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Going Gonzo:
Crunchyroll, Anime Streaming, and Unpaid Digital Labour

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Abstract

This essay examines how anime streaming platform Crunchyroll leveraged fan labour to become an industry leader in the anime distribution market. Before becoming a global leader in streaming anime, the site was known in the mid-2000s as an anime piracy site, largely functioning on fan labour for uploading its content. This essay combines Marxist political economy, discursive analysis, and fan studies methodologies to analyze how Crunchyroll capitalized on unpaid fan labour to transform itself from a popular piracy site into a legitimate streaming platform.

Keywords: Streaming platforms; Labour; Anime; Fans; Piracy.

Introduction

In the wake of the AT&T-Time Warner merger in 2018, a number of streaming platforms under the WarnerMedia umbrella were discontinued. Streaming sites such as DramaFever, SuperDeluxe, and FilmStruck were shut down, presumably seen as too niche by AT&T to continue operations amidst the acquisition of more mainstream services such as HBO. Another Warner acquisition, the anime streaming site Crunchyroll, however, remained unscathed. Instead of being discontinued, AT&T initially enveloped Crunchyroll into its larger media

operations, inviting Crunchyroll to curate a selection of anime for streaming platform HBO Max (Alexander, 2020). And as of August 2021, Sony acquired Crunchyroll for $1.175 billion dollars (Spangler, 2021). How did Crunchyroll avoid closure and become a billion dollar streaming platform? This essay argues that unpaid fan labour propelled Crunchyroll's expansive growth and scale in the first two years of the site, where it first operated as a piracy site streaming unlicensed anime.

This essay's methodology is two-fold. First, it combines Marxist political economy and fan studies to analyze the proliferation of unpaid and underpaid work associated with the anime industry, as well as informal fan economies. Second, it engages in a discursive analysis of early crunchyroll.com accessed via the Internet Archive (archive.org). Examining how the site framed the unpaid digital labour of its fans in its early years of development illustrates how embedded these practices are into the internet, and in particular digital fan formations. This investigation will also encompass analysis of how Crunchyroll's rise was facilitated and reflects industrial changes in the face of growing digital technologies, particularly reliance on and revolutionizing the industry through big data (Smith & Telang, 2017).

This case study is useful in many ways. First, it helps illustrate the general shift from free to paid online media consumption, and how this shift emerged alongside the shift from informal markets to formal markets on the Internet through the 2000s. Second, it illustrates Crunchyroll as a nexus where, as digital piracy has shifted media industries towards monetizing ease of access, the compression of time between production, distribution, and consumption of digital content has shifted and intensified. Such compression was made possible specifically through the fan labour Crunchyroll relied on in its early years of piracy. Further, this is illustrative of the current SVOD platform wars, particularly for anime distribution, through which we see Marx's (1973[1939]) dictum of the "the annihilation of space by time" take place (p. 524). Finally, Crunchyroll serves as a useful case study for the larger SVOD platform work in how it tapped into pre-existing fan practices and co-opted them. While fans take pleasure from these practices, they are also being exploited by corporations.

1. Corporate background

Founded in 2006 by graduates of University of California Berkeley, Crunchyroll.com is a for-profit streaming site based in the United States that specializes in anime and other video content from East Asia. Until 2009, however, the site was known as a streaming site for pirated anime, hosting fan-subtitled bootlegs of anime uploaded without copyright permissions, along with other copyrighted material such as Japanese music videos and game trailers. When Crunchyroll acquired a $4.05 million investment from the venture capital firm Venrock in December of 2007 (ICv2, 2008), American anime distribution companies FUNimation and Bandai Entertainment cried foul, criticizing the site for continuously profiting from unlicensed materials and seemingly being rewarded for it (Sevakis, 2008). By January 2009, after announcing a new deal with TV Tokyo, the site committed to removing all pirated content. Crunchyroll now co-produces a large number of anime, which guarantees them streaming rights, and has announced a slate of 12 original anime productions, some of which have debuted in 2020. As the site received more company investments from such corporations as The Chernin Group and TV Tokyo (Hodgkins, 2013), and later total acquisition through AT&T's merger with WarnerMedia (Spangler, 2018a), Crunchyroll's profile has only increased both in the United States and globally. But Crunchyroll achieved success in no small part because of the exploitation of free labour given by the fan translations, downloads, uploads, and other media circulation.

