Audiovisual translation and fandom

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Introduction

Fan-based audiovisual translation (AVT) constitutes a relatively new entry in the broader discipline of translation studies, only emerging as a recognizable phenomenon during the 1980s and beginning to attract dedicated research from the late 1990s onward. Significantly, this timeline mirrors that of AVT studies itself that, as Pérez-González (2014: 2) notes, ‘only began to gain traction after the surge of translation studies in the 1990s’. In this sense, these histories are conjoined. AVT ‘proper’ and its fan-based aberration developed contemporaneously. Nevertheless, within the discipline, fan AVT is typically identified as marginal, peripheral and ‘improper’. It is not difficult to understand why. Fan AVT forms part of the broad sphere of non-professional translation (see Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012) and is largely amateur, free, unregulated and even illegal. Prone to errors and inconsistencies, such translation activity tends to pass under the radar of much academic and industry discourse and research.

Against these odds, fan AVT has risen to prominence nevertheless, in no small part due to its exponential global reach that has flourished off the back of networking technologies and file sharing protocols. Affixed in this way to technological shifts (see O’Hagan 2013), the growth of fan subtitling, dubbing and videogame translation registers another home truth about AVT as a whole: it is hostage to the winds of technological change. As both a field of practice and academic discipline, AVT must continually reinvent itself, shape-shifting in response to new media platforms and formats. This pressure reveals the key to fandom’s success and ongoing significance for the field at large. If nothing else, fan practices distinguish themselves from other AVT types through their unauthorized and unregulated exploration of new technologies, with fans identified as particularly adept consumers or ‘lead users’ (Von Hippel 1986) that proactively mine new platforms and protocols in order to unlock emergent, often unforeseen, capabilities. Fans track how technological developments increasingly place media and the translation of media content in the hands of receivers. As Pérez-González (2014: 84) argues, discussion of such bottom-up practice ‘brings to the fore the extent to which . . . audiovisual translation has now become a fluid and decentralized arena of unprecedented accessibility and diversity that is fast moving beyond existing means of analysis and critique’.
As Fernández Costales (2011) acknowledges, ‘amateur or fan translation is a phenomenon that can hardly be avoided’. Assisted by Web 2.0 and peering technologies, fan AVT networks have spread their tentacles all around the globe, attracting huge user numbers and accounting for a large percentage of peer-to-peer traffic which, according to an Envisional (2011) report, represented 25 per cent of worldwide Internet usage in 2011, although this figure has lessened more recently (Cisco 2017). This chapter examines this phenomenon from a range of perspectives (historical, ethical, industrial) in order to establish how fandom connects with many of the dominant themes and challenges presently facing AVT, and thus gain a better understanding of the place it occupies within this domain of translation practice and research. Initially, the section entitled ‘Historical overview’ looks back at the emergence of fansubbing—the most ubiquitous and long-standing mode of fan AVT. The following section, ‘Trending topics and debates’, canvasses the growing diversity of fan AVT types and the numerous issues and debates they engender. This section reflects on trending topics that preoccupy fans and researchers alike, mapping key ways in which fan practices are discussed within AVT discourse. Specifically, it tests out the theory that fan translators constitute exemplary ‘prosumers’ who leverage the affordances of digital and networking technologies to actively shape and participate within contemporary global culture. The link between media fandom and ‘participatory culture’ is then explored in more detail in the section entitled ‘Emergent trajectories: major/minor’, as fan AVT becomes increasingly embroiled within industry practices and professional parameters. This final section develops a case study of fan-to-riches start-up Viki Global TV (Viki, n.d.) and considers new fan AVT debates resulting from industry shifts towards streaming and on-demand content delivery. Throughout the chapter, language hierarchies within AVT flows and counter-flows are continually interrogated, linking the varied themes, topics and trends that characterize fan translation to broader questions around media and cultural access.

