3

Fans as creators…

Andy Aldridge is what you might call a card-carrying Savant. He's never actually been in a band, though he's been learning to play the piano for the past four years, and his day job is in the BBC Archives. Always a fan but never an extrovert, for many years in his youth Andy lacked a network of other fans with whom to discuss his enthusiasms. Now he is at the center of a group of nearly 400 such fans, having invested his technical and creative skills in building his own web archive dedicated to his favorite band, Galaxie 500, and all the other bands and duos in which its members have gone on to perform.

Andy's site (www.grange85.co.uk/galaxie) carries an extraordinary amount of detail—for example, a discography with details of each song, cross-referenced to set lists for each live gig where the song was played—much more than you could ever find on any official site, on allmusic, or via any other source. The website was created in 1994, and a year later Andy added an email group to enable all the fans who had contacted him to communicate with each other. It is through the dialog in this email group that I, among many others, have been kept up to date with the activities of the Galaxie 500 musicians, have been prompted to find out more via the website, and have discovered the music of similar bands via recommendations from fellow fans. This range of resources and community dialog represents a not unusual example of how an influential part of the fan economy works, and how it catalyzes new discoveries.

We will come back to the community aspects of how a group of fans start to cluster together later in this chapter, but for now I want to concentrate on the creative and leadership role played by the most committed fans.

People like Andy collate, coordinate, and filter the information they come across. Then they organize and interpret it to make it easier for others to digest. They are doing more than just pointing the way to good foraging ground. They are farming and refining, making a patch of ground more fertile.

The unpaid work that Andy does in bringing together such a rich range of information and pointers could be win–win–win for a number of people. First, fellow fans, especially "beginners," can gain a mine of useful indicators to which albums they might want to explore, as well as an overview of an extended network of musicians from the same stable. Second, the bands concerned clearly stand to benefit from having someone who plays the roles of both archivist and informal fan club moderator (they have given Andy permission to reproduce some of their copyright material; some of the band members participate in online discussions; and they invited Andy to manage the official Galaxie 500 MySpace page on their behalf). Andy's site is *the* online destination that does most to maintain and support fan interest, and to encourage catalog sales. Finally, any third-party platform that hosted or licensed Andy's material would enhance its offering to its users. So far, the closest example of this is the MySpace Galaxie 500 page (www.myspace.com/galaxie500official), which includes an automated "feed" of news from his own site, as well as edited highlights from that site and the usual audio and video clips.

A pyramid of influence

...It's understandable that a lot of people in the marketing and media industries are interested in identifying,

encouraging, and—if possible—enlisting influential members of the fan community like Andy Aldridge. In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell introduces the idea that certain key people can act as what he called "Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen" in spreading ideas and starting word-of-mouth epidemics.[22] Paralleling this terminology, the buzz marketing sector has coined various bowdlerized terms such as Alphas, Influentials℠, and E-fluentials[23] to denote the minority of influential thought leaders.

In the context of driving business growth through corporate brands, Sven Rusticus refers to Brand Advocates, the people so satisfied with their experience of a brand that they will promote it to others under their own steam.[24] He distinguishes them from Brand Adorers, who are loyal but not so vocal, and Brand Adopters, who are just regular users. He represents these three groups as a pyramid, reproduced as part of Figure 1, to show that the Advocates are smaller in number but significant in their influence and impact. This is where the parallels with degrees of activism and leadership in online communities get interesting, and a link can also be made with the Savant/Enthusiast/Casual/Indifferent classification in the previous chapter.

On his blog, Bradley Horowitz, vice-president of Product Strategy at Yahoo!, reports that just 1% of users of the Yahoo! Groups online community services actually animate their groups by starting them or initiating new discussion threads.[25] This compares with 10% who make modest contributions, frequently in response to someone else, and, of course, 100% who are assumed to read material contributed by others (though nine out of ten of them "lurk" without participating). While Horowitz refers to these three groups as Creators, Synthesizers, and Consumers respectively, I use the terms Originator, Synthesizer, and Lurker (to avoid confusion with the different senses in which creator and consumer are used in this book). He also represents them as a pyramid—included in Figure 1—