To analyze the role unpaid digital labour played in the rise of Crunchyroll, particularly during its shift from piracy towards legal licensing, we must first define "labour." This essay relies on the work of Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani in this regard. It then examines the role of the audience commodity, and how it is shaping the debates of digital fan labour today. Dallas Smythe and Mel Stanfill's work will come into play here to add to Fuchs and Sevignani's approach by accounting for fan pleasure as well as labour.

2. Defining Labour

This essay uses a Marxist definition of labour, as differentiated from the term 'work'. Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani explain their differentiation:

> Labour is a necessarily alienated form of work, in which humans do not control and own the means and results of production. It is a historic form of the organisation of work in class societies. Work in contrast is a much more general concept common to all societies. It is a process in which humans in social relations make use of technologies in order to transform nature, culture and society in such a way that goods and services are created that satisfy human needs (2013, p. 240).

With this definition, we see how labour, particularly the digital labour of social media sites, is separate from work itself. Whereas work "satisfies human needs" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 27), the results of labour under capitalism are appropriated from the workers, creating alienation. As Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) summarize, "Marx makes clear which elements of alienation there are in capitalism: the worker is alienated from: a) herself/himself because labour is controlled by capital, b) the material of labour, c) the object of labour, d) the product of labour" (p. 245). It is the very act of alienation within capitalistic production, Marx (1973[1939]) explains, that a worker's "surplus labour … has now been posited as capital" (p. 452).

As David Harvey (2014) notes, there are multiple meanings found in the word alienation, which are useful in articulating the various ways in which capital affects us (p. 600). Fuchs and Sevignani gesture to a number of forms alienation takes, but this essay will focus on the forms of alienation described above and how they fall into two categories: alienation from the profits of capital, and social/psychological alienation where one becomes "isolated and estranged from some valued connectivity" (Harvey, 2014, p. 599). With this definition of labour set, this essay now turns to Dallas W. Smythe's work on audience commodity to determine what constitutes *digital* labour, as his work deeply influences digital labour debates today.

3. The Audience Commodity

The work of Dallas Smythe in the field of political economy of communication is immensely influential, and his theory on how audiences are commodified has had a resurgence on popularity with the rise of what scholars have termed “free labour” (Terranova, 2000), “immaterial labour” (Lazzarato, 1996), “immaterial labour 2.0” (Cote and Pybus, 2011, p. 170), or “digital labour” (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013). What Smythe contributed was a radical new way of viewing audiences and their relationship to commodities and capitalism. Smythe (1977) argues that the

> material reality under monopoly capitalism is that all non-sleeping time of most of the population is work time. . . . Of the off-the-job work time, the largest single block is time of the audiences which is sold to advertisers. . . . In “their” time which is sold to advertisers workers (a) perform essential marketing functions for the producers of consumer’s goods, and (b) work at the production and reproduction of labour power (p. 3).

He observes that “because audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity” (2001, p. 256). As capitalist mass media perpetuates consumeristic impulses and produce “audiences prepared to be dutiful consumers” (1994, p. 250), audiences “work to market . . . things to themselves” (1981, p. 4). This dispels the notion of leisure or free time, as Smythe notes that “people have always had to work — one way or another — when not at the job in order to prepare themselves to work *tomorrow*,” (2001, p. 270), but now also “work to create demand for advertised goods” (p. 266).

While Smythe uses the term “work” in a generalized sense, distinguishing it from wage labour, he observes “alienation in the processes of work under capitalism” (2001, p. 256). In short, Smythe considers the commodification of audiences as a form of alienation, as workers create value and are sold as commodities to advertisers. Smythe’s analysis aligns well with Fuchs and Sevignani’s analysis of digital labour as exploitative and alienating, and remains prescient for highlighting the dissolving boundary between leisure and labor, an effect which, as Trebor Scholz notes, has now become the status quo, especially in digital labour (2017, p. 91). As

such, this essay will mainly analyze Smythe's work in its resurgence due to its applicability in the digital age.

As Fuchs (2014) notes, "Dallas Smythe's . . . analysis of the audience commodity has gained new relevance today in the digital labour debate" (p. 100). While the labour of audiences Smythe wrote about created "surplus labour, i.e. labour that goes beyond the time necessary for satisfying basic human needs" (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013, p. 244), so too do the internet and digital technology audiences. Whereas Smythe investigated how radio and television industries commodify and exploit their audiences, contemporary scholars analyze how "contemporary corporate Internet platforms [are] based on the exploitation of users' unpaid labour" (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013, p. 237).

