicked based on their skills and track records. Those who are left behind complain about the "brain drain," which locks the smartest and most articulate posters behind closed doors. The brain trusts, on the other hand, argue that this closed-door vetting process protects privacy and ensures a high degree of accuracy once they do post their findings.

The Paradox of Reality Fiction

Spoiling is only one activity that engages *Survivor* fans. Like fans of many other series, *Survivor* fans also write and post original fiction about their favorite characters. One fan with the unlikely real name of Mario Lanza was inspired by talk about an all-star reunion series of *Survivor* to write three whole seasons worth of imaginary episodes (*All Star: Greece*, *All Star: Alaska*, and *All Star: Hawaii*), featuring the fictional exploits of these real-world participants. Each installment may be between forty and

Lévy writes: "How will we be able to process enormous masses of data on interrelated problems within a changing environment? Most likely by making use of organizational structures that favor the genuine socialization of problem-solving rather than its resolution by separate entities that are in danger of becoming competitive, swollen, outdated and isolated from real life."¹⁰ The brain trusts represent the return of hierarchy to the knowledge culture, the attempt to create an elite that has access to information not available to the group as a whole and that demands to be trusted as arbitrators of what it is appropriate to share with the collective.

Most spoilers argue that these brain trusts serve a useful purpose, but they can be paternalistic as hell. As one *Suckster* explained, "Everything we have is also theirs because we're open, everything they have most definitely is not ours because members of the gated communities may or may not feel like dropping in and sharing it. They have sources we do not, and they like to hoard information, which is what the private groups are all about." The trusts tend to dump data with no explanation about how they got it, essentially cutting the plebeians out of the process and constructing themselves as experts who are to be trusted at face value. Many of the brain trusts are rumored to have secret sources, often within the production company.

ChillOne posted everything he knew in the most broadly accessible discussion list and let the vetting take place in public

seventy pages long. He unfolds these episodes week by week during the off-season. The stories follow the series' dramatic structure, yet they are even more focused on the character motivations and interactions. Lanza compares this process of getting to know the characters with police profiling: "I tried very hard to get into these people's heads and I thought if I am going to play this game again, what am I going to change, how would I do this, what do I know about this person, how do I know them, how do they talk, how do they think?"¹¹ While spoiling tries to anticipate how they will react to the incidents depicted in the series, the fan fiction takes this one step further, trying to imagine how they would respond confronting challenges and dilemmas that they never faced in real life.

So far, this may sound like the way any other fan fiction writers approach their task—get to know your characters, remain consistent with the aired material, and speculate based on what you know about people in the real world, except in this case, the characters are people who exist in the real world. Lanza's stories have, in fact, become very popular with the *Survivor* contestants themselves, who often write him letters telling him what he got right or where he misread some participant's personality. For example, he said that Gabriel Cade (a contestant on *Survivor: Marquesas*) was so flattered about being included in one of the all-star stories that he wanted to get more involved in the writing process: "He's really interested in how his character is going to come off so he's told me all kinds of gossip about what these people are like, what they do, who likes who, and how they get along." As a writer of

¹ Personal interview with author, May 2003.

reality fiction, Lanza has been getting fan letters from his characters.

With *Survivor: Greece*, Lanza sought to tell the stories of those contestants who had been bumped early in the runs of their series. Because so little aired material dealt with these characters, he drew much more heavily on what he could learn by interviewing them and their teammates. After arbitrarily choosing Diane Ogden (*Africa*) and Gabriel Cade (*Marquesas*) as team leaders, he contacted them to see which players they would have selected to be on their teams. In some cases, he asked actual contestants to write their own "final words" as their fictionalized characters are voted out of the game. Chris Wright interviewed some of these players and found that they often felt Lanza's fiction more accurately reflected their real personalities and strategies than the television program itself because it was less reliant on stereotyping. Many of them felt a vicarious pleasure or psychological boost in watching their fictionalized characters overcome problems that had blocked them during the actual game.²

Lanza also wanted to preserve the show's fundamental element of chance: "I have talked to a lot of the survivors in real life over the phone or on e-mail and this is one of the things they consistently bring up over and over. It doesn't matter what your plans are or how smart you are or how strong you are. So much of the game is based on luck. ... I wanted that to work out the story somehow. As a writer, I didn't want to be able to cheat." So, as he started to write the challenges, he rolled a dice to determine which team or player wins

view. The brain trusts were working behind closed doors to see how far they could push his intel, but ChillOne himself wanted everything to remain out in the open. Some of the brain trusts sought to discredit ChillOne, urging Sucksters not to put their full faith in what he was saying, but they wouldn't say why. Some believed such warnings because the brain trusts had access to so much inside information; others suspected they were trying to discredit a rival.

But as of day 2, ChillOne wasn't revealing the contestants, and the group was watching the clock tick down before the names would be publicly announced. If that wasn't annoying enough, ChillOne closed his post with a bombshell, "Here is a little 'teaser' ... the deaf girl is 22. I don't know her name but, she does make it to the Final 4." For the first time, ChillOne implied that he might even know who won the game.