Currently, fan AVT encompasses a wide range of activities focused around three central practices: ‘fansubbing’ (fan subtitling), ‘fandubbing’ (fan dubbing) and videogame ‘romhacking’ (read-only memory hacking) or ‘translation hacking’. The related practice of ‘scanlation’ (manga and comics scanning and translation) does not fall within the remit of AVT, while ‘fanfic’ (fan fiction), and fan parody, music and ‘mashup’ videos can but do not necessarily involve translation at all. Hence, scanlation and fanfic remain outside the scope of this chapter. While fansubbing constitutes the most established form of fan AVT, fandubbing actually developed at the same time yet on a smaller scale and has received scant scholarly attention to date (see Nord et al. 2015). Video game ‘translation hacking’ emerged later during the 1990s and 2000s and, although expanding, remains a relatively niche activity due to the high-level of technical skill required to ‘reverse engineer’ videogame code (Newman 2008, Mangiron 2012). The fans that practice fansubbing, fandubbing and romhacking are individuals and, naturally, no two are alike. Nevertheless, although some fan translators work in isolation (Svelch 2013; Dwyer 2012), media fandom necessarily involves some sense of collectivity, developing around shared cultural objects or phenomena. Just as media forms address publics en masse, so media fandom necessarily partakes in processes of socialization. Moreover, a fandom is larger than the sum of its individual constituents. It constitutes a space as much as any recognizable entity or activity—a space of interaction, not only between individuals that constitute the fandom but also between fans and their objects of attention. In this era of digital dissemination and Web 2.0, the interactive space of media fandoms foster ‘supraterritorial’ modes of interconnection (Pérez-González 2014: 73). And, although often derided as a
form of passive or slavish devotion, fandom is anything but. Rather, it is reciprocal, performative and transformative, and has long constituted a decisive factor in the shaping of media industries, as film historian Donald Crafton (1999) explores in relation to early film and its associated, prolific fan press. It is for this reason that Paul Booth (2015) references previous sociological studies of fans to argue that fan identity is naturally hybrid and ambivalent, effortlessly careening between conformist consumerism and cultural resistance. It is important to recognize this hybridity as a residual characteristic of fandom in order to contextualize some of the claims repeatedly made in relation to fansubbing as ‘participatory culture’.

**Historical overview**

While fansubbing today constitutes an increasingly heterogeneous practice that crosses diverse genres, countries and languages, its historical emergence was firmly tied to Japanese animation (known as anime outside Japan). Moreover, while anime fansubbing began in the late 1980s, it has an extensive prehistory that connects to earlier forms of informal and specialized translation practice such as live interpreting and diverse forms of titling and captioning. To date, these connections remain under-examined within AVT studies. In this section, I trace some of these historical threads while charting the seminal influence of anime subculture on the development of fan AVT broadly. This discussion necessarily begins in the US, as it was here that anime first found international success during the early 1960s (Deneroff and Ladd 1996, Mäntylä 2010).

*Astro Boy* (1963–66), *Gigantor* (1963–66) and *Kimba, the White Lion* (1965–66) constitute heavily adapted and revoiced re-workings of Japanese productions and they were broadcast by commercial US television network NBC with their cultural origins domesticated to such a degree that most viewers were unaware at the time that they were cultural imports (Hawkins 2013, Vanhée 2006, Cubbison 2005). After NBC inexpensively acquired *Tetsuan Atom* in 1963, Fred Ladd adapted it for the American market. His US adaptation *Astro Boy* proved a big hit and NBC sold it in syndication to 50 stations around the country (Deneroff and Ladd 1996). This success continued with *Gigantor, Kimba, The White Lion* and *Speed Racer* (1967–68). As its popularity grew in the American market in the early 1970s, anime began to be exported to numerous countries around the globe, where it would become a popular mainstay of local television programming (Gosling 1996, Mäntylä 2010, Vanhée 2006, Ruh 2010, Bryce et al. 2010, Tezuka qtd. in Schodt 1983). Germany led the way, broadcasting *Speed Racer* in 1971 before embarking upon a successful series of anime co-productions including *Vicky the Viking* (1974–75) and *Maya the Bee* (1975–80) (Mäntylä 2010). *Anime* also found early popularity in Italy and France from 1973 and 1974 onwards, culminating in the late 1970s with *UFO Robot Grandizer* (1975–77) known as *Goldrake* in Italy and *Goldorak* in France (Gosling 1996, Mäntylä 2010).

The mid-1970s, however, would prove to be a crucial turning point in the commercial fortunes of anime in the US. While viewers in diverse parts of the world happily tuned in to dubbed or revoiced anime, in the US audiences that had grown up on a steady diet of anime favourites suddenly found themselves bereft, as new titles were cancelled. US lobby groups like Action for Children’s Television (see Furniss 1998) began to campaign against the perceived violence and sophisticated themes of some Japanese series and ‘discouraged distributors dumped their cartoons on Japanese-language cable channels’ (Jenkins 2006) where they tended to be shown with subtitles (Leonard 2005). It was to this subtitled anime
that the newly formed Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO) then turned. Founded in 1977, and consisting of 16 members of the well-established Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society (LASFS), C/FO is regarded as the first US anime fan club (Patten 2004). Over the next few years, C/FO branches began to emerge dotted around the country. They capitalized on the affordances of early video recording technologies to tape the programmes and distribute them amongst their fan networks alongside other content sourced straight from Japan—often via US soldiers stationed at military bases or through fellow science-fiction fans and pen pals (Leonard 2005, Patten 2004). This is how ‘fan distribution was born’ (Mäntylä 2010: 8). The sudden cessation of anime programming on US broadcast television produced the conditions necessary to spawn a pro-active fandom willing to take access, distribution and translation into their own hands, using any means possible. These fans mobilized themselves to hunt down, exhibit, share and translate anime in direct response to the market gap and ‘unsatisfied demand’ (Mäntylä 2010: 24) that emerged following the industry’s pulling of anime titles.