4. Digital Labour and Fan Pleasures

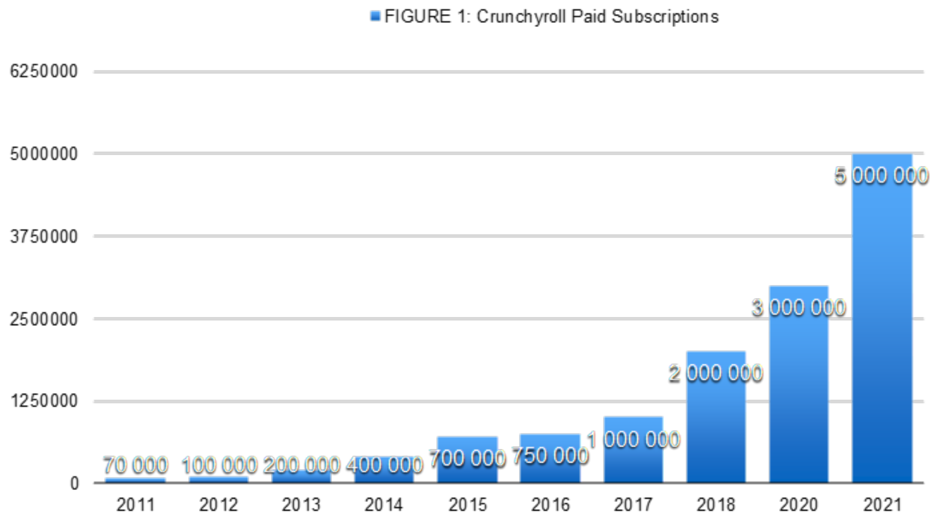
So far, I have relied heavily on Fuchs and Sevignani in this essay because of their clear and skillful assessment of the current state of digital labour exploitation. A blanket application of their empiricist approach, however, cannot fully capture Crunchyroll as a case study, as strictly empirical analyses miss the multiple circuits of value at play within fan labour and oversimplify the entangled relationships between communities, objects, and cultures. The limitations of a purely empirical approach to communication and culture as generally typified by the methodology of political economy has long been argued by the field of subaltern studies (Appadurai, 1986) for neglecting overlapping systems of value and exchange on a social and cultural level. For this case study of Crunchyroll, this criticism is most aptly focused on fandom and its social systems of value. Mel Stanfill's work offers a means of examining the fan pleasure entangled with fan labour, to which I turn to now.

In *Exploiting Fandom* (2019), Mel Stanfill examines digital labour through fandom. Stanfill notes that there are multiple economies at play when it comes to fan participation (p. 169). In addition to the labour exploitation of formal media markets, Stanfill identifies another system of exchange: the informal gift economy that flows throughout fan cultures, which does not rely on profit but on sociality and social capital. As Stanfill articulates, "this combination of desire

for status and producing in and for community is why the non-market-oriented value system of speculative media fandom has usually been described as a gift economy" (p. 163-164). This gift economy is another circuit of value that often goes ignored by purely empirical analyses, as "fandom has historically had a value system distinct from capitalism" (p. 165). Stanfill's intervention will be crucial going forward to assess Crunchyroll's complex entanglements of pleasure and profit, particularly in regards to the question of fan/user alienation (of lack thereof). It is here we now turn to Crunchyroll, and examine how the site directly exploited its users for profit.

5. Crunchyroll: Past and Present

To analyze Crunchyroll's exploitation of digital labour, we must first understand the site's initial business model, including its means of monetization and content distribution. Crunchyroll currently profits from licensing and streaming anime series both classic and contemporary. Similar to other streaming sites such as pre-2015 Hulu, ad revenue supports the site, from commercial ads playing between breaks in programs to ads on the site's pages. Crunchyroll also features a subscription program for greater access to series otherwise restricted, either unlocking entire select series or the most recent episodes of certain anime series currently broadcasting in Japan. As of 2021, the site has over 5 million paying subscribers (Fig. 1). The site has apps for a variety of digital devices to support its paid subscriptions, from digital media players like Apple TV to game consoles like the Playstation 4.



Sources: Loveridge, 2014; Orsini, 2016; Frank, 2017; Coats, 2020; Crunchyroll, 2021.

