Television & New Media

Building a *Blog Cabin* during a Financial Crisis : Circuits of Struggle in the Digital Enclosure

Robert W. Gehl and Timothy A. Gibson

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:
$SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for ***Television & New Media*** can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://tvn.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://tvn.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/13/1/48.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jan 4, 2012

Proof - Jun 16, 2011

What is This?

Building a *Blog Cabin* during a Financial Crisis: Circuits of Struggle in the Digital Enclosure

Robert W. Gehl[1] and Timothy A. Gibson[2]

Abstract

In their studies of online media, political economists of communication have examined how firms like Google enclose users in a web of commercial surveillance, thus facilitating the commodification of their online labor. However, this focus on enclosure tends to overlook the political possibilities highlighted by autonomist Marxist theory—namely, that users, under certain circumstances, can appropriate these applications to contest conditions of exploitation. This article offers an analysis of *Blog Cabin 2008*, a cable home improvement show, in order to explore this tension between autonomy and enclosure. Our findings suggest that producers indeed used the show's blog to exploit fans' free labor. However, fans also used the blog to form social bonds, to press demands on the show's producers, and to make connections between the show's class politics and the wider financial crisis. A concluding section explores the theoretical and political significance of such unanticipated uses of the show's blog.

Keywords

blogs, reality television, advertising, audience, commercial surveillance

Introduction

In early 2008, with the U.S. housing market about to implode, American television networks fed the nation's real estate obsession with a long parade of home renovation and do-it-yourself shows. Long the sleepy Saturday-afternoon domain of Bob Villa

[1]University of Utah, Salt Lake City
[2]George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia

Corresponding Author:
Timothy A. Gibson, Department of Communication, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030
Email: tgibson1@gmu.edu

and PBS, do-it-yourself TV became a staple of prime-time cable and network program-ming around the world during the late 1990s (Lewis 2008). By the time the financial bubble burst in late 2008, two cable networks—HGTV and the DIY Network—were devoting themselves full-time to home improvement and gardening programs, while a few individual shows, most notably the BBC import *Trading Spaces* and ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* aired on prime-time and drew millions of viewers.[1]

Blog Cabin is one of many such programs on the DIY Network, and in most respects, the *Blog Cabin* franchise is much like other home improvement shows. Each season, the show's producers and hosts bring fans along to a bucolic location and walk them through the building and landscaping techniques used to renovate a vacation property into a spectacular luxury cabin. For the 2008 season (our focus for this article), the property at the center of the show was a 2,700-square-foot log cabin, set on pictur-esque Appalachian lake in rural Tennessee. Despite this rural setting, the show other-wise draws deeply from the conventions of the home improvement genre, particularly in its focus on building techniques, design elements, domestic aesthetics, and helpful "how-to" segments.

In other respects, however, the *Blog Cabin* franchise is quite unique. First, as can be deduced from its title, producers use the show's website[2] to solicit design ideas from the audience that are then built into the cabin in subsequent episodes. The show thus acts as a reality TV hybrid, combining elements of the home-improvement genre with ele-ments of more participatory "viewer-vote" shows like *Dancing with the Stars*. For the 2008 season, the website held votes on cabin features for a year, from November 2007 to November 2008. During this time, visitors to the show's website were asked to voice their opinions on specific design elements, including floor plans, lighting, exterior fea-tures, bathroom and kitchen styles, flooring, color schemes, and cabinetry—all in prep-aration for the filming of the show. All told, fans voted on forty-two design features, generating a tally of over 3.3 million votes total.[3] In addition to tallying audience votes, the *Blog Cabin 2008* website also hosted a weblog that offered an insider's view of the renovation and advertised upcoming episodes. The blog featured posts on election results, pictures and videos, a call for show location ideas, and show production updates. Finally, each of these blog posts also received numerous comments from fans of the show, who responded both to the producers' posts and, more often, to one another.

Blog Cabin 2008 was therefore an intertextual media object composed of four dis-crete parts: (1) the television text, with its history of production (capital and labor) and its connection to advertisers both via product placement and spot ads; (2) the televi-sion audience, who consumed and interpreted the television show and advertisements, and who may or may not have participated via the website or blog; (3) the website for the show, with its own production inputs (again, capital and labor) and its own relation to advertisers (often coming from the same sponsors as the broadcast portion of the show); and (4) the users of the website (presumably, but not necessarily, drawn from the broadcast audience).

But how do we make sense of the relationships between the audience and the pro-ducers within this complex media object? In asking this question, we find ourselves

in the midst of a vigorous debate about how to theorize the migration of media production and consumption onto the web, particularly with regard to what some commentators in the mid-2000s called "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly 2005a, 2005b, 2006). Although an imprecise, contested (and, arguably, somewhat dated) term, the label Web 2.0 refers to a specific model for generating revenue from web users that emerged after the collapse of the "portal" model of the 1990s. If portals like Yahoo! followed a broadcasting model (which offered up easily accessible news, features, and services to attract "eyeballs" which could then be sold to advertisers), so-called Web 2.0 applications like Facebook and Flickr offered users a platform on which individuals could generate their own media content and share it with others in ever-expanding networks of friends and family. Revenue in this case would be generated from a combination of traditional advertising and selling data on users' online behavior to third parties (Andrejevic 2007a).