During the 1970s and up until the early 1980s, fans were not yet able to access the technology required to produce their own subtitles. Instead, they prepared translation booklets and synopses to accompany anime tapes and screenings. Containing line-by-line translations of the Japanese dialogue, these booklets were typically around 20 or 30 pages in length (Leonard 2004). Translation synopses, which simply summarized the main storyline and thereby enabled viewers to focus solely on the screen, rather than splitting attention between screen and page, were shorter (ibid.). These fan-produced materials recall some of the diverse methods used to translate films during the silent and early sound eras, when written synopses were often printed on the back of programmes or posted outside movie theatres or in their lobbies (Crafton 1999, Bowser 1990). Another type of informal fan translation practised in the early days of the C/FO involved live, spoken translation. When unsubtitled material was screened at anime conventions, it was often accompanied by a form of live, on-the-spot translation (Jenkins 2006), again echoing early cinema techniques of narrating and lecturing—traditions especially popular in Japan where katsuben (often referred to as benshi) accompanied both domestic and foreign film offerings, summarizing plots, translating intertitles, re-speaking dialogue and providing a particularly rich, performative layer of mediation that attracted huge followings (Anderson 1992). Such links between anime fandom and early modes of screen translation demonstrate significant continuities between fan, formal and informal modes of AVT. The varied techniques and traditions that feed into fansubbing and related activities suggest a role for informal practice in the development of translation culture broadly and especially in relation to AVT given the creativity required to transfer its complex multimodality.

According to Sean Leonard (2004, 2005), whose accounts of the fansubbing scene are based on numerous interviews with fansubbing and industry pioneers, the first fansub appeared in 1986. Yet it was not until 1989 that fansubs became widely accessible amongst the fan network. In 1986, Roy Black of C/FO Virginia added his own subtitles to an episode of anime title Lupin III that had been ‘genlocked’ to a Commodore Amiga PC. Consumer genlock (‘generator locking’) technology constituted the ‘essential hardware’ of the fansubbing movement (Leonard 2004: 10). Enabling the synchronization of two input signals simultaneously, genlocking made it possible for fans to superimpose subtitle tracks over video in real time. The results were then transferred onto videocassette tapes that were widely distributed across the fan network via fan-to-fan mail-order systems. Leonard estimates that in 1986, this technology would have cost around USD $4000 and notes it would have taken over a hundred hours of labour to produce a fansub. Such prohibitive costs
were soon overcome as new, more accessible technologies emerged. In 1989, the ‘earliest, widely-distributed’ fansub was produced by Ranma Project (ibid.: 47) using laserdisc technologies that dramatically reduced the degradation of the image characteristic of VCR copies (Hawkins 2013). The following year and through the 1990s, fansubbing exploded in direct parallel with growth in Internet usage amongst fans. Through the Internet, fan interest and demand grew rapidly, while digital advances significantly improved the quality, speed and efficiency of fansubbing practices. Newly networked fans now enjoyed advances in digital and peering technologies, producing digisubs and utilizing bitTorrent protocol. Over this period fan AVT also expanded to include new formats, platforms and media types including videogames.

Interestingly, from the early days of anime fandom, dubbing practices have exerted a major influence over the community. In the USA as in most other international markets, initial exposure to anime occurred via dubbed television broadcasts and it was these dubs that hooked viewers. Pioneer USA anime distributor Streamline Productions distinguished itself from other early fan-led companies, eschewing fan preference for subtitles in an effort to reach the broadest audience possible. It is notable that many dedicated fans also prefer dubbing, as illustrated by the phenomenon of fandubbing. The German-language fandub group Crash Dub Studios (Crash Dub Studios, n.d.), for instance, has translated a range of titles from Dragon Ball Z (1989–96) (Hatcher 2005) to Symphogear or Swan Song of the Valkyries (2012) and Fighter4Luv Fandubs (Fighter4Luv, n.d.) has produced an English dub of Sailor Moon (1992–7) (Rodríguez 2014). Generally, dubbing is considered a better to approximate ‘original’ viewing experience and make anime more accessible for pre-teens, thereby matching the target demographic of most anime series in Japan. As Anime News Network columnist Ryan Mathews notes, ‘[t]he amazing truth is that watching a good dub brings you much closer to the original experience than a subtitle’ (qtd. in Cubbison 2005: 49). Despite fandubbing’s long history, however, it is significantly under-represented within AVT and fandom research.