Before Crunchyroll's shift towards legal streaming in 2008, the site previously restricted its higher-quality video to those who contributed money towards the site (Sevakis, 2008), reportedly $6/month to access 1080p HD streams of content (Bertschy, 2008). Rewards aside from access to high quality video without ads also include badges to show off your support on the site ("Crunchy Supporter," 2007). The use of badges as a form of cultural capital, as well as its narrowed focus on anime streaming, illustrates how Crunchyroll oriented itself around specific fandom practices from the beginning. Badges were a minor feature of the early site and were later discontinued, but were indicative of how Crunchyroll as a platform was attuned to the specific practices of anime fandom. Badges, buttons, and pins are a common fixture for anime fans and a staple of merchandise at anime conventions, with fans wearing them to show support and share their favourite shows and characters. Crunchyroll's badges had a similar purpose, while also incentivizing participation and building community.

Crunchyroll also built a sense of community by focusing on anime and associated media, such as AMVs (Anime Music Videos). This kind of curation, and in particular the forum spaces that enabled discussion of all things anime, further created a sense of community on the site. Such a strategic curation practice has served Crunchyroll well, with similar yet unrefined attempts

such as Amazon Prime Video's short-lived anime SVOD service Anime Strike (2017-2018) failing to capture the specificities of Crunchyroll's curation practices by contrast.

The site's history with copyright until its turn towards legality is worth examining in detail. On November 6, 2006, a few months after the site had launched,[1] new links appeared at the bottom of the main site page: one for "downloads" and one for "uploads".[2] These pages outwardly encouraged users to upload content to the site, giving detailed information on how to upload, format, and title videos for Crunchyroll. While the upload page emphasizes to not upload materials that are "licensed or copyrighted" ("How do I Upload?", 2006), Japanese copyright is largely honoured around the world and vice versa, making anime uploaded to Crunchyroll illegal whether it has been licensed in the United States or not. It is this content that we will turn to now.

While current media coverage tends to diminish the role bootlegs played in Crunchyroll's early business model, searching crunchyroll.com through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine illustrates how prevalent anime piracy was on the site. Pirated copies of media comprised the vast majority of content Crunchyroll hosted. Unlike YouTube, a site that capitalized on user-uploaded content legal and illegal alike, Crunchyroll's focus from the beginning was unlicensed or unauthorized anime uploads and other Japanese media related content, such and AMVs and game trailers.[3] And much like YouTube, the site shifted to accord with copyright law and profitability once the site received larger corporate investments and interest.

A forum discussion on Crunchyroll from October 2007 was quite revealing to another asset of the site: advantages over YouTube. In a thread about what was the better service, YouTube or

[1] archive.org's first archive of the site is from July 19, 2006. https://web.archive.org/web/20060719040427/http://www.crunchyroll.com/

[2] This change is viewable at: https://web.archive.org/web/20061106084825/http://www.crunchyroll.com/

[3] The closest this author could find to user-generated content were anime music videos, known as AMVs. These videos combine anime clips and music tracks to create a remixed music video. While these works are arguable fair use, it is yet another example of Crunchyroll, like YouTube, profiting from user-generated content.

Crunchyroll, forum participants noted how on Crunchyroll, episodes of anime could usually be uploaded in their entirety because uploaders didn't have to cut them up into separate videos or worry about copyright. Whereas YouTube initially restricted upload length to 10 minutes and adhered to copyright restrictions, forcing users to upload a single anime episode across multiple separate video uploads, Crunchyroll did not have such restrictions, making it a preferable destination to stream anime unencumbered.

6. User Labour and Fan Pleasures

As discussed by Fuchs and Sevignani (2013), "Digital labour is alienated from itself, the instruments and objects of labour and the products of labour" (p. 288). This labour is often obscured by Internet corporations, as "exploitation does not tend to feel like exploitation because digital labour is play labour that hides the reality of exploitation behind the fun" (p. 288). Through digital media sites users upload content such as blogs, videos, photography, or share, link, and circulate media. The majority of these activities are on for-profit websites, meaning that "most web usage is digital labour that creates commodities and profit that is owned by private companies. The Internet is largely dominated by the exploitation of digital labour" (p. 266).

Crunchyroll is no exception. While the site's current form capitalizes on the unpaid digital labour of anime fans, such as encouraging anime fans to share their favourite anime on social media and thus promote Crunchyroll's own streaming service, Crunchyroll's previous incarnation from 2006 to around 2009 exploited the labour of every aspect of the anime industry, and will serve as the nexus of our analysis. In accepting venture capital and becoming a legitimate business, Crunchyroll capitalized on the social capital built by fans, as well as retroactively capitalizing on the fan user labour that went into maintaining the site. In the process of becoming a legitimate business in terms of anime licensing, Crunchyroll harnessed fan energies into venture capital.