By the end of day 2, ChillOne started to deliver the core of his intel and offer some hints about how he accessed it. ChillOne wanted to protect his sources, he said, so he wasn't going to disclose much. He spent time buying people drinks at the hotel bar and asking them questions, but not too many questions since he didn't want them to clamp down. At least some of the people he talked with spoke only Portuguese so he had to rely on translators. In the following weeks, he was asked about the gestures they used and the tone of their voice, whether they had thick accents, and how comfortable the translator was

with colloquial English. He did spell out a theory about how knowledge might have circulated back to the hotel, given that it wasn't the "loser lodge" as some had suspected, and that none of the contestants themselves ever went there: he implied that the information had come from the "boat guides" who ferried away the contestants once they were voted off the tribe. "Since there are only a small handful of 'boat guides' most of them working long hours driving the 56 crews in/out of the jungle, thus, enabling them to witness the filming. I'm sure that over the 3 months, they rapped among themselves and with the help of the English-speaking staff, figured out what was going on." ChillOne never actually said a boatman was his source. He let the spoilers draw their own conclusions, and in the weeks ahead, an enormous amount of speculation and mythology grew up around the boatman. ChillOne refused to confirm or deny any of the theories. He said he didn't want to cloud the water by engaging in speculation. Some think he was messing with their minds.

"Here's what I know ... it's not much," he said with classic understatement. He knew parts of everything—the first four boots, the final four, the location, the details of contestants and their behavior, some of the highlights of the series. He knew that for the first time the tribes would be organized by gender but that they would "merge much earlier ... possibly after the first 3 or 4 contestants are gone." He knew the women would dominate the early challenges and that several of the first boots would be athletic young men who had fumbled in the competition. He knew that one of the contestants would strip down to gain an advantage. (It turns out that both Heidi and Jenna went skinny-dipping in return for chocolate and peanut butter during one of the immunity challenges.) He knew that a certain kind of local insect would be the gross food challenge. Some of what he knew, even some of what he was certain about—like the claim that the "deaf girl," Christy, was part of the final four—turned out to be dead wrong. Some of it turned out

and then wrote the scene accordingly. A single roll of the dice could wipe out weeks of plotting, much as it did for the producers of the television, and as a consequence, the stories are full of surprise twists and turns that capture something of the spirit of the series. One of his series ended with an all-female final four, something that never happened on the air. As he explains, "That's just the way the story happened to go."

Perhaps because of this close interaction with the contestants, Lanza has become a sharp critic of spoiling, which he says becomes too intrusive. As he explains, "People take it way too seriously. It's just a TV show." Only a few minutes later, however, he adds, "Get me talking about *Survivor* and I will talk forever." As they say, *Survivor* sucks.

² Chris Wright, "Poaching Reality: The Reality Fictions of Online *Survivor* Fans," unpublished seminar paper, Georgetown University, February 7, 2004.

to be so vague that it could be massaged to seem right no matter what the outcome. But the general pattern of his knowledge held true. He got the order of the first four boots wrong, but in the end, his four were among the first five folks kicked out of their tribes. He misidentified one of the final four but Chitisty did make the final five. The odds of getting all of that right without inside information are astronomical.

As for the outcome, he knew, or claimed to know, that it came down to a contest between a woman who was called "Jana" or something close to it and a man who was in his twenties, had a "strong build," and a "tight haircut" that was combed to the side. The Oracle at Delphi spoke with greater clarity. First of all, the name "Jana" didn't perfectly match any of the contestants and on a season where the women's names included Janet, Jenna, Jeanne, and Joanna, there was certainly room for confusion here. Matthew the globe-trotting restaurant designer might meet his description of the man, more or less: he certainly had a strong build and he did part his hair to the side, but he had longish hair going in and was apt to have even longer hair by the end, and he was a good deal older than twenty-six, so perhaps they were thinking about Alex the triathlon coach or Dave the rocket scientist. Before long, even the gawky nerd-boy Rob was starting to be put forward as someone who could have refined his muscle tone over a two-month stay in the rain forest. There was more than enough here to keep the community busy for the coming months, and for the most part there was enough that could support multiple theories and arguments.

Several people wanted to delegate tasks, rally the troops, and see what they all could put together before the season started. That is, they wanted to exploit the full resources of a knowledge community rather than put all of their trust in one previously unknown individual. One of the would-be leaders explained, "There is LOTS we need to know about them and could be compiling. Basically build a dossier on each of them. Pics from outside of *Survivor*, vidcaps, bios, descriptions (how friggin' TALL are these guys, exactly?). What hints have Jiffy [Jeff Probst], MB [Mark Burnett], and others made about them, what allusions to them exist? . . . Eventually, more clues are going to pop out at us. Pieces will fit together. The puzzle will start to make sense. A tremendous amount can be done in this way BEFORE the show airs." But ChillOne had refocused the spoiling community's efforts; everything was directed toward proving or disproving his theories—and

nobody was searching in other directions. Over time, ChillOne's intel would spread outward to all of the other boards and discussion lists, until you couldn't turn around without running into an opinion about his veracity, whether you wanted to have contact with spoilers or not. You couldn't put forth an alternative theory without having someone dismiss you for going against what the group "already knew" from ChillOne.

Contested Information

Almost immediately, the skeptics on the listboard began to circle, because something about all of this didn't smell right, something here was too good to be true.

Not that past history means "a lot" but how many times have we received legit contestant spoilers like this from somebody that just happened to be around where filming took place. I guess there's a first time for everything.

It is, of course, still possible that ChillOne is MB and that he is establishing credibility by leaking good information a few days early only to slam us with a bad F4 prediction.

MB is definitely the type of person that would have his lackeys make up fake spoilers and such during their lunch breaks.