**Trending topics and debates**

**Getting up to speed**

With the explosion in fansubbing facilitated via digitization and online networking, fan AVT entered its present post-anime phase characterized not by any dearth of anime content but rather by huge expansion into diverse genres, languages, countries and contexts. Fansub groups dedicated to South American telenovelas (Tauro 2002), Korean dramas (Hu 2010, Van Rossum 2015) and German soap operas (Hellekson 2012) are now commonplace. However, despite such signs of diversification, by far the majority of non-anime fansub activity now occurs around US television series, with fans around the world seeking up-to-date access to hit shows such as Supernatural (Warner Bros. 2005–) (Mendes Moreira De Sa 2015), Big Bang Theory (CBS 2007–) (Massidda 2015, Qiu 2010, Tian 2011), Glee (Fox 2009–2015) (Casarini 2015), Californication (Showtime 2007–2014) (Massidda 2015), Lost (ABC 2004–2010) (Massidda 2015, Bruti and Zanotti 2014, Vellar 2011, Hu 2014, Vandresen 2012), Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011–) (Svelch 2013), True Blood (HBO, 2008–2014) (Bold 2011, Tian 2011), Prison Break (Fox 2005–2017) (Wang 2014) and CSI (CBS, 2000–2015) (Tian 2011). Increasingly these days global fansubbing activity aims to bring subtitled US television content to fans in the shortest turnaround times possible, commonly within 24 hours of a show’s first domestic airing, and prior
to the appearance of a professionally subtitled version. When the first season of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2010-) premiered in the Czech Republic in 2011, for example, tens of thousands of viewers downloaded fansubs rather than waiting a further six hours for the professionally subtitled version to become available on HBO Czech Republic, merely one day after the episode’s US debut (Svelch 2013). As Bold (2011) notes, ‘passionate non-Anglophone fans refuse to be left behind when American TV channels release new episodes of their favourite shows’.

This ‘need for speed’ has often been discussed by scholars in disparaging terms. Rayna Denison (2011: 12), for instance, ponders whether the rise of ‘speed subbing’ groups indicates a ‘shift in the fan culture from responsible to more profligate piracy’. Against this backdrop, fan demands for speedy access are often viewed negatively, and speed subbing is regarded as a superficial pursuit that prioritizes timing over quality (Denison 2011, Ito 2012). Such conclusions are too hastily drawn. Rather, fan demand for speed subbing needs to be contextualized in relation to notions of global connectivity and ‘transworld simultaneity’ (Scholte qtd. in Pérez-González 2014: 71). It also raises issues around global language politics and hierarchies. When fans demand instant access to the latest episode of an imported television series, they assert their rights as global citizens or ‘netizens’, with speed symbolizing a measure of equality. As Svelch (2013) and others have documented, fansubbers attract huge followings when they are able to circumvent windowed release strategies and other forms of geoblocking in order to provide timely access to recent releases. In this sense, ‘getting up to speed’ is about entering the conversation, speaking the same language (even if only metaphorically) and levelling the playing field.

Certainly, the need for speed speaks to fan interest in controlling both the means and manner of access—not just what but also how, when and where. As new technologies facilitate and indeed promote rhetoric about global connectivity and instant access, it should not come as a surprise to find that fans are utilizing new technologies to realize this ideal—mining the capabilities of networking to its full potential in order to partake in global culture as full citizens or netizens. In this way, speed subbing practices put to the test theories that extol the democratizing effects of new technologies (Pérez-González 2014), insisting upon the equitable distribution of global cultural content by reducing time lags. On the other hand, if so much current fansub activity and research revolves around timely access to US content, then what does this tell us about language politics and global screen dynamics more broadly? The manner in which speed subbing is increasingly coalescing around US television content in particular suggests the way in which informal modes of media distribution and translation can mirror, rather than disrupt, industry practices. How much is fan AVT contributing to translation flows that support US and Japanese entertainment giants, rather than helping to diversify content as well as language options? Perhaps with the current ascendancy of ‘Quality TV’ (Mittell 2015) dominated by US production powerhouses, fan AVT is facilitating cultural imperialism, ensuring the dominance of US media corporations on global television as well as the multiplex (González 2013). In this sense, informal fan AVT needs to be recognized for the part it is currently playing in replicating entrenched cultural hierarchies, contributing to the one-way nature of so much translation traffic from the US to the rest, as highlighted by Venuti (1995). According to Mattelart (2012: 746), informal modes of media distribution often buy into hegemonic power relations, and inequalities in access to pirated goods tend to echo those existing in relation to legal goods. To a degree, fansubbing bears out this theory as its reliance upon new technologies and high-speed Internet connections means it is only available to some. This idea that fansubbing might replicate rather than redress language inequalities is not without controversy, yet it is important to entertain this
idea in order to counter the over-exuberant way in which fansubbing is sometimes linked uncritically to notions of grassroots ‘people power’ and forms of cultural opposition. Such approaches gloss over many of the social complexities and language politics that motivate and delimit fansubbing activity, as will be elaborated upon in the next section.