Crunchyroll's exploitation of site users during its piracy era was essential to the site's profitability, as it was the users themselves who uploaded and compiled digital videos to the

site itself. This amounts to tens of thousands of videos, ranging from anime TV series, to films, to music videos, to game trailers, and more. Anime were either fan translated or professionally translated and/or localized by American anime distribution companies like FUNimation or Bandai Entertainment. This work should not be overlooked, as users provided all the content for the site.

Crunchyroll's forums were also a significant source of digital labour. To watch videos, users were required to register an account with the site, and login to access any kind of video. This was a subtle form of coercion to encourage participation on the site, such as video uploading, downloading, and forum use. This registration requirement likely helped fuel activity on the site's forums, often used by the administration to brainstorm new ideas for the site and receive feedback. Pinned forums threads such as "Anime Duplicates/Wrong Tags/Corrupt Videos" encourage users to monitor the quality of uploads and assist in administrating the site, while the "Request an Upload Thread" encouraged content uploads of popular media. Specific site developments also first incubated within forums. For instance, a poll dated from February 22, 2008 noted the admin[4] asking its users whether they would like manga (Japanese comics) on Crunchyroll. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the staff eventually made this a reality, opening its own digital manga distribution service bundled into its paid subscription program in October 2013. Crunchyroll's site design encouraged users to become producers as well as consumers, reflecting the "conflation of production and consumption" (Cote and Pybus, 2011, p. 171) in the rise of digital labour.

While Fuchs and Sevignani's criticism regarding alienation of surplus labour (and therefore profits) still rings true—Crunchyroll leveraged digital fan labour into venture capital, after all—the social/psychological component to alienation, where one's social or mental fabric is torn, does not apply to this case study. In fact, it was quite the opposite: with active forums and uploads, anime fans did not feel alienated because the value system they were engaging with

[4] Before receiving funding from large investment firms, the co-founders of Crunchyroll, Kun Gao and Vu Nguyen, were anonymous, with one of them working on the site as an administrator known only as "shinji".

was the gift economy of anime fandom. The ability to upload and share their favourite anime and comment on popular series with other anime fans was and continues to be socially and psychologically nourishing. As Stanfill notes,

> Calling these activities "labor" produces some trouble from the fan side, because "work" does not tend to describe people's experiences of being fans. Being a fan in general, and fan productivity in particular, is a leisure and pleasure activity. Fans have their own specific use values—what need an object satisfies for an individual—distinct from exchange value—what an object is worth, usually monetarily, in a market economy (2019, p. 163).

Such fan pleasures complicate a straightforward empirical analysis of Crunchyroll, but also highlight the other systems of value at play in the site's formation, including the aforementioned gift economy. It is this informal economy of value and social capital that was also capitalized on by Crunchyroll that this essay turns to now.

7. Fansub Communities

Fansubbing is the practice of anime fans outside of Japan who "digitize, translate, add subtitles to, and make available online unauthorized copies of TV series and films" (Condry, 2010, p. 194). These copies, referred to as fansubs, are produced by anime fans for anime fans, and are distributed for free, most often taking the form of digital files to torrent. As Rayna Denison observes, fansubs are fan text themselves, and "are at the liminal edge between fan creativity and piracy" (2011, 450). In operating within the gift economies of fandom, fansubbers accrue subcultural capital (Hills, 2017, p. 87-88). Free distribution is part of the "code of honour" many fansub communities follow, and many fansubbers "halt all work on a title once it has been licensed in the US" ("Fansub," n.d.). Fansub code of ethics are entwined with the North American market, typically framed as making obscure material available that the market would otherwise fail to translate and distribute ("Ethical Code," 2003). There is debate as to whether fan work such as fansubs benefit the anime market (Hatcher, 2005); at the very least, fansubbers support legal anime distribution, as "fansubbers tend to view their actions as contributing to an

increase in anime fans," and "would like to see a widening anime market" (Condry, 2010, p. 195).

Of course, anime distributors often accuse fansubbing of deterring rather than enabling U.S. anime licensing. The North American anime distribution industry typically posits that the fansub "code of ethics" largely rests on cognitive dissonance propelled by both a simplistic grasp of copyright law and purposeful ignorance of what it entails. While fansubbers often argue that their fan translations help make anime more popular in the United States, including making lesser known titles available, helping grow the anime market, licensors point out that "fansubs routinely remain available long after the commercial release" ("Fansub," n.d.). While litigating this debate is outside the scope of this article, it is important to acknowledge these contesting viewpoints, particularly as Crunchyroll profited immensely from the free labour of the fans translating and digitally circulating anime. These files formed the backbone of what users uploaded to Crunchyroll, with subtitling and translation work going unpaid, capitalizing on the fansub communities ethical principles to work for free.