They would continue in that manner for the rest of the season. Spoiling is an adversarial process—a contest between the fans and the producers, one group trying to get their hands on the knowledge the other is trying to protect. Spoiling is also adversarial in the same sense that a court of law is adversarial, committed to the belief that through a contest over information, some ultimate truth will emerge. The system works best when people are contesting every claim that gets made, taking nothing at face value. As one skeptic explained, "People with doubt should be welcomed, not scorned. It helps everyone in the long run. If I poke at holes that look thin, they either get firmed up (a win for you), or they become bigger holes (a win for me). Bigger holes could lead to other things. Either way, some resolution is forthcoming eventually."

As participants struggle over the nature of the truth, things can get pretty nasty.

If enough contradicting evidence could be found to fully discredit ChillOne, the discussion list would be able to close off his thread and attention would be routed elsewhere. ChillOne wanted very much to keep his thread alive for the whole season; his rivals wanted to shut him down. There were the two camps in this struggle over ChillOne's claims. First, there were the absolutists, who believed that if any part of the ChillOne intel was false, it proved that he was lying: "If a person says four distinct things are going to happen and then the first one doesn't, that means he's wrong. Whether anything is right after that is irrelevant. . . . You can't 'partly' win. You either nail it or you don't. . . . [Otherwise], that person merely met the mathematical probability of being correct." And then there were the relativists, who argued that memory could be imprecise or that data could be corrupted: "Where do we get you people from? . . . People unable or unwilling to acknowledge any correctness in some elements, if there is incorrectness in any other elements." There was too much information here that came close to the facts for the whole thing to be fabricated.

Soon, the absolutists and the relativists were enmeshed in philosophical debates about the nature of truth. Think of such debates as exercises in popular epistemology. As we learn how to live within a knowledge culture, we can anticipate many such discussions centering as much on how we know and how we evaluate what we know as on the information itself. Ways of knowing may be as distinctive and personal as what kinds of knowledge we access, but as knowing becomes public, as knowing becomes part of the life of a community, those contradictions in approach must be worked over if not worked through.

At one point an exasperated ChillOne defender summed up the competing theories, "He was never in Brazil. He works for someone in the know. He's not quite right, he's working the perfect scam, he's one of us that got amazingly lucky." The poster continued, "To me, a spoiler as grand as this one opens the author to legitimate questions about his identity, his true sources of information, his true purpose, and so on. In other words, the author himself becomes a critical part of the spoiling information." Part of what gave ChillOne credibility was his willingness to log in day after day and face these questions, respond calmly and rationally, and maintain consistency about what he was saying. Others, however, noted strange shifts in his writing style, some-

times lucid and authoritative, other times vague, rambling, and incoherent, as if someone was ghostwriting some of his posts.

Early on, ChillOne's credibility took a licking. The "Asian American" (Daniel) wasn't the first one booted, as "Uncle Boatman" had predicted, and so everyone was ready to bury the theory until Daniel went the third week, pretty much according to the logic that ChillOne had outlined. And so it went, week by nail-biting week, with ChillOne's information proving to be more or less right, but each week something contradicted his claims. He gained some credibility by midseason when the news media picked up the story of a Las Vegas gambling operation that discontinued betting on the *Survivor* outcomes when it caught some CBS employees placing bets on what they suspected might be insider information. They had been gambling on Matthew and Jenna for the Final Two and this seemed to prove ChillOne knew his stuff, until people realized that someone from CBS might have been monitoring the boards and had been betting that ChillOne was right. It had happened before when the spoiling community had trusted some consistently accurate predictions from a Boston newspaper as backing up their inside information on *Survivor: The Australian Outback* until it was clear that the reporter was just writing his column based on stuff he learned from the online discussions.

In the end, ChillOne got it right, assuming Jenna was "Jana" and the thirty-something shaggy-haired Matthew was the twenty-something man with the "close haircut." Maybe it would be more accurate to say that ChillOne's intel helped the spoilers get within striking distance of the right answer, even if many Sucksters trusted their guts over his inside dope: they couldn't believe that Jenna, the spoiled brat, could win out over the hardworking but mysterious Matthew. For a community like this one, which thrives on debates about the validity of information, a loose consensus is about all one can expect at the present time. Some things become common beliefs that everyone accepts and, on other matters, the group, gladly and gleefully, agrees to disagree.

The Evil Pecker and His Minions

We may never know for sure where ChillOne's information came from. From the start, the skeptics had two prevailing theories: that he was in some way linked to the production company, or that he was a hoaxer.

Both of these theories were plausible, given their experiences over the previous seasons.

The Spoilers had every reason to believe that Mark Burnett played an active role in shaping the flow of information around the series. They called him "Evil Pecker Mark," a play on EP (which also stands for "Executive Producer"). CBS had admitted that they, like many other production companies, monitored the discussion lists for information about the audience. Here's Chris Ender, CBS senior VP of communications: "In the first season, there was a ground swell of attention in there. We started monitoring the message boards to actually help guide us in what would resonate in our marketing. It's just the best marketing research you can get."¹² The fans had every reason to believe that someone from Burnett's office was listening to what they were saying—and some reason to believe that they were being lied to, at least some of the time, in a deliberate effort to shape the reception of the series. Here's host Jeff Probst describing his role in this process: "We have so many lies going, and we have so much misinformation that there is usually an out; there is usually a way to recover [from a slip]. I can tell you who the winner is right now and you wouldn't know whether to believe me or not."¹³