The theoretical debate thus hinges on how to interpret this new model of generating revenue from the free labor and online social interactions of web users. To what extent does this model open up intriguing opportunities for users to actively and creatively participate as producers (rather than consumers) of media culture, and to what extent does this model open opportunities for commercial surveillance and the exploitation of users' labor?

In our view, this debate over how to theorize the economic and political consequences media convergence has unfortunately taken an all-too-familiar shape. Twenty years ago, Clarke (1990) lamented that media studies had hardened into a debate between cultural populists, who celebrate audience agency and popular pleasures, and cultural pessimists, who focus instead on industrial strategies and the limits these strategies impose on the circulation of information and culture. More recently, Miller (2009) divided the history of media studies along similar lines, arguing that the field has bounced back and forth between "Media Studies 1.0," in which a concentrated, centralized, all-powerful media system victimizes audiences, and "Media Studies 2.0," which merely reverses the poles and celebrates all-powerful audiences and users, who nimbly resist the ideological and economic strategies of producers and who appropriate and transform media technologies to pursue their own interests.

It appears not much has changed: these positions can be readily discerned in much contemporary scholarship on Web 2.0 and "convergence culture." In the realm of new media studies, for instance, the flag of cultural populism has been seized by scholars who emphasize the way that web applications both foster powerful forms of social cooperation and blur the lines between media production and consumption. Jenkins (2006) for his part argues that the emergence of the web and the wide distribution of digital technologies that allow users to easily capture and transform media images and sounds have together democratized media production, signaling the rebirth of a participatory "folk culture" in which passive cultural consumption is replaced by a creative explosion of rip, mix, and share.

Continuing in a populist vein, other scholars have emphasized the ability of Web 2.0 to encourage exciting and creative forms of grassroots collaboration that pool and

leverage the "collective intelligence" of users (Levy 1997). Favorite examples in this vein include the creation and collective debugging of open-source software (Benkler 2002; Sunstein 2006) and the self-generated and collectively policed online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* (Benkler 2006). Interestingly, this is a point at which the populist strains of Jenkins and Benkler dovetails unexpectedly with the autonomous Marxist positions of Hardt and Negri (2004) and Dyer-Witheford (1999, 2005). Autonomous Marxist scholars, while certainly attuned to the ways in which online cooperation and creativity can be exploited for profit, nonetheless also view the web as a crucial means toward rebuilding, or "re-composing," grassroots activism and struggle (specifically, in their work, resistance to global capitalism).

At the same time, other scholars—including, most prominently, Marc Andrejevic—emphasize quite different consequences of the migration of media production and social collaboration onto Web 2.0 platforms. For Andrejevic (2003, 2007a, 2007b), Web 2.0 applications represent one feature of a more pervasive "digital enclosure," wherein the price of accessing online services (logging into Facebook, for example) is surrendering control over personal information—information that is then quickly commodified and sold to rationalize the efforts of marketers and advertisers.[4] The extent to which the accumulation strategies of new media firms like Google depend on the expropriation and exploitation of user-generated content—the uncompensated immaterial labor[5] of users, as Hardt and Negri (2004) would put it—is a key concern of Andrejevic and other scholars in the political economy tradition (see also Arvidsson 2005; Fuchs 2009; Mosco 2009; Schiller 2007; Terranova 2000).

With this debate in mind, we offer a case analysis of *Blog Cabin 2008* as a way of exploring some of the political and economic contradictions at the heart of Web 2.0 and online media convergence. Although *Blog Cabin* is not the only example of convergence of media and culture, nor is it necessarily the most prominent, *Blog Cabin*'s 2008 season, historically situated within a financial crisis as well as during the rapid growth of Web 2.0/social media, offers unique insight into and raises questions about the roles of labor, emotion, fandom, and political economy in convergence culture. How, in short, did the producers of *Blog Cabin 2008* cultivate fan participation and emotional investment through both the television program and the show's blog? How did this process exploit the free labor of viewers in order to create value for producers? On the other hand, did the participants in the show's website use their labor to pursue ends not anticipated by producers or captured by producers? And, if so, what reasonable conclusions might be drawn with regard to the political and theoretical significance of such unsanctioned or unanticipated uses of the show's blog?

Method

To explore these questions, we engaged in a close reading of the archives of the *Blog Cabin* blog (including blog posts and viewer comments[6]) as well as all fifteen of the episodes from the 2008 season, which ran during the fall of 2008.[7] As mentioned above, the blog itself ran for a year between November 2007 and November 2008,

during which the website hosted at total of thirty-nine blog posts. Although the 2008 blog is still active—technically speaking, as of this writing comments are still open—for the purposes of this paper, we ended our study of comments in late December 2008. By that time, the blog posts had received more than eleven thousand comments in total from fans.[8]

In analyzing both the blog posts and the comments, we utilized an inductive, qualitative method derived from Altheide (1996) and Patton (2002). In our recursive review of all blog posts and comments, we identified repeated patterns of language across the blog—for instance, celebrations of the cabin's natural setting, the use of possessive pronouns when referring to the cabin (e.g., "our cabin")—and then examined the relationships between these patterns in order to explore the ways that fans conceptualized their relationship to the show and to one another. In later rounds of analysis, after initial patterns were identified, our close reading of the posts and comments was aided by simple search functions (e.g., global searches for "bailout" or "our cabin"); however, we did no text-mining. In the end, following this inductive process, we arrived at the themes discussed below. We then sought to interpret the political and cultural significance of themes, drawing both on the theoretical debate over media convergence discussed above and our reading of the larger political-economic crisis that unfolded as we were conducting the analysis.