While the anime licensing industry takes a negative tact towards fansubs, more recent work illustrates how these informal markets are actually beneficial, and even vital to the distribution and circulation of media. Ramon Lobato (2012) demonstrates how piracy, rather than being an aberration of media, is in fact central to the way media circulates globally, and reframes piracy as a form of distribution to be taken seriously. Furthermore, as Virginia Crisp (2015) argues, the economic aspects of piracy should not over-determine our analyses, but rather, should be examined alongside the social contexts of piracy as well (p. 158). Ian Condry (2010) examines the social contexts of anime piracy, in particular fan labour.

Condry discusses the fan labour that goes into making fansubs, identifying what he terms "dark energy":

> I propose focusing on 'dark energy,' which is my term for a collection of social forces that enlivens the connections between content and desire that in turn drives the circulation of media.

> I call it 'dark energy' because some of these forces operate through the darknet of peer-to-peer file sharing networks and because a strict focus on piracy and commodification tends to dismiss the productive capacity of this power (i.e., making it unseen) (Condry, 2010, p. 195).

Such dark energies, rather than being detrimental to the circulation of media, may actually be in fact beneficial, and discussions around pirated media are often narrowly defined by copyright law without taking into account the benefits of fan production, circulation, and reception. Similar to criticisms of political economy in regards to fan labour as voiced above, focus on piracy from a purely legalistic lens excludes, to the detriment of the analysis, the fan labours, practices, and cultures that make up informal markets. Instead, informal markets shape, guide, and even spawn formal markets of distribution (Lobato, 2012; Condry, 2010, p. 200).

8. Turning Dark Energy into Venture Capital

As Lobato articulates, "the informal distribution realm, far from being a marginal force at the edges of film culture, is actually the key driver of distribution on a global scale" (2012, p. 4). Likewise, the dark energies of anime fandom, from translating and subtitling anime programs, to distribution through tapes and torrents, were an essential part of Crunchyroll's content in its initial years of piracy, as it was fansubs that made up a considerable part of the content Crunchyroll offered at the time. This fansub labour, as well as other fan labour such as tagging and reporting broken videos, contributed to the social capital of the site. It was this social capital that was converted into literal capital as the platform courted venture capitalists. In accepting venture capital from Venrock, The Chernin Group, and other corporations, Crunchyroll capitalized on these dark energies of anime fandom for the site's (and the owners') profit. Crunchyroll transmuted the subcultural capital of fansubbers as well, hiring many fansubbers for professional translation work to support the site (Sevakis, 2015a). While the site may have begun as a labor of love for both the administrators and user contributors alike, the reality is that those who benefitted most from the site becoming a legitimate business were the co-founders, one of whom, Kun Gao, served as Crunchyroll's CEO for around 7 years, most

recently sitting on the board of Crunchyroll KK, Crunchyroll's Tokyo-based branch (Spangler, 2018c).

9. Case Study: Gonzo

While Crunchyroll received investment from Venrock and other investment firms, more significant is the investment by GDH, the corporate parent of Studio Gonzo, an animation studio in Japan. Not only did GDH invest around US$2 million in 2008 (Loo, 2008b), but the studio was the first to offer their content for exclusive international streaming. The streaming of Gonzo's series *The Tower of Druaga: The Aegis of Uruk* and *Blassreiter* in April 2008 on Crunchyroll was the first instance of simultaneous broadcasting ('simulcasting'), paving the way for the elision of time between Japanese and English releases of anime (Loo, 2008a).

One might ask why Gonzo would support such a site that previously profited from their media without recompense, while also arguably diverting consumers from legally buying the series on DVD. The reason is because Gonzo was severely suffering financially at the time, and saw digital streaming as one of the many options available to stave off bankruptcy (Loo, 2009b). The studio reduced its number of anime shows in production in 2009, reducing its creative staff from 130 to 30 (Loo, 2009a). While these efforts were unable to stop the Tokyo Stock Exchange from de-listing Gonzo on July 30, 2009 (Loo, 2009c), the company eventually bounced back, focusing their efforts in on intellectual property management, particularly licensing their products for online streaming (Nelkin, 2013).