First-season fans started scrutinizing the opening credits for clues and spotted an image of nine contestants at what looked like a tribal council session.¹⁴ They used that image to narrow down the boot order—though in some cases, questions remained, since it was possible one person was voting when the picture was taken, and some of the people were in the shadows leading to debates about who they really were. The picture turned out to be misleading, read out of context. No one was sure whether the producer meant to send them on a wild-goose chase. Later in the first season, the behind-the-scenes machinations of the show's producers made the national news in what became known as "Gervase X." Spoilers figured out the URL for the directory tree on the official CBS Web site and dug around behind the scenes, unearthing fifteen unlinked images showing all but one of the contestants, Gervase, Xed out. The fans were convinced that the African American coach was the only one who never got booted, up until the moment that Gervase got voted off the island. Both Mark Burnett and Chen Maynard, the CBS executive in charge of reality programming, have publicly acknowledged that they planted that misleading clue. From then on, the rules of the game had changed. Shawn summarized the

shift of attitude: "Before it was Mark Burnett that naïve unassuming producer/idiot letting all of his secrets flood out. Now it was Mark Burnett deceiver. Mark Burnett the Devil, Evil Pecker Mark. Now we knew he was trying to keep secrets and it was game on."¹⁵

Burnett had the last laugh in that first season. There was a really big clue in the opening credit: as the announcer is explaining that "only one will remain to win the title of sole survivor and one million dollars . . . in cash," he had shown, from the first episode forward, a shot of Richard Hatch, the actual winner, walking alone across a rope bridge with a big smile on his face. The spoilers had seen it and dismissed it, believing it couldn't be that simple—and after that, it wasn't.

From then on, the spoilers watched the episodes more closely, using their single frame advance to search for embedded clues, keeping track of the shots of animals that often functioned metaphorically to foreshadow the rising or falling fortunes of individuals or teams, looking at editing patterns to see which characters were being foregrounded and which hidden. Tapewatcher developed an intriguing theory about *Survivor: Africa* based on what he saw as biblical allusions surrounding the long-haired, bearded, and Jewish Ethan, who he believed was going to win out over his more transgressive competitors. Again and again, Ethan's image was coupled with a distinctive lens flair that looked a bit like the Star of David. "Follow the star," and you will find the winner, Tapewatcher predicted, and, strange as it seems, he was right. Tapewatcher presented his argument in page after page of richly detailed close textual analysis, accompanied in some cases by images grabbed off the video tape and in some cases by actual streaming footage.¹⁶ Is it possible that the show's editors planted clues for viewers? This may not be as far-fetched as it sounds. Another reality series, *The Mole*, planted equally obscure clues that it assumed people armed with VCRs and the Internet would sort through. A good chunk of the final episode of each season was spent mapping them out for viewers "too dense" to spot them hidden in the background of shots or arranged in the first letters of the last names of the production crew on the closing credits.

As soon as the *Survivor* fans found an editing pattern that might help them foretell a winner, Burnett shifted his style for the next season. There were even rumors, never confirmed or denied, that once a guess circulated broadly, the production staff redubbed subsequent episodes to strip out elements they knew the spoiler community was looking for. After all, the late episodes were still being cut as the early ones

aired. Burnett liked to talk about *Survivor* as a psychological experiment to see how people would react under extreme circumstances. Was he also playing an experiment with his audience to watch how an information society would respond to misdirection?

By the sixth season, there was a growing sense that Burnett was losing interest in the spoilers, much as a segment of the audience was losing interest in the series. As one fan grumbled, "I want CBS to play the game. They are not playing the game." If ChillOne was telling the truth, then security on the *Survivor* production site was getting unfortunately sloppy. Or, more optimistically, the fans would have pulled off a coup for which the series might never recover. As one fan exclaimed, "Picture what a fine panic such a thing might cause!"

If ChillOne was lying, if ChillOne was a plant or even better, if Burnett himself was going undercover on the boards, that would be the producer's biggest stunt ever. One Suckster explained: "CBS would never allow accidental information to come into the hand of a lay person. They are smart enough to hide it. Say what you will but there is a direct connection between Chill and CBS." Others went further: "C1 may very well play the role of puppetmaster that guides us merrily along until the unexpected happens. Afterwards, there may be more planted spoilers, false leaks and doctored evidence unveiled to throw new curves into the mix. Ultimately, I'll be thrilled if MB and CBS have taken the reigns in an effort to 'work' the spoiler community once again."

By the final weeks of the season, the rumors and theories had reached gargantuan proportions. One side was embracing a fantasy of the producers engaging in some form of cloak and dagger theatrics. The other side was embracing a fantasy of finally beating the "Evil Pecker" at his own game.

One of the most outrageous theories was that ChillOne was Rob, who had been an active poster on the boards before he was chosen as a contestant on the series. The fan community saw Rob as one of their own, sent in to enliven the sixth season, with his witty comments and dirty tricks. He seemed more interested in producing a fan-friendly drama than in winning the game. What if he had taken all of it a step farther and was manipulating the boards just as he was manipulating the other players? Rob certainly knew about the rumors and is said to have wanted to wear an "I am ChillOne" T-shirt at the *Survivor* reunion broadcast as a joke.