It is important to note that we have anonymized the participants in the blog either by withholding their names or using secondary pseudonyms. Although we consider these participants authors with agency operating within a public space, many of them are, we feel that anonymity is necessary given the intensely personal nature of their comments, the uncertainty of the involvement of minors in the blog, and because several participants use what appear to be "real world" names. This decision was informed by the Association for Internet Researcher's position on ethics in Internet research (Ess 2002). In addition, as Nancy Baym (2010) argues, even pseudonyms can carry enough information to link a comment to a real-world identity, not to mention the fact that many individuals invest much of their lives into building pseudonymous identities on the Web. All this said, we consider these comments part of the public domain because they appear in a site with no barriers to public entry; we are not paraphrasing them, although we are withholding exact comment URLs. However, we have edited comments for spelling, but only in a few places (i.e., if a letter is missing in a word) and in the interest of readability within the context of this article. The participants in the blog were writing for one another within a system that does not allow for later edits, so there are occasional errors. None of our editing changes the original meaning.

By using this approach, we discovered that, as the financial markets began to fall apart in late 2008, fans of the show helped one another become aware of the political irony of building a luxury cabin during a foreclosure crisis. In addition, some users began to organize with one another to place demands on the show's producers—demands that emerged from a growing sense of ownership in the show and the lakefront property at its center. These claims of ownership—based, we will argue, on

long-standing cultural notions that connect private ownership with a history of labor—posed serious problems for producers, who were forced to confront unexpected viewer demands more or less on the fly. In our conclusion, we attempt to untangle users' surprisingly politicized behavior and try to think carefully about how it might inform the debate between new media scholars focused on online fandom and political economists focused on issues of commercial surveillance and the exploitation of fans' immaterial labor.

Blog Cabin and the Myths of the Pastoral and the Home

In our review of online comments, we focused first on how fans described the cabin and its setting. By examining their comments on the cabin itself, we hoped to learn more about how comment-writers understood their relationship both to the property and, ultimately, to the show and its producers. What we discovered was that fans discussed the cabin through two key cultural myths—the myth of the *pastoral* and the myth of *home*. Ultimately, as we will argue below, in sharing their ideas about home, the pastoral, and the good life, fans not only became more invested in the Tennessee cabin but they also became more invested in one another.

The pastoral, as Leo Marx (1964) argues, is a major foundational mythology in America. It is the space between the demands and domination of industrialization and the chaos of nature. It is thus a designed space, where humans simultaneously hack away at "nature" by creating open fields and gardens while at the same time holding off urbanization. As Marx argues, the pastoral is thus the balance between human emotion (signified by the irrationality of nature and animals) and rationality (signified by modernity and industry); both are sought in moderation.

Blog Cabin's producers drew heavily on the pastoral myth. In an early blog post, for example, the producers posted pictures of the build site and described the bucolic setting: "The first thing that greeted us as we pulled into the lot were two deer only 100 yards away. They took a fleeting interest in us before moving on (too quickly for us to get our cameras ready), but gorgeous Mother Nature was all around us."[9] However, this was not a nature show. The intention of the show's producers was to develop "Mother Nature" into a space habitable for humans. Yet this development was of a particular kind. The producers were not building a strip mall, but rather a pastoral space where one could escape urbanization amid the trappings of nature yet still enjoy the fruits of industrial capitalism.

The audience, in their blog comments, took up the pastoral myth with enthusiasm. For example, on the same post in which the show's producers describe their close encounter with the deer, the audience posted 112 comments. Many of these comments examined the "picturesque" build site. As one commenter exclaimed, "I agree with other to leave the site as undisturbed as possible since it is so magnificent. When you look at something like this, you just have to feel closer to God and His touch on this earth. Makes me feel responsible to help keep it that way." Another comment-writer agreed. "I absolutely 'love' this piece of land. I can imagine sitting in a handmade

rocker, blanket snuggled around, drinking a cup of coffee and watching the morning sun melting the mist coming off the lake on a beautiful autumn morning. It would be very peaceful to see the full moon reflected upon the still waters on a warm summer night and have a cool breeze softly blowing." In this way, the dream of the pastoral—that is, the desire to strike perfect balance between the needs of human habitation while preserving "unspoiled" nature—was widely shared by fans and formed the basis of their early interactions on the blog.

The second theme in the comments focused more narrowly on the myth of "home." This theme emerged later in the show, as the show's producers began to present the audience with choices in the floor plan, lighting, flooring, and décor. Faced with these choices, comment-writers began to talk about the log cabin as a "home"—a place where children, grandchildren, and parents could build a life together. In doing so, fans articulated their visions of what "home" means to them.