**Participatory Prosumers**

It has become commonplace to identify fansubbers as ‘prosumers’ who proactively contribute to the shaping and rewriting of cultural products and, by extension, the cultural sphere. This line of thought can be traced back to some of the earliest scholarship on fansubbing (Díaz Cintas 2005, Pérez-González 2006, Jenkins 2006). To effectively engage with this claim, it is necessary to first explain the terminology used and conceptual lineage from which it derives. Coined by futurist Alvin Toffler (1980), the term ‘prosumer’ constitutes a portmanteau that combines ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ and, as Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009) explain, is commonly used to suggest that distinctions between the production and reception of cultural products have blurred so much so that consumers now actively participate in creation/production processes, constructing cultural products from scratch, shaping the course of their development, altering meanings and ultimately controlling their failure or success. The scholarly literature on this term and its varied applications is truly vast and I cannot hope to do justice to its breadth here. Instead, I will focus on the way in which this concept has become almost a preliminary for discussing fan interventions within AVT practice. This tendency can be interrogated somewhat by examining the Cultural Studies origins of Henry Jenkin’s influential iterations of this concept in relation to ‘participatory culture’. His discussion of participatory prosumers is, in turn, largely influenced by the concept of ‘cultural poaching’ developed by de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) to challenge then prevailing assumptions regarding the reception of mass media and popular culture. Significantly, both Jenkins and de Certeau refute the idea that media audiences are either passive or homogeneous and focus instead on the individual’s role in constructing meaning.

Since the publication of Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1988a), discourse around media fandom has shifted considerably. When Jenkins first began writing about *Star Trek* fans and ‘slash’ fanfiction (1988b), this group of avid media consumers was virtually ignored by media scholars and tolerated at best by the media industry. Fans tended to be denigrated as excessive, obsessive, socially immature and even degenerate. Today, the situation is dramatically different, as fan audiences have moved from the margins to become ‘the locus of television marketing and a major site of industrial strategy and practice’ (Johnson 2007: 62). Industry promotion of popular media properties now regularly seeks to attract fan participation, inviting audiences to create mashup parodies, music videos and the like. Major US TV series support transmedia franchises that target fans’ purchasing power as well as their free, promotional labour, sponsoring numerous fan contests and events like *Glee*’s 2009 ‘Who Is the Biggest GLEEk’ contest (Casarini 2015: 217) while offering tie-in merchandising, books, videogames, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), mobisodes, webisodes, podcasts, and wiki databases like *Lostpedia*. While transmedia tactics have long played a role in media marketing, transmedia extensions and storytelling that both cater to and generate a ‘hungry fanbase’ are becoming ever more ubiquitous (Mittell 2015).

Since Jenkins’ ground-breaking study, media fandom scholarship (including later work by Jenkins) has become considerably more nuanced and cognisant of the many situated complexities and internal hierarchies that structure fan communities and practices. Drawing on
a substantial body of fan scholarship from the 1990s, Booth (2015: 3) emphasizes fandom’s hybrid nature, as it both ‘lives off’ and resists media industries at one and the same time. Despite often manifesting a culturally oppositional or resistant stance (brought to the fore in Jenkin’s exploration of ‘slash fanfic’), fandom cannot be entirely disentangled from the conservative impulses or mechanisms that drive capitalist modes of commodification, buoyed by the affective ties that bind fans to products (Booth 2015). For Booth, therefore, fans exist in a liminal state between resistance and complicity, while the increasing mainstreaming of fandom only adds to this ambivalence. In fact, fandom has become a key means by which ‘cult’ and ‘niche’ media are increasingly marketed to the masses.

Despite receiving little attention by media theorists to date, fan AVT constitutes one particular area of fandom aptly placed to tease out the possibilities and limitations of this hybrid double bind in relation to participatory culture. Fansubbing and other modes of fan AVT signal and engage with the geopolitics and language inequalities of the media industries and, in this way, broaden appreciation of the type of participation or intervention in which fans potentially engage. Fan AVT marks the absence or unsatisfactory nature of localized, translated versions of television shows, films, news reports and the like, demonstrating how media industries continue to be riven by language barriers and geographic borders despite the de-territorializing, transnational affordances of digital and networking technologies. In taking a do-it-yourself approach to screen translation, fansubbers defy the media industry’s cultural and language hierarchies, typically eschewing legal parameters in the process (Rembert-Lang 2010). In this way, fan AVT is critical in its foundations. Nevertheless, at the same time fansubbing can enable certain inequalities to persist, and often ends up serving the interests of powerful media conglomerates, furthering the reach of Japan’s globally dominant animation industry, for instance, or that of US television series. As so many fansubbers proudly insist, their DIY translations largely seek to ‘spread the love’ (Dwyer 2012: 218), advancing media titles and the commercial industries behind them by facilitating ‘the demand formation phase necessary, but ancillary, to capitalist activity’ (Leonard 2005: 283).