There is a long history of interaction between the fans and the *Survivor* contestants, many of whom became active participants on the boards, sometimes under their own name, sometimes under assumed names, once they were booted. Contestants read the fan boards to see how they were coming across on the air. Fans fired off e-mails to several former contestants as they sought to confirm the ChillOne posts, asking them questions about how the production process worked. Deena, one of the other *Survivor*: *Amazon* contestants, acknowledged, after the fact, that she had followed the ChillOne debates with great interest and threw her own wrench into the discussion: "Pretty good spoilers if you ask me, and it was a little disappointing because here I am under contract not to open my mouth and somebody already is. I think this board as a whole, would have liked this season much more if there had been no ChillOne. As to the mysterious boat driver . . . never saw anybody like the description given. Production members, those that have contact with us, are generally repeaters and those who have gained the supersecret pass." Others were less romantic in their theories, continuing to suspect that they were dealing with a garden-variety hoax: "When will you learn? How many times has a mysterious new person shown up out of the blue to post spoilers? These 'super spoilers' are always huge fans of the show who know lots of info and have lots of insight about previous incarnations of the series, but they just never bothered to ever post on any message board until this amazing spoiler just fell into their lap." The most common reference point there was the "Uncle Cameraman" exploit a few seasons back. A young poster had claimed that his uncle was a cameraman and had started telling him things to watch for. He posted a list of the boot order and had the good fortune to get the first several right, including some rather unlikely twists of fate. He developed something of a following before his "uncle" was revealed to be a fabrication. "Uncle Cameraman" had become a running joke in the spoiling community, so ChillOne's source quickly got labeled "Uncle Boatman."

There had been lots of hoaxes—some of which had enough good information to make the bad data plausible, at least for a little while. Some posted hoaxes to get attention, some because they hated the spoilers and wanted them to waste their time, some to see if they could outsmart the spoilers. As one fan explained, "[Don't] assume that everyone comes to these boards for the same reason. Spoiling *Survivor* is a game. Spoiling the *Survivor* spoilers is a game. Planting fakes to see

how long they go is a game. Spoiling certain elite spoiling groups is a game. . . . Many people come to play at this big wide open amusement park, and some of them could be playing with you."

The challenge was to construct a hoax that was plausible enough to get past the initial screening and occupy attention over a longer period of time. In the beginning, it was enough to claim to have a list of the names of the contestants and some explanation of how you got it. Soon, you had to produce names of real people who could be located using search engines and those real people had to match the profile of the series. You had to weave into your list the names of some of the folks the spoilers had already outed so that it confirmed the group's consensus. After a while, people were producing fake photographs, or in some cases, photographs taken out of context. As one post explains, "It's like a chess game. Hoaxer makes the first move. If it's bad, it's checkmate very quickly. Others, like this thread, are a bit more challenging and take longer to play out."

If ChillOne was a hoax, he was a very good one. As one board member explained, "To concoct all this and create all the component pieces would be a lot of work and quite hard to do. Creating complicated lies and then sustaining them for weeks under interrogation is very hard. Keeping track of lies and inventing additional layers of lies to 'substantiate' the big lies is just a very difficult task."

As for ChillOne, after several weeks of such abuse, he threw up his hands: "My information is out there. Read into it as much as you like. Choose to believe what you like, choose to not believe what you like. Poke holes in that which you desire. Pat me on the back as you see fit. This is all fine by me. I heard what I heard." But he never really went away. By the next day, he was in there again, taking on all challengers, and he stuck it out to the bitter end.

Collective Intelligence and the Expert Paradigm

As more and more of his claims came true, the focus shifted away from discrediting ChillOne. The more accurate he was, the angrier it made some people. He hadn't "spoiled" the season; he "ruined" it. These were fundamental questions: Was spoiling a goal or a process? Was it an individual sport, in which contestants won bragging rights based on nailing information, or a collaborative sport, in which the team rejoiced

in its collective victory? As one participant grumbled, "We have turned spoiling into a non-cooperative game. . . . 'Winning' means spoiling the whole season; hiding how you know about it and making others second guess you all season so you can humiliate them. ChillOne won. Everybody else lost."

From the start, sourcing—getting information from direct and often unidentified sources—had been a controversial practice. Snewser had an inside source, for example, which allowed him to post the results of the show a few hours before airtime; it was there if you wanted to read ahead, but it didn't get in the way of the group's deliberations until the last possible minute. Sourcing was a game only some could play; it depended on privileged access to information and since the sources couldn't be revealed, sourced information was not subject to meaningful challenge and disconfirmation. Wezzie and Dan had made a specialization out of tracking down the locations. Not everyone has access to satellite data. Not everyone could play the game the way they did. But, ultimately, what they brought to the group was shared knowledge that could fuel a range of theories and speculation and that other group members could mine as they needed in the collaborative process of spoiling. By contrast, other forms of "spoiling"—making guesses based on weight loss or facial hair, reading the editing patterns of episodes, or interpreting comments by Mark Burnett or Jeff Probst—enabled collective participation. Everyone could play, contribute their expertise, apply their puzzle-solving skills, and thus everyone felt like they had a stake in the outcome.

We might understand this dispute in

Monitoring Big Brother

Survivor is not the only reality television series whose fans and followers formed large-scale collaborative knowledge communities to unearth secrets, nor was it the only series where such efforts resulted in an antagonistic relationship between producers and consumers. Endemol, the Dutch production company that controls the worldwide Big Brother franchise, saw the Internet as an important dimension of its production and promotion strategy. The Web site for American Big Brother attracted 4.2 million visitors during its first season. Hard-core Big Brother fans paid to watch the action unfold in the household 24/7 throughout the entire run of the series with multiple webcams showing interactions in different rooms of the house. If the challenge of spoiling *Survivor* was a scarcity of officially released information, the challenge of Big Brother was that there was simply too much information for any given viewer to consume and process. The most hard-core consumers organized into shifts, agreeing to monitor and transcribe relevant conversations and posting them on discussion boards. Fans regard the broadcast version as a family-friendly digest of the much racier and more provocative Web feed, and they are drawn toward talking about things they know were hidden from people who watch only the televised content. Season Three's resident sexpot, Chiara, naively tried to create a

"secret code" that would allow her and the other "houseguests" to talk about personal matters without being exposed to the Internet voyeurs.

