**The Contraflow of Anime Fandom via Weeaboos and Pokémon**

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**Abstract**

Though globalization is often seen as a force that usually spreads the ideas found in the core of the hegemony, this being the West, to nations that were historically considered as periphery, this often ignores aspects of “contraflow” or counter-flow that results in culture from these other nations back into the West. The idea that information, or perhaps more specifically certain types of media, can spread backwards from these nations stands in stark contrast to the ideas presented by the typical cultural imperialism models, in which this culture would be completely erased instead. In order to best understand how media production is changing in a globalized world, anime serves as a case study to show how media produced in a “periphery” nation such as Japan has subverted and changed how media is produced in the West, due in part to the communities and cultures that consume them in these Western nations and due in part as well as the monumental success that Pokémon had within the West. In doing so, a look is taken at the value of the industry, moral panic that anime once had in the West, and the origins of the weeaboo.

*Keywords*: Anime, fandom, weeaboo, globalization, contraflow

In the past twenty years, there has been an uptick in cartoon television shows that are produced featuring aspects normally absent in this genre of show in the West: while much of the genre is still dominated by comedy-focused shows that orient themselves around singular, self-contained episodes popularized by the likes of *SpongeBob* and *The Simpsons,* which can be seen in shows such as *Adventure Time, Gravity Falls,* and *Rick and Morty*, shows like Avatar: *The Last Airbender* and its sequel *The Legend of Korra,* the recent Netflix reboots of *Voltron* and *She-Ra*, and the internet series *RWBY* all feature aspects that set them almost completely apart from their Western-made counterparts. These shows all focus on continual plotlines that do not start and then end up resolved in a singular episode and feature stylization that is nothing like most Western-produced media in the way of characters that are designed in ways that make them seem both extremely exaggerated while also being close to reality, something nothing like most Western cartoons. More specifically, these shows are made in a way that far more resembles anime, which is the Japanese term for animation and, in the West, usually refers explicitly to Japanese-made animation and its style.

While *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is the most prominent example of these anime-esque shows to reach mainstream success in the West – especially after it, too, was recently brought onto Netflix and back into the public eye, these anime-inspired shows and series like them often have thriving internet communities that are in love with them that congregate on sites like Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, and even 4chan, and these communities all have significant overlap with the internet communities in love with Japanese-made anime as well. The presence of these fan communities allows for a look at how globalization has allowed for both the spread of media in a sort of counterflow, a direct challenge to the concept of cultural imperialism, in how media is produced and consumed in Western communities, and for a more nuanced look at how fandoms prop up around globalized culture. Anime has resulted in a product that has cultural value beyond just the borders of Japan, and though it is not the only type of media to buck the trend of Western media’s dominance on the cultural hegemony, it is perhaps one that owes much of its success due to the internet.

In his talk of contraflow, Dr. Daya Thussu (2019) explicitly refers to Japanese animation as one of the types of media that has grown greatly due to the access to things like the internet, but he mostly focuses on the rise of telenovas, a type of show that had originally started in Brazil, Chinese media, India’s Bollywood, and international news outlets like RT and Al Jazeera as examples of media that have been able to evolve and expand as a result of contraflow. References to anime as contraflow are limited, and thus miss both the length of time that anime has existed as a media produced in a periphery but consumed in the West and its impact on Western nations own production. Though Thussu’s description of contraflow is a much-needed one to be able to understand the base-layer concepts that would end up with anime’s success in the West, by limiting the discussion to anime to be only saying that “other products, notably Japanese animation have been entertaining younger generations across the world since the 1970s” (p. 195) both ignores its effects on media production and the true fan communities that consume the bulk of anime and anime-like Western animations.

It ignores, too, the size of the Japanese animation industry. According to a April of 2019 report by the Association of Japanese Animation, the anime industry was worth 2,181.4 billion yen, which, as of December 15th, 2020, would be a value of over 21 billion dollars in the United States – and according to that same report, the overseas market makes up roughly half of that value, of which then North America makes up 42.9% of the overseas market and Europe, listed distinctly from Eastern Europe, makes up 11.4%. The internet, as well, is where the anime industry showed some of the most growth according to this report. This report, as well, provides one of the key insights as to show one of the key factors for the success of anime in the West: by listing how Pokémon’s *music* is one of the medias that produces the most royalties in the past three years, there shows one of the key influences in the past thirty years that provided a mass-market interest in anime.

By analyzing Pokémon’s success, we can also see a key reason that a lot of the anime seen as “socially acceptable” to watch in the West is successful: Iwabuchi (2004), in *The rise and fall of Pokémon,* describes the culture that Pokémon carries with it in its production as “culturally odorless” (pg. 57), much like other Japanese exports. The products that Japan exports do not try to sell a Japanese way of life, according to Iwabuchi, nor do they sell Japanese aesthetics much either; they do not challenge the Western hegemony, and in a way, they slightly reinforce it by, unconsciously or not, “choose not to draw realistic Japanese characters when they wish to draw attractive characters” (Iwabuchi, 2004, p. 58). To a mass market, this makes the media more palatable; to an involved audience, their involvement would begin to dip their toes into the anime market and, from there, into the “otaku” subculture that would lead to them yearning for Japan much like how there had been an earlier yearning in Japan for the “coolness” of American popular culture.