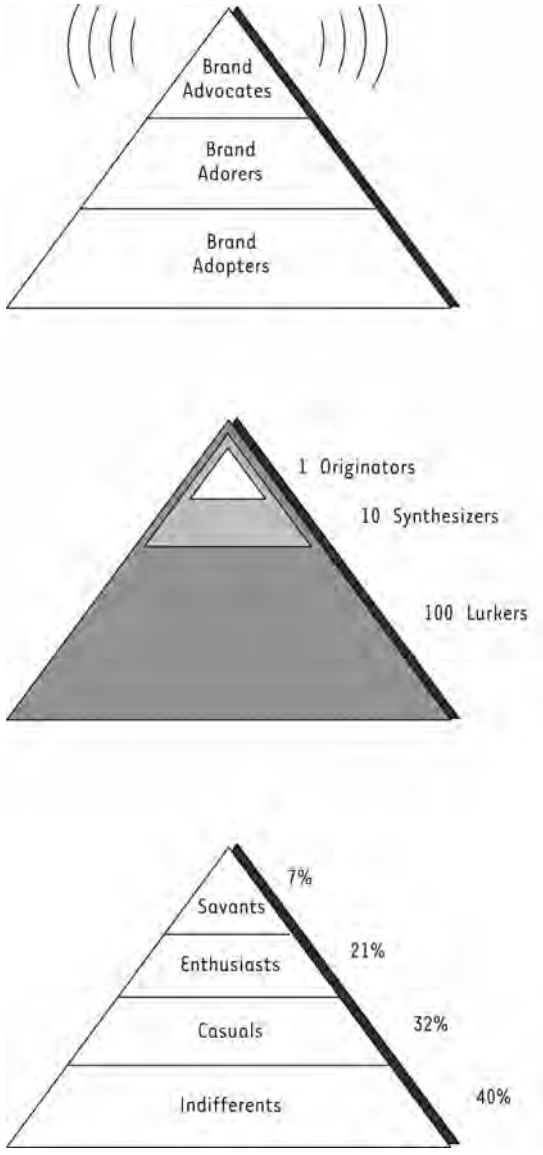

Figure 1: *Pyramids of influence and activity*

Top pyramid adapted from Rusticus, S. (2006) "Creating Brand Advocates" in Kirby, J. & Marsden, P. (2006) *Connected Marketing: The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*, London: Butterworth-Heinemann. Middle pyramid adapted from Horowitz, S. (2006) "Creators, Synthesizers, and Consumers," http://www.elatable.com/blog/?p=5, 17 February.

though in this case the different categories are nested within each other, as each creator is also a synthesizer and a consumer of other people's contributions.

Is it in fact possible to overlay the categories from the Project Phoenix data on these pyramids, as I have suggested in Figure 1? It's clearly not the case that every Savant is an Originator. Not all Savants are confident or concerned enough to create original material related to their favorite music. But they don't have to be. The scale and reach of the net are such that we need only a minority within a minority group to be active in order to create rich and sophisticated material—like Andy Aldridge's site—that other fans can productively explore. If only one in seven of the Savants is interested in contributing something original to the fan community, and even if their contribution is just an interesting new topic of discussion rather than a comprehensive site, then the figures still tally sufficiently to generate a sustainable stream of useful material.

The values of Savants also coincide considerably with the characteristics of blog culture, as defined earlier in this book. We saw in the previous chapter that the Insider group of Savants places strong emphasis on authenticity, individual "grassroots" voices, sharing of opinions and content, and building communities of interest. Thus a proportion of them are "natural" bloggers.

So there seems to be at least some consistency between the three pyramids in Figure 1. It may be a moot point, however, whether a pyramid is always the right way to represent these different levels of commitment, activity, and interest. Horowitz refers to his pyramid as representing value creation. Those few at the top do more to create, maintain, and animate online communities than do the relatively passive larger group at the bottom. His point is that communities do not require majority participation in order to be successful and to generate content and relationships that their members find valuable. Indeed, the

pyramid could instead be an iceberg, with 10% visible and the rest lurking out of view.