One comment-writer put it this way: "I am so excited I have already set my DVR so that I could watch each episode over and over and envision myself and family there!" Commenting on the home and on a special children's bed made in the shape of a boat, another commenter wrote, "Finally a place to call home and be proud of. My family dreams of this lifestyle! . . . What a dream life! We are ready! My little boy wants the boatbed!" In a similar way, a third wrote:

> My grandchildren would love this home especially the oldest who is 9 yrs old.
> . . . He would see this as an adventure! My littlest grandson who lives with me
> and my son . . . would love the childs bedroom. He is fascinated with boats and
> would love that special boat bed. . . . His dad is my son, who absolutely would
> love living on the water, to fish and raise his son in a great environment.

In addition to these fantasies of raising children or grandchildren in ostensibly worry-free pastoral Tennessee, the audience used the blog to discuss many issues seemingly unrelated to the task of designing and building the cabin. They shared recipes. They discussed child-rearing ideas. They talked about their health issues and experiences with chemotherapy, hip surgery, multiple sclerosis, and trips to doctors. They used the blog, in short, to discuss all the things we commonly associate with "home" and the domestic sphere, including food, children, and family health.

Thus, for fans, the cabin had become a basic economic space, or more accurately, the space of *oikos* (household/family) and *nomos* (convention/law). As is often noted, the word *economics* finds its roots in the Greek *oikos* and *nomos*, thus revealing a centuries-old view of the home and the management of the family as the foundational unit of economy. The confessional comments about medical issues, the recipes exchanged, the child-rearing ideas—all of these facets of *oikos* were presented in the comments section of the show's blog, often in startling candor.[10] The desire to share "tips" on managing these facets of *oikos* also appeared to be exceptionally strong among the audience, and as the audience voted on various design elements, many of the arguments on the blog centered on which designs would best manage the ebb and

flow of domestic life. It thus became clear that fans were thinking about this cabin in deeply personal terms, as domestic space, as a *home* for themselves and their children, rather than as an investment property or vacation getaway.

Overall, it is clear that *Blog Cabin* fans' online participation—and, in particular, their enthusiastic take-up of the myths of home and the American pastoral—served the economic interests of the show's producers and advertisers. By encouraging the audience to actively comment on the program and to participate in on-line conversations, the DIY Network created a rich and detailed means of gauging audience response. This was undoubtedly accomplished with simple tracking software that can collect IP addresses and analyze how much time a visitor spends on a site, what pages users opened while there, how users came to the site, and where users went on leaving. Such fine-grained data differ significantly the traditional practice of measuring viewer ratings that only deliver the most basic estimates on who is watching television and for how long (Andrejevic 2003). With web tools that track site participants, and by requiring users to reveal particular forms of personal information in the site's registration page, the producers of *Blog Cabin* could thus derive a much better picture of the audience and its loyalty to the program and its sponsors. All of these data could then be used to enhance the exchange value of advertising space on television and on the website.

Yet on the other hand, these realities of enclosure and commodification do not exhaust the analysis. It would not be accurate to say that the audience of *Blog Cabin 2008* was produced by the narrative and marketing skills of the DIY Network. Instead, to borrow a similar concept from science and technology studies, the audience and television series *co-produced* one another as they worked through and developed these two myths via their collective immaterial labor (Jasanoff 2004). Moreover, at the same time that the blog's comment-writers were drawing on the myths of home and the pastoral to bind themselves to the show as loyal fans (and therefore to constitute themselves as a source of value), *they were also binding themselves to one another.* They formed, in other words, a self-aware collective, going so far as to give themselves a name in their blog comments: "The Off-Site Build Team." In their collective discussions, fans—not producers—played the leading role. The amount of writing the audience produced, for example, far outweighed that of the show producers, with conversations between viewers clearly acting as the main attraction for many of the blog's most dedicated comment-writers.[11] Furthermore, as we will discuss next, as they formed themselves into a collective, and as they began to dominate the blog's discussion, these fans began to think and act in ways that producers could neither have predicted nor controlled.

It's *Our* House: Labor and Ownership in *Blog Cabin*

Loyal and committed audiences are the new coin of the TV realm (Jenkins 2006). "Loyals" skip fewer ads, remember more brands, and buy more sponsored products. But, interestingly, it was the impressive level of fan loyalty in *Blog Cabin* that led

directly to some intriguing contradictions and tensions on the show's blog, particularly around the thorny question of ownership. For many fans, this was not merely "the cabin" or "the show's cabin." It was very often "ours" or "mine." As one participant wrote, "a big thanks to everyone who is working so hard on our beautiful Blog Cabin!"[12]

Undoubtedly keen to bind fans more tightly to the show, the show's producers actively encouraged this sense of investment and ownership in their own blog posts. For example, one producer's post noted that:

> This next round of voting focuses on some of the cosmetics and extras of *Blog Cabin 2008*. Choose a cool toy for *your* sunny afternoons on Watts Bar Lake, feel good about *your surroundings* with an outdoor green feature, relax in an adirondack or rocking chair (painted or natural), select *your* patio furniture style and last, but not least, choose *your* kitchen cabinet hardware. Happy voting! [emphasis added][13]

This is not to say that fans' feelings of ownership were cultivated by producers in a mechanical way. It is much more likely, in our view, that the comment-writers felt a sense of ownership based on the time and effort they were devoting to the show. After all, the votes of fans had a demonstrable impact on the cabin, and its design was viewed as a collective effort, as the frequent use of possessive and collective pronouns (our/ours; my/mine; we/us) attests.