Unfortunately, she worked out the code while being Webcast, generating much bemusement among the fan base, until the producers called her aside and explained the error in her logic. Subscribers complained, however, when the producers cut away at key moments—notably competitions, voting, and discussions central to the game play—so that they could hold content in reserve for the actual television series.

In the first season, the fans pushed further, seeking to alter the outcome of events in the house by breaking through the wall of silence that separated contestants from the outside world. A group calling itself the Media Jammers, which spun from discussions of the series on Salon.com, sought to get information into the Big Brother house by throwing messages contained in tennis balls into the yard, by shouting through megaphones, and by hiring airplanes to fly streaming messages over the production site. They wanted a mass walkout of all the contestants midseason to "raise awareness of the abuses the producers have committed against the contestants, the families, and the viewers of the show." The viewers could monitor the impact of their efforts on the "houseguests" as the producers called them (or the "hamsters" as the fans did) using the live Internet feed. They could coordinate their efforts via Internet chat groups and come up with real-time tactics even as they watched the producers trying to shield the show's participants from their messages.

Pam Wilson has offered a detailed account of what she calls "narrative

terms of the distinction between Pierre Lévy's notion of collective intelligence and what Peter Walsh has described as "the expert paradigm."¹⁷ Walsh argues that our traditional assumptions about expertise are breaking down or at least being transformed by the more open-ended processes of communication in cyberspace. The expert paradigm requires a bounded body of knowledge, which an individual can master. The types of questions that thrive in a collective intelligence, however, are open ended and profoundly interdisciplinary; they slip and slide across borders and draw on the combined knowledge of a more diverse community. As Lévy notes, "In a situation in flux, official languages and rigid structures do nothing more than blur or mask reality."¹⁸

This may be one reason why spoiling is so popular among college students; it allows them to exercise their growing competencies in a space where there are not yet prescribed experts and well-mapped disciplines. Shawn, for example, told me that he saw a strong connection between spoiling and the skills he was trying to cultivate as an undergraduate history major: "I like to dig. I like to look at primary source information. I like to find official manuscripts of an event. I like to find out who were the people there, what did they see. I want to hear it from them. That's part of my love of spoiling. I like to dig to the bottom. I like it when people don't just say here's who gets booted—here you go, but elaborate a

little bit about where they get their information."

Second, Walsh argues that the expert paradigm creates an "exterior" and "interior"; there are some people who know things and others who don't. A collective intelligence, on the other hand, assumes that each person has something to contribute, even if they will only be called upon on an ad hoc basis. Again, here's Shawn: "The people work together, put their heads together, in the absence of one person with inside info. . . . There are little tips which accumulate often during the week before the show. The group of spoilers have to figure out which ones are credible and which ones are wishful thinking or outright false." Someone might lurk for an extended period of time feeling like they have nothing significant to contribute, and then *Survivor* will locate in a part of the world where they have travelled extensively or a contestant may be identified in their local community, and suddenly they become central to the quest.

Third, the expert paradigm, Walsh argues, uses rules about how you access and process information, rules that are established through traditional disciplines. By contrast, the strength and weakness of a collective intelligence is that it is disorderly, undisciplined, and unruly. Just as knowledge gets called upon on an ad hoc basis, there are no fixed procedures for what you do with knowledge. Each participant applies their own rules, works the data through their own processes, some of which will be more convincing than others, but none of which are wrong at face value. Debates about the rules are part of the process.

Fourth, Walsh's experts are credentialized; they have gone through

activism," the effort of these viewers to shape the televised events:

A window of opportunity emerged for only a brief period of time, allowing for the invasion of a slickly produced corporate television game show by amateur narrative terrorists whose weapons were clever words rather than bombs. The intervention could perhaps only have happened once, during a period of technological and programmatic flux, when the format was new, the formula was flexible, the unscripted narrative was emerging from the psyches of the not-yet-jaded improvisational players, the events were being closely followed around the clock by avid on-line viewers, and the Hollywood set was relatively unprotected.¹

The effort was surprisingly effective, forcing the contestants to rethink their affiliation with the series, and the network to periodically shut down the live feed as it was trying to thwart a full-scale revolt.

¹ Pamela Wilson, "Jamming Big Brother: Webcasting, Audience Intervention, and Narrative Activism," in Susan Murray and Laurie Queller (eds.), *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), p. 323. See also Joan Gigliome, "When Broadcast and Internet Audiences Collide: Internet Users as TV Advocacy Groups," paper presented at Media in Transition 3 Conference: Television, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., May 3, 2003.

some kind of ritual that designates them as having mastered a particular domain, often having to do with formal education. While participants in a collective intelligence often feel the need to demonstrate or document how they know what they know, this is not based on a hierarchical system and knowledge that comes from real-life experience rather than formal education may be, if anything, more highly valued here. ChillOne and the other "sources" were reinserting themselves into the process as "experts" (albeit experts by virtue of their experiences rather than any formal certification) and this threatened the more open-ended and democratic principles upon which a collective intelligence operates.

What holds a collective intelligence together is not the possession of knowledge—which is relatively static, but the social process of acquiring knowledge—which is dynamic and participatory, continually testing and reaffirming the group's social ties. Some said that having ChillOne tell them the final four before the season had really begun, before they had a chance to get to know these contestants and make their own predictions was like having someone sneak into their house and unwrap all of their Christmas presents before they had a chance to shake and rattle them to try to guess what might be inside.