Hence, accounts that focus solely on the collaborative nature of fan AVT and empowerment of the audience/consumer require much qualification and contextualization. A body of recent scholarship shows that fan AVT practices often involve their own internal forms of social differentiation, exploitation and exclusion, either through instances of fan-to-fan piracy (Hemmungs Wirtén 2013), cultural gatekeeping (Schules 2014), generational differentiation (Vellar 2011) and technological barriers (Svelch 2013, Vellar 2011). Drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Schules (2014) and Vellar (2011) pay close attention to the ways in which fansubbing accrues nuanced types of (largely social and subcultural) capital, thus drawing attention to the place that fansubbing plays in economic or market-based modes of cultural production. Along with Svelch (2013), Schules (2014) considers how quality issues add complexity to discussions of participatory culture and fansubbing. In his view, fansub headnotes or linear notes function on multiple levels, signalling the proficiency and cultural or genre expertise of the translator as much as facilitating the comprehension of source content. Indeed, he points out how these much-celebrated, interventionist notes (Pérez-González 2007) can function to conceal inaccuracies. Ultimately, by prioritizing the ‘appearance of proficiency’ over translation accuracy, headnotes enable translation errors to circulate unchallenged. Finally, both Schules (2014) and Svelch (2013) shift attention from fansub production to fansub reception, drawing attention to the subordinate position that fansub users occupy in relation to fansub producers—significantly impairing their ability to question, critique or participate on a meaningful level within translation processes or discourse.
Crowdsourcing

Perhaps crowdsourcing more than any other phenomenon signals the central importance of fan AVT within current cultural shifts and the ubiquity of mediated screen environments. Crowdsourcing is proving an essential tool in delivering media content to dispersed, linguistically diverse audiences and hence in providing global reach to news channels such as Al Jazeera (Pérez-González 2014), social media websites and eCommerce players such as LinkedIn (Kelly 2009), Facebook (DePalma and Kelly 2011) and Twitter (see McDonough Dolmaya 2011) as well as not-for-profit initiatives like Babels (Dimitroulia 2015) and TED Open Translation Project (O’Hagan 2011). The link between crowdsourcing and fansubbing is articulated by O’Hagan (2011: 31) who notes that ‘crowdsourced translation legitimizes the concept of free translation’, continuing that ‘fan translation remains primarily “unsolicited” work whereas crowdsourced translation is “solicited” by its organisers’. She goes on to propose that crowdsourced translation operates via a ‘top-down mechanism’ whereas ‘fansubbing is the result of a genuinely bottom-up formation of fans’ grassroots efforts’. On the whole, these distinctions make sense and are widely accepted, despite the fact that they can’t be applied as a blanket rule: some types of fansubs are more ‘bottom-up’ than others, for instance—as will be elaborated in the next section.

The distinction that O’Hagan draws between crowdsourced and fan translation is extrapolated further by Serenella Massidda (2015) who claims that the differing legal status of each practice relates inversely to their ethics. However, O’Hagan’s own case study of TED.com’s not-for-profit, crowdsourced subtitling exposes some overstatement within Massidda’s claim. Crowdsourcing does not necessarily constitute a commercial strategy, despite its massive uptake by the business community. Additionally, whether profit-based or not, the ethics of crowdsourcing cannot be so summarily dismissed. As DePalma and Kelly (2011: 388) note, the commerce of crowdsourced translation tends not to concern cost-saving as much as market diversification and improved products or services. Facebook, they state, ‘realized minimal or no cost savings; its large investment in technology offset most of what it saved from getting translations from its members’. In this regard, the ethics of commercial efforts to monetize the volunteer labour of translators, amateurs and fans is a complex, thorny issue that requires rigorous, ongoing debate, not dismissal. The central question is how ethics connects to piracy. More than ‘legitimising’ the free translation methods modelled by fansubbing (see O’Hagan 2011), crowdsourcing involves its legalization. In this way, crowdsourced AVT exposes the tenuous and shifting boundary between formal and informal modes and how ‘over time, activities move in and out of the legal zone’ (Lobato 2012). Once again, the concept of the ‘lead user’ is helpful for considering the relationship between crowdsourced and fan AVT, with fansubbers leading the way in exploring the collaborative potential of technological developments around language transfer—now being intensively mined for commercial purposes.