It appears, however, that with (a sense of) ownership comes (a sense of) power, because as *Blog Cabin 2008* moved through the season, the design suggestions of the "Off-Site Build Team" shifted noticeably into more explicit demands to go off-script and add unplanned features to the cabin. These demands, as we will see, were less centered on aesthetics and more on the addition of simple but powerful symbols that spoke to fans' growing sense of solidarity and community.

The fans' most notable demand grew out of their concern for one of their own. Cynthia, a fan who had been an early and active participant on the blog, suddenly dropped off the *Blog Cabin 2008* website around May of 2008, early in the development of the online portion of the show. Before she dropped out, however, she had confessed that her cancer had returned, repeatedly mentioning hospital visits and being too weak to sit at her computer. Often, her daughter would post comments under her name, informing the community of her mother's status. In one such post, her daughter described in graphic detail a surgical procedure her mother was undergoing:

> It looks as if it's going to be closer to a ten day hospital stay, and there were a couple of problems during the surgery. Her right lung collapsed and they have what looks like a thin dryer vent hose going through a hole in her back right now, but her doctor assures me that when she is breathing fine on her own that will come out. During the surgery her temperature went up to 105 degrees, and apparently she had pneumonia!

Within a month after Cynthia dropped out, her fellow comment-writers began to ask the DIY Network to dedicate episodes to her. They also asked that the webmaster of the blog contact Cynthia via email so that others might learn of her condition. They were, in short, noticeably concerned about a woman that had become a part of their community.

This concern grew over time. In June 2008, in response to the producers' "Two New Slide Shows!" post, comment-writers ignored the producers' preferred topic and instead mobilized to petition the network.[14] The vast majority of the 326 comments on that post focused on Cynthia's condition and called for some sort of on-air dedication to her. The petitions continued the next day on a new blog post. As the show's episodes continued to air without any mention of Cynthia, the "Off-Site Build Team" grew more frustrated, with statements such as "there was no mention of Cynthia on the videos or the tv shows. Do you think DIY thinks we will forget that they were asked to do something?"

Other audience members demanded a more tangible tribute. "I think a permanent marker for Serenity Shores would be a great idea. It would be a lasting tribute to all that participated," argued one. Another audience member agreed:

> I would vote for a more permanent type of plaque or marker on the property. It doesn't have to be large or flashy just something that will endure. Then, any of us who might find our way to Serenity Shores at some point in time could see it and remember this experience and the part that Cynthia and [her daughter] played in it. Let's face it, the TV show will come and go, but a marker would last much longer . . . maybe even forever? *this beautiful home would not exist in its present form without all of us who shared our ideas and feedback* [emphasis added].

This dialectical tension between labor and property ownership has a long history in capitalist societies. In his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, for example, John Locke suggested that if all of creation was, in the beginning, a gift from God to all of humanity, then pouring one's labor into the world—and thereby improving on God's creation with one's sweat and tears—conferred fundamental rights of private ownership. Of course, Marx would later note that these rights never quite extended to workers whose status as hired help precluded, as a matter of law, such claims to ownership. At the same time, the feeling among workers that they "own" the products of their labor, regardless of legal prohibitions, can persist, as can be seen in the common practice of construction workers who sign trusses or write their names in wet concrete at build sites.

In a similar way, *Blog Cabin*'s most enthused fans may not have *owned* the cabin in a legal sense, but they could at least leave a physical marker behind to make a small claim on the fruit of their labor, particularly in the name of one of their fallen members. Fans therefore not only recognized their vital role in the creation of the cabin, but they also wanted that role materialized at the build site.

In the end, however, the producers did not comply with the demands for a plaque or for an on-air mention of Cynthia, although both the show's host and executive producers posted comments on the website expressing their concern about Cynthia's illness.[15] Yet despite this relative lack of response, particularly with regard to the on-site memorial, the coordinated demands advanced by audience members nonetheless demonstrated their awareness of themselves as a cohesive group—a group who had provided a valuable service via their collective labor and who sometimes found themselves at odds with the show's producers.

Building a Luxury Log Cabin in a Financial Crisis

In the summer of 2008, as producers and fans busied themselves with building the *Blog Cabin*, foreclosure rates in America began to climb. By September, the nation had plunged into the worst economic recession since the 1930s. As millions lost their homes, banks and investment firms that had once seemed like unassailable temples of capitalism collapsed or were sold off for pennies on the dollar. Home prices plummeted further and banks stopped lending, further exacerbating problems in housing markets, resulting in still more foreclosures as homeowners saw their equity disappear. This was particularly apparent among homeowners who used nontraditional, interest-only, or subprime loans. According to the Mortgage Banker's Association, by December 2008, national foreclosure rates had reached 3 percent, triple the historical average.[16]

The irony of participating in the planning and construction of a luxury log cabin during a foreclosure and financial crisis was not lost on the "Off-Site Build Team." In fact, during the public debate about a proposed federal government rescue of the financial industry, *Blog Cabin 2008*'s comment-writers began to connect the show to their own housing situations and to the crisis engulfing the larger American economy.