Gonzo partnering with Crunchyroll feels a touch ironic, as many of Gonzo's financial troubles arose specifically from rampant online piracy of their shows. In a 2007 interview, Arthur Smith, president of GDH International (the parent company of Gonzo), condemned fansubs, asserting that "illegal file sharing and postings on streaming sites like YouTube are destroying our industry" ("Interview on Anime Piracy", 2007).[5] When pressed how much GDH/Gonzo was affected by fansubbing and illegal downloads, his answer was "significantly" ("Interview on Anime Piracy", 2007). In a subsequent open letter to the American anime industry, Smith emphasized that he's "not exaggerating" (Smith, 2007). Indeed, the Japanese government had

just filed a formal request to the United States government only a few months prior asking for help in preventing anime piracy (Loo, 2007).

It is also important to note that Smith wrote this condemnation during two economic disasters: first, the global recession of 2007-2008, and second, the anime bubble burst in 2006-2007 (Moses, 2013; Sevakis 2015b). As a result, anime companies like Studio Gonzo were under performing during periods of extreme instability in the market. While it is quite possible fansubs and other forms of piracy were hurting Gonzo's bottom line, it is also quite likely that sites like Crunchyroll became the main targets of criticism because it was much easier to direct ire at one prominent piracy site than the contradictions of boom and bust that are at the heart of capitalism.

As Chris Anderson notes, piracy is viewed as a special class of theft in that the creators don't "suffer a loss, but rather a lesser gain" (2009, p. 71). This is central to understanding the anime market in particular, as anime studios in Japan make the majority of their profits from DVD/Blu-ray sales and merchandising rather than through broadcast advertising, a practice hurt even more through digital piracy (Sevakis, 2012). Through the piracy facilitated by sites like Crunchyroll, the labour of creators goes unpaid, and Japanese animators working in precarity suffer as a result (Loveridge, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Nishijima, 2015; Ristola, 2017). Gonzo's streaming partnership with Crunchyroll is quite ironic: pushed into financial troubles by online piracy and the financial crises dragging down the economy and anime market, Gonzo turned to online streaming to create revenue, working with the very company that leeched from Gonzo's profits in the first place.

While financial constraints certainly pushed their hand in working with Crunchyroll, it is also important to note that Gonzo was known as a somewhat reckless, avant-garde studio, particularly adept at digital innovation in their animation (Cirugeda, 2017). Knowing this, their early embrace of streaming was not just a desperate move to generate revenue—though it certainly was that—but also another example of their embrace of digital technologies and

innovation. Gonzo is the name of the studio, after all. Given the predominance of streaming platforms in media industries today, one could argue that Gonzo was ahead of their time.

Studio Gonzo's relationship with Crunchyroll illustrates to what extent unpaid labour in informal markets begets underpaid labour in formal markets. Not only does the work of fan subtitling communities (translating and subtitling works), digital distributors (uploading the translated content to sites like Crunchyroll), and marketers (promoting and sharing these shows) go unpaid, but so too does the original work of the studio staff that made these cultural products. While Studio Gonzo still exists, it is very much a shell of its former self. The studio finally became profitable again in 2012, and produces 1 or 2 anime a year. Whereas previously Studio Gonzo works were heavily present in the North American market in the 2000s, Gonzo's presence has largely receded from cultural recognition in North American anime fandom.

Conclusion

In 2008, Crunchyroll co-founder Vu Nguyen asserted that streaming anime "is what people want, and there is definitely a demand" (Koulikov 2008). Nguyen was right in that fans want streaming anime, a desire largely facilitated by digital technologies and sites like Crunchyroll itself. Technological advancements such as digital video and streaming services are unsettling previous channels of power and control over cultural goods, as digitization allows for massive replication and distribution within increasingly shorter time spans. Consumers are interacting with content in new, unregulated ways, and the industries have had to change and adapt to consumers' desires. Fans, as key contributors of labour and active consumers in the early years of the site, were the vanguard in shifting the anime distribution model from free but legally troublesome (torrents), to paid access to licensed content. Additionally, this move emerged from the informal marketplace (Crunchyroll's early days as a popular piracy streaming site), and rapidly changed the infrastructure of the formal anime distribution markets today.