Nevertheless, while someone at the top of the pyramid may be more influential than an individual at the bottom, there are many more people at the bottom, and it would be dangerous to infer that influence flows in only one direction. People define themselves and their tastes as much by what they're not as by what they are. As we saw in the previous chapter, some Savants explicitly react against what they perceive to be popular among the Casuals and Indifferents who represent mainstream opinion. Such opinion is rarely expressed in confident word-of-mouth recommendations, but tacitly, via the shopping basket. (Hence, for example, the phenomenon of artists and bands that achieve significant sales while it is rare to find anyone who will publicly admit to liking them.)

Another point to emphasize is that these figures and fractions apply *within* particular communities but not right across the population. No one is saying that only 1 percent of people on the net create original or influential material. Many of us are Originators in the fields that most interest us, Synthesizers in others, and just Lurkers in the areas we are casually interested in. The way we distribute our creative energies is similar to the way attention and sales are distributed across the entertainment market, and one man's Big Hit is another man's Long Tail obscurity.

Originators and synthesizers join forces

...So what are the ways in which Savants or Enthusiasts can express themselves and demonstrate some leadership across the fan economy? Blogs are one obvious route, and they can be used both to originate and to synthesize. Many blog posts point to other websites and, indeed, to other posts on other blogs. In doing this, they digest and synthesize the web,

making it more comprehensible to other like-minded people. Gradually, clusters of bloggers emerge, reinforcing each other and developing a loose network of affiliated people and ideas.

In line with Bradley Horowitz's original focus on Yahoo! Groups, another way you can participate creatively is through email or web-based groups. You might either instigate a new discussion—let's say, write a review of a new film you've just seen that connects with the group's interests—or react to the opinions of others. A lot of discussion in online groups is also a kind of collective synthesizing and digestion of relevant news: new releases, tours, series, or appearances.

On blogs and online discussion groups, different opinions sit side by side. You can remain independent of others and agree to disagree. In wikis like Wikipedia, it's a different story. A wiki is a website that allows its users to add, remove, or otherwise edit all (or almost all) the content on its pages. The wiki approach seeks to merge different voices to arrive at a coherent consensus statement. This means that over time, the pages become collaborative endeavors, drawing on the knowledge of several contributors.

In keeping with blog culture, wikis reverse the traditional publishing model of "expert writes, everyone else pays." In Wikipedia the theory is that anyone writes and no one pays.[26] In practice, though, as with other areas of online creation, it turns out that only a tiny minority of people do write. Wikipedia's own figures suggest that the number of active editors and contributors is between 0.5 and 4% of registered users, depending on the measure of activity—and a significant proportion of Wikipedia readers are not registered.[27]

In 2004, I created the original Wikipedia entry for a particular album, *69 Love Songs* by The Magnetic Fields. In the following two years it was edited over 50 times, though the main descriptive text in the entry remained substantially the same as the first version. About ten of these edits were minor corrections

and updates that I made, but the others were contributed by a range of other Wikipedians and mainly related to standardizing the entry to make it look more like those for other albums: adding a track listing, adding categories and a chronology to position the album among others, adding links to other entries, and correcting the format of citations to conform to the Wikipedia standard.

It seems this is a common pattern on Wikipedia. People contribute blocks of information in areas where they have significant expertise (Originators), but then a large number of small edits are made that put this information in the right context and presentation format (Synthesizers).[28] In this case, then, it's actually the Synthesizers who are the most regular editors and the Wikipedia "insiders"—much like a traditional magazine or reference source, where a core staff would edit and lay out the work of a much wider but looser group of contributors.

If you're in any doubt about the importance and influence of the material generated by fans on blogs and wikis, consider the cases where mainstream entertainment adapts in the light of what fans say about it online. The cult ABC TV series *Lost* provides one example. It's impossible to quantify reliably the mass of commentary and reaction that this series has generated, but it's a lot. This includes the Lostpedia site (lostpedia.com), which is explicitly modeled on Wikipedia but concerned exclusively with the series, as well as an ABC official wiki (lostwiki.abc.com). Lostpedia provides episode-by-episode synopses, profiles of the characters, details of locations, and analyses of recurring themes. Though most of the links on the site refer within the *Lost* universe, some also point outside, as in the catalog of appearances of literary works in the series.