First, as the financial crisis unfolded, fans began to discuss the true costs of owning a luxury cabin in rural Tennessee. A major concern was the tax bill waiting for the eventual winner. As one comment writer put it, "there is such a high tax price just for the house and property alone. I know once winners receive the blogcabin it becomes income earned. Then taxed." Several audience members chimed in and calculated the total bill. One fan in particular carefully examined the sweepstakes rules and came to the following conclusion:

> The winner will have to pay income tax on $750,000, and is likely to be 35% federal, plus whatever Tennessee's income tax is, plus whatever your home state income tax is (none in TX). I figure that you will need a $290,000 mortgage to cover the taxes, which at the interest rate of 5.25% for a 30 year mortgage will run you about $1600 per month. I would want to be making at least $55,000 a year to have that size mortgage payment.

For his part, audience member Nick noted that "for a few people, $260,000 or so in tax is no problem. For some it will be possible with some lifestyle adjustments. For

most it will be hard to impossible." Following this thread, another came to this stark conclusion:

> The way property prices are going and will continue for some time the winner will have a potential "white elephant" on their hands with an ARV [annual retail value] of $750,000 but a "real" value (the price it can actually be sold for) considerably less. Unfortunately, Uncle Sam doesn't care about this value, for tax it's just the declared ARV that will be used to determine the tax owed.

Confronting these numbers, several audience members considered ways that the cabin could pay for itself as productive capital. In doing so, fans departed from the myth of home as a center of meaning (use value) and toward viewing the cabin as a means of generating profit (exchange value). Given the rural setting and appointments of the home, several fans suggested that the winner turn the cabin into a bed and breakfast. Other ideas included home-businesses such as accounting services, hair salons, dog kennels, or simply leasing the property as a vacation rental. However, even these hopes were dashed when Nick reviewed the regulations of the private housing development where the cabin was located and informed the community that "The Deeds and Covenants of the development prohibit home-based business. It's even doubtful that the winner can rent it out. They want owner-occupiers or owner-occasional occupiers only." Indeed, the log cabin was being built in a privately regulated housing development with strict rules about land use, landscaping, and colors. As we will see, for some comment-writers, knowledge of these regulations, along with the property's asking price, removed the cabin from the realm of the "pastoral" and into a different discursive category: the gated community.

Indeed, if the winner were to choose to live in the log cabin and pay for it by earning a wage in Tennessee, she or he would have few options. The cabin is located in Spring City, Tennessee, (population 2,025 as of the 2000 census).[17] In Rhea County, where Spring City is located, the median household income was $34,750 (2009 dollars), $17,000 below the national average. As a small rural town, Spring City, Tennessee, would presumably not have the breadth of employment options that the owner of the $750,000-home might require. Knoxville, the closest large city, is more than sixty miles away, an estimated hour and ten minute commute. Unless the cabin went to an audience member who could *afford to win it*, it would indeed be a "white elephant."

Thus, as the season of *Blog Cabin 2008* progressed, and as the financial crisis deepened, the audience began to recognize their alienated position vis-à-vis the cabin. While they were participating in its design and building a community of fans of the show, the odds of the winner of the cabin even being able to keep it appeared extremely low. Faced with this deflating prospect, some in the audience once again began to make demands and offer alternatives. The leader of this effort was Susan, who persuasively called upon the show's producers to engage in the production of affordable housing:

I believe BLOGCABIN should do some things a little different and really help families dreams come true I Think that with this home being worth $750,000.00 it will most likely force the average viewer who is the potential winner to sell. And I have a problem with that. It's a gift it should be affordable . . . It's a giveaway to make dreams come true so why not make them come true! They also could build on more affordable land to bring overall budget cost and winner's tax totals cost down. Not every give away has to be built into a gated community with an awesome view.

On another post, Susan commented:

I know they can build smaller and cheaper [cabins] and just as nice! But It would be great if they made sure the home can adapt and be used by anyone no matter how old or young or how rich or poor they are. Build different sizes of homes in different types of neighborhoods, cheaper land, smaller home not necessarily a gated estate with alot of rules to follow. Put it in a place where the potential owners can have a business and run it from the home and give them a fighting chance to keep the homes built to give away. That would be more of a blessing to your viewers in knowing they are building something that really helps someone out *more so than just being apart of it by blog* [emphasis added].

And, in a completely different conception of what a television contest might mean, another commenter argued:

I think the cabin is fantastic and wanted to add that it would be really nice if the winner would donate the house to let others stay in it like missionaries or other volunteers that do so much for our environment. People that help our planet, the people and animals that live here. What a wonderful retreat it could be.

Joined by six others, these fans argued for alternatives to the show's plan to build a massive and luxurious house and give it to a single owner. In this way, collectively, the "Off-Site Build Team" helped one another recognize the contradiction in building a home in which many of them could not afford to live, even if they were lucky enough to win. Despite the effort they devoted to composing themselves as a community and designing the cabin, in the end they would have no say over how the cabin would be used. Even the lucky winner would likely be forced to sell.

It therefore seems clear that the audience bore a great deal of the risk of producing the *Blog Cabin 2008* media object. They contributed to the design of the cabin. They faithfully posted comments on the blog and watched the show when it aired. They invested their emotions in an object almost certainly destined to be owned by another. Finally, once the show was over, the cabin's lucky winner would assume all the risks of owning a luxury cabin with a big tax bill in the midst of a real estate crisis, even while being required to make television and online appearances promoting the show.