Crunchyroll was a key motivator in making compression the key feature in the contemporary anime distribution industry. I use the concept of compression in two ways here: first, as a nod to Jesse Anderson-Lehman's work (2018) which urges us to consider the actual apparatus of

streaming animation—that of video compression, and how animation is easier to compress than live action video in regards to digital streaming platforms. Second, that the industry of anime licensing and localization has shifted so that Crunchyroll and other anime licensors significantly compress time between production and delivery of anime for viewers in North America and later around the world. This is indicative of Marx's analysis that capitalism creates the annihilation of space by time, or what David Harvey articulates as capitalism's time–space compression (Harvey, 1989).

This form of compression stands in contrast to the earlier forms of legal anime distribution in the 2000s. When Crunchyroll began in 2006, the primary legal means of watching anime was either buying copious amounts of expensive DVDs (with anime seasons often released over multiple separate discs), or watching licensed anime on programming blocks such as 4Kids (2005-2008) or Cartoon Network's Toonami (1997-2008; 2012-). Anime piracy, however, had largely gone digital by 2006 via torrents and other forms of digital distribution. As such, Crunchyroll as a streaming website was a natural extension of contemporary anime consumption patterns, as ardent anime fans likely already had the technology and access to broadband needed to stream video. In offering access to vast amounts of anime for a low price, Crunchyroll created an innovation in the anime distribution. Crunchyroll's presence quickly shifted the formal North American anime distribution market towards streaming, as lead competitor Funimation soon scrambled to follow Crunchyroll's compressed timelines for content delivery with their own anime streaming and production of simuldubs, English localizations of anime episodes made within a week of the episode airing in Japan (Bertschy, 2015).

This innovation in anime distribution—next day or even same day streaming of animated programs from Japan—was specifically enabled through the initial labour of anime fandom. The site's founders built their success from the grand pool of unpaid labourers contributing to the site, from the original animators, to the fan (or professional) translators, to the users uploading the translated content to Crunchyroll. Whereas newer entries in the SVOD wars are beginning to rely on the pre-existing fan bases of their most popular properties, such as

NBCUniversal's Peacock and its classic comedies such as *The Office* (2005-2013) (NBC, 2019), Crunchyroll began its streaming platform embedded in such fan communities from the beginning. These fan communities were a key source of labour and consumption, and directly enabled Crunchyroll's compression model that shifted the anime distribution industry. Crunchyroll capitalized on the shift from consumer to "prosumer," subtly coercing anime fans who wanted to watch anime to contribute to building their site. What began as a pirated anime content provider turned into a legitimate streaming service, becoming the biggest legal anime streaming provider while other companies such as FUNimation and VIZ Media struggle to catch up. Furthermore, Crunchyroll influenced other streaming platforms to enter an increasingly competitive anime distribution market, with Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, and other SVODs offering their own exclusive series and original productions (Williams, 2019; Petit, 2021).

Figure 2: the "secret crunchyroll headquarters" listed on the about page of Crunchyroll, circa 2006: <https://web.archive.org/web/20060720164133/http://www.crunchyroll.com/about>

Crunchyroll's tagline in 2006 was "anime for the masses!" Yes, anime for the masses, but at the expense of the masses as well. While Crunchyroll did not begin as a startup venture, it leveraged its social capital and soon became one, and in the process drew from and capitalized on fan practices and their social systems of value. This transmutation by capital is seen most

literally in the transformation of space, from Crunchyroll's origins in a cramped college dorm room (Fig. 2) to an expansive post-modern pastiche of Shibuya, Japan (Fig. 3). Such an expansion of space is predicated on the exploitation of labour, from unpaid fan labour during their piracy days, to Crunchyroll's current system of underpaid translators today (The Canipa Effect, 2020; 2022). Through its history of converting fan labour into industry legitimacy, Crunchyroll offers unique insight into the ways in which streaming platforms operate today.

Figure 3: a photo of Crunchyroll offices listed on Crunchyroll's about page in 2020. Available from: <https://www.crunchyroll.com/about/index.html>

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Résumé : Cet essai examine comment la plateforme de streaming d'anime Crunchyroll a tiré profit du travail des fans pour devenir un leader sur le marché de la distribution d'anime. Avant de devenir un leader mondial du streaming d'anime, le site était connu au milieu des années 2000 comme un site de piratage d'anime, reposant en grande partie sur la main-d'œuvre des fans pour téléverser son contenu. Cet essai combine économie politique marxiste, analyse discursive et méthodologies pour les études de fans afin d'analyser comment Crunchyroll, en tant que site de piratage populaire, a capitalisé sur le travail non rémunéré des fans afin de se transformer en plateforme de streaming légitime.

Mots-clefs: Plateformes de vidéo à la demande; Travail; Anime; Fans; Piratage.