In his blog article "Why *Lost* is genuinely new media,"[29] Dan Hill refers to these kinds of sites as metamedia, existing as they do in a critical symbiosis with the original media content for which they provide commentary. The idea of such commentaries

is itself not new. Companion works to guide audiences through the finer points of Shakespeare's plays have been published for centuries, for example. But there is a spectrum from editor-led, one-way reference works through to editor-free, community-led dynamic sites (this spectrum is the central topic of Chapter 5).

Hill indexes a massive array of online discussions about *Lost*—of which Lostpedia is just the tip of the iceberg—and argues that the collaborative nature of these enterprises amounts to a kind of "social life" of the television series, such that it "uses the entire web as its canvas and its entire audience as its creators." The audience (or, as with Wikipedia, a small but committed percentage of the audience) picks up the elements of the programs and uses them as a currency for conversation, speculating about possible plot explanations. And these conversations may, Hill suggests, feed back into the development of the series.

The games industry takes this even further, and several commentators have asked whether multiplayer games like Second Life point the way to a future where the consumers—if that is still the right word—are actively involved in creating the experience they enjoy.[30] Second Life enables its users to create their own artefacts and even their own businesses within the virtual world of the game. Players retain intellectual property rights in their virtual creations, and some make a tidy profit from their endeavors. There is a risk of overgeneralizing from a medium that overtly expects you to be an active participant to other media—film and recorded music, literature, or broadcast—that give you more limited scope for interaction. However, the fundamental point remains. Communities of fans naturally self-organize into Originator, Synthesizer, and Lurker roles, and there is a cycle of influence between these roles that can significantly affect the word-of-mouth reputation of a book, film, piece of music, or game.

Communities of practice

...As we look into the details of how groups coordinate their shared activities within the fan economy, we start to see how supposed leisure pursuits take on many of the characteristics of the world of work, particularly in terms of the division of labor. The difference, of course, is that no one is giving orders in these groups, and there are no contracts in place to ensure continuity and loyalty to common goals. But the fans have what every employer aims to instill: a shared commitment that comes from *inside themselves*. And via the net—with its communications channels of blogs, wikis, and messaging—they can develop large-scale resources together.

In their shared and active commitment to music or video, fans can sometimes demonstrate similar achievements and similar ways of learning from each other to those that you might find in a workplace. The development of Lostpedia is an example of such an achievement. Research into how learning spreads between people engaged in shared activities refers to the groups concerned as "communities of practice." These share some activity-oriented purpose, which plays a part in defining their identity within the group. Typically communities of practice include both core and peripheral members—the core members being the "old hands" while the peripheral members are serving a kind of informal apprenticeship.[31]

Andy Aldridge may have been the instigator of the Galaxie 500 website and email list, but he's at pains to point out that there's a lot more going on among the fan community than the activities he initiates, and that the community that has grown up around these channels is by no means "his." The fans have—among many other things—contributed set lists and photographs from concerts around the world; worked out the guitar chords for most of the repertoire of songs; recorded and privately distributed their own tribute album; and researched the feasibility

and costs of producing a privately distributed vinyl release of a CD-only album. For a while, another community member operated a server where live recordings were collated and shared. (Some of these activities have involved sharing of copyright material; the community was in touch with the bands' members and withdrew any material to which the performers objected.[32])

By doing things together over time—the "practice"—communities of practice achieve several things. First, and most obviously, they get things done: creating a free public listing of performances by a band, for example.

Secondly, they develop a shared way of working together, what leading theorist Etienne Wenger calls a "shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems."[33] In the case of the Galaxie 500 community, this would include when (and how) to use the server, experiences of previous "flame wars" on the email list and how they were resolved, the ethical codes of what is and is not legitimate digital copying, together with shared memories of meet-ups at gigs and which albums have topped the fans' polls over the years. Andy Aldridge observes that none of the people who were active and vocal in the community ten years ago (with the exception of himself) is still active today. But the character of the exchanges has stayed remarkably similar despite the changes in personnel. This is the power of collectively and tacitly understood customs.