At the same time, what was fascinating was that, in their collective immaterial labor on the website, comment-writers also helped one another recognize their alienation from the cabin and even mobilized to contest their lack of control, especially when it came to honoring one of their own.

Re-composition and the Politics of Articulation

How can we make sense of the role of the audience in *Blog Cabin 2008*, particularly given the show's creative use of fans' emotional investments and their user-generated content? At one level, the experience of fans confirms the sobering analyses of Andrejevic (2007b) and Fuchs (2009). *Blog Cabin*'s producers used the show's blog to bind viewers more tightly to the show, thereby building not merely a cabin but a loyal and devoted audience—precisely the kind of audience for which advertisers will pay a premium (Jenkins 2006). Furthermore, the show's blog also became a venue for exploiting the immaterial labor of audiences. Fans contributed materially to the show by suggesting and voting on design elements, and their online interactions undoubtedly yielded the kinds of digitized personal information highly prized by producers and sponsors. Finally, control of the television text, the show's blog, and the cabin itself remained firmly in the hands of producers. In fact, according to the blog's terms of use, every idea, every suggestion, every piece of personal information, every catchy turn of phrase posted on the blog immediately became the intellectual property of the show's producers, to be commodified and sold to third parties at will. As Andrejevic might say, welcome to the digital enclosure.

At the same time, however, we argue that these accumulation strategies do not exhaust the story of *Blog Cabin 2008*. Although the website was created to exploit the free labor of audiences—to put them to the value-generating "work of being watched" (Andrejevic 2007b)—fans also used the blog to pursue their own ends, in ways not anticipated by the show's producers. Drawn by the shared investment in the myths of home and the American pastoral, fans used the blog to constitute themselves as a community, to make demands on producers, and to advocate their interests. On occasion, fans even made connections between the contradictions in the television text (i.e., how would we pay the taxes on this cabin, even if we won it?) to the accelerating financial and real estate meltdown that formed a somber backdrop to the show.

In fact, the online discussion took a decidedly politicized turn as Congress debated a $700-billion rescue package for Wall Street. Two comments from the "Off-Site Build Team," part of a larger exchange, are examples of the larger politicized conversation:

> I saw a commentary on what could be done with the $700,000,000,000. It could pay for medical expense for the whole USA for 5 years. It could be used in education and fund teachers' pay for 10 years. It could be divided among every citizen of USA and each would get $2000, that is every man, woman and child. There were a number of other comparisons like fund the current middle eastern military actions for the next 10 years. I agree why not apply it where it would

help the people pay their mortgages instead of paying the people that caused the mess.

Then, another audience member replied with the following:

I agree with you wholeheartedly. . . . You know, if America bails out these idiots, don't you think we should in essence be shareholders? You know the banks wouldn't hesitate a second to charge us interest. Why then shouldn't we? Or perhaps they could use this money to produce an alternative energy vehicle that could be *given to every family in this country*. No more dependency on oil, cleaner environment, and money well spent. But just about anything is better than giving away our money to those who will likely never appreciate it anyway. And probably just do it again.

In our view, these comments, part of the wider pattern of viewer advocacy discussed above, represent a gesture or a halting half-step toward what the autonomists call "class re-composition," that is, the process through which individuals, linked together in networks of commerce and communication, come to grasp their collective interest in organizing against relations of inequality and exploitation (Dyer-Witheford 1999). In short, just as the autonomists might predict, fans turned the networking power of the blog toward ends not anticipated, nor we suspect particularly welcomed, by the producers or their advertisers.

Thus, we argue that actions of *Blog Cabin* fans should remind media studies scholars, particularly those studying the political economy of media convergence and Web 2.0, to not fall too readily into the dual traps of cultural pessimism and populism (Clarke 1990). Instead, we find ourselves in agreement with Miller's (2009) call for Media Studies 3.0, an approach to media analysis that refuses to "privilege pessimism, optimism, audiences, owners, states, or labor" but rather stresses "their mutual imbrication" (p. 6).

In this case, we view the proprietary platforms of Web 2.0 in dialectical terms, as simultaneously an expression of popular desires for cultural participation and collective action and as a technical means of colonizing and valorizing these same creative and democratic impulses. On one hand, the rise of the web as an accessible and powerful vehicle for media distribution has indeed challenged established industrial practices, opening up opportunities for establishing alternative modes of producing and sharing media, based on gift economies and the creation of commons rather than on the establishment of property rights and admissions fees (Lessig 2001). At the same time, these liberating possibilities have also inspired an aggressive response among established media firms to both radically extend the reach and scope of intellectual property and to enclose user creativity and collaboration within proprietary platforms designed for maximum commercial surveillance (Lessig 2004; Andrejevic 2007b).

Yet (and this is the central lesson of the *Blog Cabin* case) the ongoing effort to colonize, enclose, and commodify never quite exhausts the human capacity to resist,

to organize—to re-compose, in other words—in order to carve spaces and moments of autonomy and freedom (De Certeau 1984). This dialectical tension between re-composition and recuperation thus forms what autonomists call the "circuit of struggles"—a circuit where both class power and class resistance call each other into being and where the ongoing antagonism between them becomes, in fact, the primary motor of social and technical development (Dyer-Witheford 1999).