For many others, getting the information was all that mattered. As one explained, "I thought the name of the game was spoiling. . . . The fun is trying to find out how the boots go down by whatever means we can, isn't it?" Many claimed that it intensified their pleasure—being in the know about the secret—and watching the really silly guesses the uninformed were making on the official CBS Web site, where Jenna and Matthew were way down in the pack of likely winners. Others argued that this advanced information shifted the way they watched the series: "If C1 has successfully spoiled this installment of *Survivor*, the fun part is trying to figure out how the hell it will happen! It is the detective in us that not only wants to know what will happen, when it will happen, and how and why it happens." ChillOne, they argued, had given them a new game to play just as they had started to tire of the old one, and, as such, they predicted he would be a "shot of adrenaline" for the whole spoiler community, keeping the franchise fresh and new for another season or two.

The question was whether, within a knowledge community, one has the right to *not* know—or more precisely, whether each community member should be able to set the terms of how much they want to

know and when they want to know it. Lévy speaks about knowledge communities in terms of their democratic operations; yet the ability for any member to dump information out there without regard to anyone else's preferences holds a deeply totalitarian dimension. Historically, spoiler warnings had been a device to allow people to determine whether or not they wanted to know every bit of available information. ChillOne and his allies argued that such warnings were not needed here, since the whole purpose of the group was spoiling, and yet, telling the answers cut off the game that many other group members wanted to play. In any case, this argument assumes that the information ChillOne unearthed would stay within the spoiling community.

Increasingly, spoiled information is finding its way into more and more public discussion forums, where it is picked up by mainstream news outlets. *New York Times*'s reporter Emily Nussbaum wrote about this phenomenon as "the End of the Surprise Ending," suggesting that this scurry to track down all available information and the accelerated circulation of that data across many different discussion lists was making it impossible for networks to keep secrets or for consumers to watch cult shows without knowing what is going to happen next. As she explains, "Shows are becoming more like books: If you want to know what happens later on, just peek at the last page. . . . It's an odd wish—for control of the story, for the chance to minimize your risk of disappointment. With spoilers in hand, a viewer can watch the show with distance, analyzing like a critic instead of being immersed like a newbie. . . . But the price for that privilege is that you never really get to watch a show for the first time."¹⁹ ChillOne's critics would suggest that the problem extends beyond this: if you want to participate in the ongoing life of this community, you have to accept this knowledge whether you want it or not. Spoiling—at least within *Survivor* fandom—has now moved decisively from a game of puzzle-solving to one based on revelation of sourced information.

ChillOne stumbled onto his intel by accident; now the community was sending its own reporters. Since the *Survivor*: *Amazon* season, either ChillOne or someone else from the fan community had flown to the location while shooting was occurring and brought back a good deal of information about what took place. Two seasons later, a detailed list of all of the upcoming plot twists was dumped on Airt It Cool News, a Web site with a traffic many, many times larger than *Survivor* Sucks. From there, it got picked up by *Entertainment Weekly* and

a range of other mainstream publications. (This list turned out to be largely false but who can say what will happen next time.) Suddenly, it was not just members of the spoiling community who had to decide whether they wanted to log on and read what someone like ChillOne had found by visiting the series location. Suddenly, every viewer and every reader of every publication ran the risk of learning more than they wanted to know.

As spoiling has moved more and more into the public eye, it has moved from a fun game that Mark Burnett occasionally liked to play with a small segment of his audience to a serious threat to the relationship he wanted to construct with the mass audience of his series. As Burnett told an interviewer, "It [spoiling] is what it is as long as it doesn't affect ratings. There may be 5000 people on the Internet but there are some 20 million viewers and they don't spend their time reading the Internet."²⁰ In and of itself, spoiling represents an extension of the pleasures built into the series. The producers want us to guess what is going to happen next, even if they never imagined teams of several thousand people working together to solve this puzzle. In the next chapter, we will see how the desire to build a community around such programs is part of a corporate strategy to ensure viewer engagement with brands and franchises. Yet, pushed to its logical extreme, spoiling becomes dangerous to those same interests and they have begun using legal threats to try to shut it down. At the start of the eighth season, Jeff Probst told a reporter for the *Edmonton Sun*: "The Internet and the accessibility to information have made it very difficult to do shows like *Survivor*. And it wouldn't surprise me if ultimately it led to the demise of our show at some point. Sooner or later, you cannot combat people who betray you. We have a crew of 400 people, and everybody tells somebody something. I definitely believe that. Once you spread information like that and there's money to be made or fame to be had—'Hey, I know something you don't know, listen to this'—all we can do, honestly, is counter it with our own misinformation."²¹ And the producers are not the only ones angered by such efforts to track down information at the source. Wezzie, who has herself participated in on-location scouting, wrote to me:

Soon (On Sept 16), the next *Survivor: Vanuatu* premieres. But, the boards feel different this time around. . . . They're D-E-A-D. I've kept a location-information thread going for the past few months with discussions about

the environment and cultural traditions of Vanuatu and Dan put up some great maps, but that's about all that has been happening on the boards. The Internet fans are bored, angry and disinterested. As a result of ChillOne's (and Snewser of *SurvivorNews*) boot lists, *Survivor*'s most avid fans, the internet community, no longer seems interested in discussing the show. 'Spoiler free' boards and forums have sprung up but they are lightly visited. . . . Hopefully, interest will pick up once the show premieres. I wonder if CBS and SEG are happy that lethargy has set into the Internet community . . . or worried."²²

Earlier, I described these emerging knowledge cultures as defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations. Because they are voluntary, people do not remain in communities that no longer meet their emotional or intellectual needs. Because they are temporary, these communities form and disband with relative flexibility. Because they are tactical, they tend not to last beyond the tasks that set them in motion. Sometimes, such communities can redefine their purpose. Insofar as being a fan is a lifestyle, fans may shift between one series and another many times in the history of their affiliation. Yet, as a fan community disbands, its members may move in many different directions, seeking out new spaces to apply their skills and new openings for their speculations, and in the process those skills spread to new communities and get applied to new tasks. ChillOne's intervention no doubt shortened the life of the *Survivor* spoiling community, yet he merely sped up what was going to be an inevitable decline in interest. Once the game had been played through a few times, the members were going to seek out new avenues for their practice.