Emergent trajectories: major/minor

Fansubbing and fan AVT are currently experiencing mushrooming attention by media and translation scholars alike making it difficult to keep apace of the field. A major reason for this interest relates to fan AVT’s central position in relation to media accessibility more broadly, globalization and technological interconnectedness. These are connections that global TV site Viki makes explicit through community campaigns and advocacy. Viki has sponsored a number of videos that showcase endangered languages and the role that AVT can play...
in their revival. In 2014, it launched two campaigns, partnering with the Living Tongues Institute of Endangered Languages to ‘help save endangered and emerging languages’ and with deaf actor Maree Maitlin to advocate on behalf of deaf and hard of hearing audiences, offering new tutorial videos specifically geared towards captioning (see Lawrence 2014, Fisher 2014, Dwyer 2016). It also initiated a Viki-managed ‘Living Tongues’ documentary channel. These initiatives serve to flag the importance of AVT for the future of linguistic and cultural diversity. As Kothari (2015) demonstrates, the same-language subtitling of Bollywood movie songs for local audiences has been shown to significantly improve mass reading and literacy levels in India. Popular screen content provides an invaluable means of reaching, engaging and educating global audiences and its translation can become a precious tool in the fight for literacy and language preservation alike. And, as Viki has recognized, the community-based nature of fansubbing makes it an ideal means for advancing such endeavours. Building language awareness from the bottom-up via fansubbing engages young people at the coalface of language revival and emerging technologies. DIY fansubbing harnesses affective ties to media content and in this way can promote local languages while also fostering global interconnections and social bonds, both online and off. As Viki reports on ‘Official Viki Channel (Episode 20)’, ‘[e]very two weeks, the last fluent speaker of an endangered language passes away’; ‘[t]oday less than 5% of the world’s languages are available online’; ‘[f]or the other 95%, the Internet can be a path to extinction or revitalization’. The vital links that Viki draws between AVT, media accessibility and language diversity position collaborative, participatory fan practices at the heart of global media and technological shifts (see Dwyer 2016, 2017). Viki presents an atypical mode of fansubbing. Some might even dispute its claim to represent fansubbing at all. Viki fansubs are legal and, as CEO Razmig Hovaghimian (2011) puts it, they are ‘monetized’ as part of a for-profit commercial service. Nevertheless, they remain voluntary and amateur: profits made do not flow back to the fansubbers themselves. Additionally, they confuse distinctions between top-down and bottom-up mechanisms. Fan AVT is solicited by Viki’s open call for crowd participation, yet channels are mostly managed by contributors themselves and users can nominate new channels at any time, and advocate for language representation. While a case could be mounted that Viki’s AVT is crowdsourced rather than fan-based, the entire project is underpinned by the fannish appreciation of particular media titles and genres—primarily Korean television drama: the site fosters affective community-building via its timed comments feature and by facilitating community discussion forums and private messaging between contributors who clearly identify as fans.

The ways in which Viki pushes and stretches definitions of fansubbing indicates an emergent trajectory in the field, as the blurring of commercial and community interests characteristic of much crowdsourcing becomes increasingly prevalent within media industry practices. Already, much overlap is surfacing between fan and professional AVT. Fansub groups like Dattebayo, for instance, have transformed themselves into professional distribution companies (see Schules 2014) while fansubs are inching their way onto a variety of commercial platforms, including TV broadcasting (Casarini 2014, Vellar 2011, Bourdaa 2013), DVDs and video-on-demand streaming services like Netflix (Ernesto 2012). Professional subtitling companies now hold fansub contests, with the aim of hiring winners (Di Giovanni and Spoletti 2011, Bold 2011), and adopt methods based upon fan strategies (Leong 2010, 65). Many professional game localizers such as Clyde Mandalin started as translation hackers and continue to moonlight as fan translators ‘out of love’, almost as a form of community service (see O’Hagan 2009, Parkin 2008). Additionally, the popularity of fansubbing is pushing networks towards more timely delivery of imported content
(Bold 2011) and encouraging them to offer both subtitled and dubbed options (Massidda and Casarini 2017, Casarini 2015). The other significant factor in Viki’s approach to fansubbing is that overt commercialization of this grassroots practice does not necessarily trouble its ethics or result in de-politicization. Rather, Viki explicitly leverages its legitimate industry position to politicize fan AVT, using formal partnerships to establish clear links between fandom and broader media access issues in the digital, global age. In this way, Viki offers a ‘big picture’ perspective on fan AVT rarely entertained by individual fansub groups. This is not to suggest that the macro-politics advanced by Viki are ultimately more valid than those micro-politics that many fans proactively negotiate in their translation work—they are just different. Viki constitutes one particular example of commercialized fansubbing, and its politics need to be analyzed in this context specifically.