Thirdly, learning and discovery are inevitable by-products of these shared practices. The activities may be led by the core members of the community, but over time the other members get the hang of things, either simply by lurking on the email list or by playing some supporting role that justifies the core members showing them the ropes. Andy surprised me when I met him by telling me that word-of-mouth recommendation via the email list he started is one of the main ways in which he discovers new bands. So influence does not just flow from the head of the pyramid to its base.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for a community of music fans, the extended period of doing things together gives a sense of collective identity linked to their favorite bands. This is helped by the fact that, in the case of the Galaxie 500 email discussion list, various members of the bands have themselves been part of the list, sometimes passing on the latest news about albums and tours from the horse's mouth, and even offering their own guest-list passes to community members who traveled long distances for a farewell gig.

In common with many active fan groups, the Galaxie 500 online community has evolved into a self-organized and self-regulating channel for communications, support, and learning, which reflects again three levels of commitment, similar to Originators, Synthesizers, and Lurkers. The Originators look after the technical and social infrastructure of the community. In return for this unpaid work as ambassadors for the band's music, they may enjoy personal relationships with the band and other "gift economy" favors such as being invited to after-show parties. The Synthesizers back up the Originators' efforts with moral support and occasional offers of practical help. Through this process they develop the competences to take their place in the core group of Originators if necessary. Any Lurker members will initially just be passive members on the periphery of the online community. Over time they may grow in confidence or be drawn into group discussion and activities, thus graduating to become Synthesizers; alternatively, they may pick up a little useful information and then just leave.

A sustainable community of fans manages the ebb and flow of core activities in such a way that it maintains a stream of information and exploration to keep the majority of its members interested. In the gaps between album releases and tours there is only so much trivia and fan polls that can keep discussion flowing. In these circumstances, the Galaxie 500 mailing list follows the practice of many other online forums in discussing music by other

bands that fans might like. Any member of the list might suggest a new band to discuss, and before long a canon of other bands that are frequently mentioned emerges. Thus the community becomes another channel whereby new music can percolate between Savants and Enthusiasts and on to more Casual listeners. As well as the community aspect (the C in TLC), this process also demonstrates discovery through associative links, since every band discussed on the Galaxie 500 email list is implicitly linked to Galaxie 500.

The canon of bands linked to Galaxie 500 by the fan community overlaps with the lists of similar artists in the Galaxie 500 allmusic and Last.fm entries—all include Low, Yo La Tengo, and The Feelies, for example—but the former also includes other bands that are personal favorites of core members of the community.

Playlists and personality

...It takes only a small minority of active users, then, to create valuable resources and sustain a thriving community. The likes of Yahoo! and Wikipedia can take consolation from this. But that doesn't mean that they wouldn't like to encourage a greater proportion of their users to become active. Happily, technology is taking some of the creative activities that used to be the preserve of professionals and Savants and making them easier for more casual fans to get to grips with, while social networking sites are providing the motivation to create as a means of personal expression.

Tagging is one example, because the new services mean that it is a cinch to tag images, songs, and web resources. A recent study found that 28% of US internet users have tagged content online,[34] reinforcing the point that such practices are not limited to small numbers of Originators and Synthesizers who go round organizing everything on the net. Another example already

touched on earlier in the book is the creation and sharing of playlists. One way of looking at these lists is as trails that foragers leave behind them to indicate to others a rewarding and fruitful path through the mass of available material.

Cultural insiders and curators have been creating lists of books and art for centuries. From the 1970s music Savants and Enthusiast fans used the new cassette format to produce mix tapes of their favorite songs, which they passed around (sometimes with hand-drawn cover art and extensive sleeve notes) in order to turn their friends on to their latest discoveries. Sometimes I used to edit multiple fragments of a few seconds between songs to create an aural collage; making a 90-minute mix tape of this kind with analog technology could be a day's work. Using the drag-and-drop technology of Apple's iTunes software, I can compile a 90-minute digital playlist in about a minute. I can then upload that list to one of many playlist-sharing websites to get feedback and ratings from friends and fellow fans. Thus playlists come within the reach of Casual, or even Indifferent, music listeners.