This otaku subculture, however, was not without moral panic within the West at one point. As Iwabuchi briefly touches on, there once was a negative perception of Japanese culture through the idea of Japan being see as the “land of otaku who avoid physical and personal contact” from their usage of technology, which hearkens back to how the modern cyberpunk genre originally got its styling from that very same fear being used to detail the landscapes of the original *Bladerunner* film when Japan and Hong Kong seemed poised to overtake, or at least upset, the Western hegemony.

Jacob Lacuesta (2020) notes how, too, much of the modern perspectives on Western otakus was shaped by relatively minor media:

Much of these conceptions stems from moral panic from the mainstream. The non-mainstream manga produced within the subculture contained images of moral dilemma including but not limited to yaoi, which is centered upon homosexual romance; lolicon, which often fetishizes the image of the prepubescent girl; traps, young boys who look feminine; and pornography. These images, though minor, became the definitive conceptions of the otaku through the imagination of the public. Moral panic exacerbated by a media on the offensive permanently solidified negative connotations as a result of a single incident. In 1989, a man infamously known as The Otaku Murderer was caught for the murders and rapes of four young schoolgirls. (p. 3)

These perceptions, though, are often only levied against the people who go too in-depth into their obsession with anime. As noted by Jesse Christian Davis (2008, p. 44), much like how stereotypical nerds and geeks were modelled off of Westerners who were obsessed with media such as Star Trek and Star Wars, but while the public perceptions of those obsessed with Western media label them as “dorky” in a way that has slowly shifted to become more socially acceptable, the stigma still permeates strongly around those who are seen as too obsessed with anime publicly. Though otaku is one-such word to describe this phenomenon, over the past two decades there have been a wide variety: Japanophile is, perhaps, the most sterile way to describe it, while the slur “wapanese” – a portmanteau of white and Japanese – was once used, having fallen out of favor for both being a slur and, of all things, as a result of a 4chan word filter that replaced said slur with the now extremely popular term “weeaboo”, which was once just a meaningless word from a webcomic.

Davis, too, notes the power that Pokémon had in bringing anime to the mainstream. Though late-night shows such as Cartoon Network’s Toonami, which streamed anime later at night, helped introduce people to anime – and even streamed Pokémon as well – there was simply no match for the widespread appeal that Pokémon had. While Pokémon explains the mainstream attempts to copy its style as capitalism sought to try to replicate its profits – and, in cases like *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, succeeded if based from the reviews and the viewership numbers. In this, the attempts at a counterflow-based hybridization via the absorption of stylization and methodology of anime to create a successful Western media is highlighted best, and the mainstream success of anime becomes self-evident in its basis as a culturally-sterile product that is easily consumed. Via Pokémon and the attempts to replicate its success, anime had secured its foothold within the West.

Anime as a successful symbol of contraflow might be able to be chalked up to a lucky hit; however, this denies the second reality of anime’s success through globalization that is found within two sites: Netflix and Crunchyroll. As Lule (Lule, 2018, pp. 64-65) notes, a lot of globalization’s current effects on our society can be felt through the means of digital media and its influence on the consumption of media. As digital media has evolved how we shop, get our information, be involved in politics, and interact with friends, it has affected how we consume more “traditional” media as well, like television and movies, and the success of Netflix in this realm is self-evident by looking at phrases that have popped up into vernacular like “Netflix and chill”, even if they are rather crass. Among the media that Netflix has included in its repertoire is anime, and Crunchy Roll exists as a streaming site much like Netflix except solely focused on anime, making it much more accessible to one audience in particular: the self-proclaimed weeaboos who have taken the insult used against them and, instead, adopted it as a moniker.

Though anime fan communities have existed for as long as anime has been brought into the United States, organizing, as Andrew McKevitt (2010) noted, within “clubs, conventions, and in the creation of an underground, self-published, English-language literature” (p. 905), the conversations that would then take place over the internet would expand the community and, in a sense, serve as a sense of contraflow through these fan communities to “globalize Americans”, as Andrew describes it. This is a community, however, that’s resistant to attempts to localize anime to suit Western tastes: heated debates on message boards have been raged between the preferences for “subs vs dubs”, or subtitling versus audio dubbing. To many anime fans, subtitles are the superior option because it allows them to experience anime as it was made for Japanese audiences and without any potential mistakes or confusions that might be required to make a dubbed anime match up with the animation on screen. They see themselves as part of the intended audience, not a new audience; Western anime fans just want to be considered anime fans and not a specific market that has to be advertised and accommodated for to sell products – ideas that, in their own way, hearkens upon ideas of a global cosmopolitan, even if some of the “weeaboos” may think of Japanese culture to be superior to their own.

A mixture of hybridization, in the form of Western cartoons that emulate anime’s style, and contraflow, in the consumption of Japanese cultural production within anime regardless of whether it may be “odorless” or not by fan communities, has lead to Western audiences in North America and Europe being responsible for a quarter of the total value produced by Japanese-produced anime, and both hybridization and contraflow are direct results of the globalized world that these “core” and “periphery” nations exist in. Much of the mainstream success and profits of anime within the West can attribute some of their success to Pokémon for its role in being media palatable – and extremely marketable – to Western audiences, it is clearly not the only cause for anime’s rise to Western popularity, with fandoms themselves being responsible for the consumption on dedicated services to them. In doing so, anime highlights the problems with a strict cultural imperialism thesis, the power of palatable contraflow media, and the power that fan communities can have.

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