By shedding light on the ways that fansubbing is currently being reimagined and reshaped, Viki provides a segue for thinking about how fan translation itself is involved in a continual process of modification and revaluation. Fandubbing and videogame translation romhacking are two more ‘minor’ modes of fan AVT that illustrate the unpredictability and organic nature of the subcultural. Ultimately, it is here that much of the value of fan practice lies—in its unpredictability and innovation. One new trend in both fandubbing and romhacking reveals a particularly baroque logic of ceaseless inversion and enfolding: that is, the growing nostalgia for past AVT practices. This can involve fans actually recreating earlier forms of subtitling, dubbing or game localization in an act of homage (see O’Hagan 2009: 104). Rodríguez (2014), for example, explains how a recent fandub of Sailor Moon (1992–1997) explicitly seeks to honour the ‘original’ US dub made by DiC, casting actors with voices resembling those of the US dubbing cast, retaining the US theme song and character names, and ‘even going so far as to editing it as if it were going to air on kids TV!’.

In the gaming community this type of nostalgic appreciation of past localization efforts extends to the professional realm and focuses more specifically upon translation errors, with clumsy or nonsense lines of translation being retained for comic effect (O’Hagan 2009, Mangiron 2012). AVT practices that were widely disparaged by fan communities when they first appeared are thus resurrected and lauded. Fandubbers in particular are now actively seeking to redeem ‘bad’ translation practices of the past. In doing so, they relativize and destabilize notions of value, authenticity and fidelity, demonstrating how modes of reception can engender claims to ‘originality’ that potentially threaten the authority of source texts and producers. As Booth (2015) notes, the concept of play is integral to fan practices and identities, unleashing a performative element within fan activities that is steeped in both nostalgia and novelty, at one and the same time. In fandom, Booth explains, ‘semantic repletitions based in nostalgia . . . build to become a syntactic expression of novelty’ (ibid.: 36). Nostalgia signals a finely calibrated appreciation of fandom and fan objects and ‘it depends on feelings of affect generated by the original text but exceeds them’, making connections to a new present via the past (ibid.; 167). It is the power of affective play that media industries are now seeking to capitalize upon via transmedia tie-ins, humorous or parodic ‘funsubbing’ (see Nord et al. 2015, Zhang 2013), crowdsourcing and other ‘mutant’ or underground forms of fan AVT. It is also this mode of play that keeps fans one step ahead.

Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the growing interrelationship between media fandom and AVT practices, focusing on fansubbing, and extending the discussion towards the less established fields of fandubbing and video game translation hacking. Comprising three
sections, it first traces the origins of fan AVT, exploring *anime* fandom in the US and beyond. Second, it reflects upon the predominant ways in which fan AVT discourse tends to be framed today, interrogating notions of ‘participatory culture’ and ‘prosumer’ intervention before examining how fan AVT is proximately placed in relation to the fast-developing phenomenon of crowdsourced translation. Third, the chapter considers emergent trajectories, presenting a case study of atypical fansubbing through global TV site Viki, suggesting that this example requires many assumptions about fan AVT to be rethought. Finally, it draws attention to playful, nostalgic practices amongst the fandub and gaming communities. The chapter proposes that fan translators constitute ‘lead users’ (von Hippel 1986) of new technologies, new collaborative AVT methods and unpredictable modes of affective, performative play. In this way, they are positioned at the centre of current developments in the AVT field.

**Further reading**


Jenkins, H. (1988a) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York & London: Routledge | This seminal text introduces the widely influential concept of ‘participatory culture’ that has only become increasingly central to current cultural and industry practice in the years since publication.


**Related topics**

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Viki (n.d.) ‘Viki Homepage’. Available online: www.viki.com [last accessed 20 December 2017].

Filmography

*Big Bang Theory (2007–)* Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0898266/?ref_=nv_sr_1
*Dragon Ball Z (Doregan Boru, 1989–96)* Various directors. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0121220/?ref_=ttfc_fc_tt
*Game of Thrones (2011–)* Various directors. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0944947/?ref_=nv_sr_1
*Gigantor (Tetsujin28-go, 1963–66)* Mitsuteru Yokoyama. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058807/?ref_=nv_sr_1
*Kimba, the White Lion (Janguru Taitei, 1965–66)* Various directors. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058817/?ref_=nv_sr_1
*Maya the Bee (Die Biene Maja/Mitsubachi Māya no Bōken, 1975–80)* Seiji Endo and Hiroshi Saito. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133295/?ref_=ttfc_fc_tt
*Supernatural (2005–)* Various directors. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/?ref_=nv_sr_1
*UFO Robot Grandizer (1975–77)* Various directors. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0185070/?ref_=nv_sr_1
*Vicky the Viking (Wickie und die starken Männer/Chīsana baikingu Bikke, 1974–75)* Chikao Katsui and Hiroshi Saito. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0278855/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1