In his book *iPod Therefore I Am*,[35] Dylan Jones shows some of the potential of the playlist format when he imagines what would have happened if The Beatles had not split after the release of the *Abbey Road* album but had gone on to record one further album in 1970, titled *Everest*. He provides a track listing for the album, which he has compiled for his iPod using songs written by each of the four Beatles around 1970 and subsequently released under their own names. Jones also writes the story of how the album came about, how George Harrison persuaded the others to postpone the split of the band, how John Lennon argued for the inclusion of one particular track, and how George Martin, as producer, held the ship together. Jones concludes, "*Everest* is just one example of how an entire oeuvre can be reconfigured using iTunes, how a whole career can be re-examined, re-edited and born again."

As well as giving us an insight into music tracks themselves, playlists often seem to open up another window on the person that created them. That's why celebrity playlists are popular, with Apple introducing them to the iTunes Store in its early days, record labels commissioning celebrities to make compilation albums, and radio stations hiring everyone from Bob Dylan to Courtney Pine and Lulu as DJs for specialist shows. Not waiting—or not wanting—to be hired, David Byrne streams his playlist from his website (www.davidbyrne.com/radio).

Many Savants really go to town on their playlists, displaying the fruits of extensive research. Ernest Paik is a Chattanooga-based fan of the songwriter Stephin Merritt, an artist who is himself distinguished by his scholarly knowledge of musical traditions and his willingness to reference multiple cultural sources in his work. For a year, Ernest published his Stephinsources MP3 blog (stephinsources.blogspot.com) in weekly instalments. Styled as "the songs that inspired the songs about songs," each instalment introduced one or two new artists, provided details of how Stephin Merritt had cited or drawn on their work, and provided the means briefly to try out a couple of their songs. Over time the blog grew to become a scholarly reference source, intricately hyperlinked to the interviews, profiles, and other documentation on which it drew, and an extended essay on a particular aspect of Merritt's creative practice. It was also a fictional celebrity playlist.[36]

Software like iTunes makes it possible for listeners much less committed than Ernest Paik to compile playlists, almost without thinking about it. The desire to project your own identity, and to sneak insights into other people's tastes, is what drives a lot of playlist sharing. This was shown graphically in the case of 13 co-workers, all based in the same office, who were able to browse each other's music collections using their company's internal computer network.[37] Researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology and Palo Alto Research Center

found that these people, some of whom did not know each other well, consciously worked to portray themselves in certain ways through the collections of music they chose to share. In one example, a participant was anxious about what his colleagues would think of him in the light of the Justin Timberlake and Michael McDonald music that they could find on his computer. He had purchased it, he said, "for his wife."

The researchers demonstrate how people use music to manage the way other people see them, an area of identity management that was defined by Erving Goffman's sociological classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.[38] Because music is an imprecise way of communicating your personality, and because this group of co-workers also included a mix of Enthusiasts and Casuals with different musical interests and knowledge, the self-portrayals were sometimes misread by colleagues. Nevertheless, as the research showed, the activity of music sharing helped to build a community within the workplace as the co-workers came to find out more about each other.

Several software applications and web services now exist that make it easy to compile lists of books, films and videos, or games, and then publish them online for friends and strangers to peruse. These each have the same narrative and essayistic potential as music playlists, in the way that they encourage people to make associative links between different items, and it is equally possible to try to "read" an acquaintance's or a celebrity's personality from such lists. What is not so feasible—with the exception of short films or videos—is to cue up a playlist of books and games, press "play," and enjoy the results in a reasonably short period.

What the examples in this chapter begin to illustrate are some of the ways in which cultural discoveries are transmitted through groups of people. Some groups come together explicitly for the purpose of discussing music or entertainment and keeping up with what's going on. These groups can develop a strong and

persistent sense of community—and generate practical, useful information in the process—with just a minority of active participants.

Most of us also belong to other groups (at work or elsewhere) that have nothing to do with culture or entertainment. But the ease of sharing playlists and other collections of favorites via the net can encourage mutual exploration of each other's tastes. In this case we're driven not by curiosity about music or films *per se*, but by the opportunity to find out more about our neighbors or colleagues. And in the process of doing that, we find out more about music, films, books, and other stuff.