We can see such knowledge communities as central to the process of grassroots convergence. To be sure, as we will see in the next chapter, the producers wanted to direct traffic from the television show to the Web and other points of entry into the franchise. Those various points of contact became opportunities to promote both the series and its sponsors. Yet, fans also exploited convergence to create their own points of contact. They were looking for ways to prolong their pleasurable engagement with a favorite program, and they were drawn toward the collaborative production and evaluation of knowledge. This bottom-up process potentially generated greater interest in the series, amplifying these fans' investment in the aired material. But, insofar as it interfered with or reshaped the informational economy

around a series, it also threatened the producer's ability to control public response.

What we need to keep in mind here and throughout the book is that the interests of producers and consumers are not the same. Sometimes they overlap. Sometimes they conflict. The communities that on one level are the producer's best allies on another level may be their worst enemies. In the next chapter, we will reverse perspectives—looking at the audiences of reality television from the vantage point of program producers and advertisers. In this way, we will come to understand how entertainment companies are reappraising the economic value of fan participation.

David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (eds.), *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

16. Grielman, "Introduction."

17. Cheskin Research, "Designing Digital Experiences for Youth," *Market Insights Series*, Fall 2002, pp. 8-9.

18. Mizuko Ito, "Mobile Phones, Japanese Youth and the Re-placemement of the Social Contract," in Rich Ling and Per Petersen (eds.), *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation of the Social Sphere* (forthcoming). <http://www.ifofofnet.com/mto/archives/mobileyouth.pdf>.

19. For a useful illustration of this point, see Henry Jenkins, "Love Online," in Henry Jenkins (ed.), *Fans, Gamers, and Bloggers* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

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1. Joanna Pearlstein, "The Finale as Rerun When Trumpping 'Survivor,'" *New York Times*, March 27, 2003.

2. Chill One has his own story about what happened, and he has self-published his own account of the incidents described here. See Chill One, *The Spoiler: Revealing the Secrets of Survivor* (New York: Universe, 2003).

3. Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1997), p. 20.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

5. *Ibid.*, 217.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

7. Mary Beth Haralovich and Michael W. Trosset, "Expect the Unexpected: Narrative Pleasure and Uncertainty Due to Chance in Survivor," in Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (eds.), *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 83-84.

8. Unless otherwise cited, these and subsequent quotes from Sucksters come from "ChillOne's Amazon Vacation Spoilers" thread at <http://p085.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm12.showMessageRange?topicID=204&start=1&stop=20>. Except for major participants in the story, I have withheld names of posters here to protect their privacy. Where names appear, it is because I have gotten explicit permission from participants to print their user name.

9. Quotations from Wezzie and Dan are taken from a personal interview with the author, conducted via e-mail, in June 2003.

10. Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, p. 61.

11. The phrase "in America" here is suggestive of the global reach of this fan community. While reality series are produced for specific local markets with the formats but not the contents traded globally, reality fans take advan-

tage of the Internet to monitor reality series in other countries and to link with other fans worldwide.

12. Marshall Sella, "The Remote Controllers," *New York Times*, October 20, 2002.

13. Daniel Robert Epstein, "Interview: Jeff Probst of Survivor," Underground Online, <http://www.ugo.com/channels/flinttv/features/jeffprobst/>.

14. For a useful history of Survivor Spoiling, see "Fear and Spoiling at Survivor Sucks," <http://p085.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm32.showMessageRange?start=1&stop=20&topicID=74&topic>.

15. Personal interview with author, May 2003.

16. See TapeWatcherB65, "The REAL Episode 1 Spoiler—Follow the Sun," <http://p085.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm12.showMessageRange?topicID=101&start=1&stop=20>.

17. Peter Walsh, "That Withered Paradigm: The Web, the Expert and the Information Hegemony," in Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (eds.), *Democracy and New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

18. Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, p. 70.

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20. The wingedmonkeys, "Conference Call with Mark Burnett," *Survivor News*, <http://www.survivornews.net/news.php?id=317>.

21. Steve Tilley, "Will Survivor Survive the Internet?" *Edmonton Sun*, January 16, 2004.

22. Wezzie, e-mail correspondence with author, August 29, 2004.

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2. Jeff Smith, "Getting the Massg: U.S. Wireless Carriers Mining the Airwaves for Ways to Profit from Text Messaging," *Rocky Mountain News*, May 19, 2003.

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4. "AT&T Wireless Text Messaging Takes Center Stage with Unprecedented Performance on Fox's American Idol," *PR Newswire*, April 16, 2003.

5. Scott Collins and Maria Elena Fernandez, "Unwanted Wrinkles for Idol," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 2004, p. 1.

6. Stuart Elliott, "The Media Business: Some Sponsors Are Backing Off to Fine-Tune the Art of Blending Their Products into Television Shows," *New York Times*, January 22, 2003.

7. Jennifer Pendleton, "Idol a Standard for Integration," *Advertising Age*, March 24, 2003.