At the same time, lest we get swept away in our enthusiasm for rebuilding class consciousness within the collective intelligence marshaled by Web 2.0 users, we also recognize that, in the case of *Blog Cabin*, re-composition remained a mere *potential*—a potential that was largely unrealized. Fans won no real concessions from producers; the memorial was never added to the build site. Nor did they use the blog to mobilize and advance political alternatives to the no-strings-attached Wall Street bailouts; their posts remained at the level of words, not deeds. Re-composition thus does not happen on its own, springing full-grown from networked collectives like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. Instead, this potential for collective action can either be activated and channeled toward particular political ends, or can forever lay dormant, depending on the actions (or inaction) of those linked in the network.

This is a point that can be easy to miss when reading key autonomist texts like Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), in which the subsumption of all of everyday life under the logic of accumulation and the linking of all humanity within global networks of commerce and communication has created the conditions for the inevitable, spontaneous, and decisive uprising of "the multitude" as an unstoppable political force. We firmly agree with Laclau (2001) that this is wishful thinking of the most egregious sort. Grasping the potential for class re-composition instead requires what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) call a politics of *articulation*, in which individuals work together to forge an awareness of social antagonism (i.e., conflicts of interest), a sense of collective identity, and a provisional agreement on political strategies and tactics.

Realizing the potential for class re-composition in moments like those created by *Blog Cabin* fans thus requires making *connections*. And, as we have seen, fans were indeed connecting some of these dots. Comment writers began to recognize the contradiction between the producer's invitation to feel a sense of ownership in the cabin and their lack of control over the property, even when it came to placing a small memorial. A few fans even began to connect the increasingly precarious status of the American dream of home ownership (as dramatized by the financial crisis) and their distance from centers of political and economic power in global capitalism (as grasped in their objections to the Wall Street bailout). It was at these moments that the awareness of class exploitation and inequality came closest to the surface.

Grasping the political potential of such connections and drawing together fans' various threads of conversation in a more explicitly politicized direction is an altogether different matter. In the end, therefore, what the case of *Blog Cabin* suggests is the necessity for autonomists and others interested in the possibilities of online class

re-composition to engage more directly with the issue of *leadership*—a subject that critical communication scholarship has left almost entirely to organizational communication scholars and management consultants. Whatever antipathy critical communication scholars might feel with regard to assertions of leadership and authority (fears of vanguardism and elitism come to mind), it seems obvious to us that helping individuals move from online expressions of episodic discontent toward a more effective and organized collective network, focused on concrete political aims, requires the intervention of leaders who can take advantage of such teachable moments. Thinking carefully about how effective leadership can be mobilized through online networks in the pursuit of class re-composition, without falling into anti-democratic traps of vanguardism and authoritarianism, would seem like a productive vein for critical internet scholars to explore.

Acknowledgment

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. At its height, *Trading Spaces* drew four million viewers (Dehnart 2008), making it a hit by cable standards, while at the height of its run, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* drew more than fifteen million viewers to ABC (Bauder 2005).
2. http://www.diynetwork.com/blogcabin.
3. http://www.diynetwork.com/diy/blogcabin2008/text/0=,,DIY_30896_66199,00.html.
4. As Andrejevic argues, if in the high times of traditional media, watching television could be plausibly theorized as "work," particularly when we watched unwelcome ads in exchange for the "wage" of desired programming, on the web we perform the "work of being watched"—where our user-generated content (our "likes" and "dislikes" on Pandora and our status updates on Facebook) are transformed into the private property of the firm, compiled, and sold to third parties as cybernetic commodities (Andrejevic 2007b; Mosco 2009).
5. The concept of immaterial labor emerged first from the work of Lazzarato (1996) and was later developed by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004). The concept, though not without its critics (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008), refers to the labor that produces the cultural or semiotic content of goods and services. Such goods can include intangible informational or cultural goods (e.g., video games), the meanings that become attached to material goods (i.e., the

images of status and lifestyle advertisers associated with goods like jewelry or automobiles), or services where the primary "good" is a feeling or sense of well-being (e.g., life coaches).

6. Currently available at http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/category/blog-cabin-2008/.

7. Currently available at http://www.diynetwork.com/diy-blog-cabin-episodes/videos/index.html.

8. Note that a small portion of these comments are written by the show's producers in response to questions posed by the viewers. However, this was only a small part of the overall total.

9. http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2007/11/09/blog-cabin-2008-first-look/.

10. It is important to note that these comments have no bearing on the contest—the contest is not based on who deserves the home more or any other subjective decision; it is a random drawing. Thus, there is no logical reason for the audience members to confess to illnesses, distressed economic situations, or family needs.

11. To take a representative example, on the post "Great Evening of Blog Cabin Tonight, plus Something Exciting," Watson, the DIYnetwork.com manager, produced 137 words. The audience produced more than 36,000 words in response.

12. Other audience members frequently referred to the winning features of the cabin (the floorplan, the fixtures, and the decor) as "my idea," regardless if they specifically suggested these design elements or simply voted for them as one pre-determined option among many.

13. "Paying Attention to the Details" (my emphasis, http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/ 2008/04/07/paying-attention-to-the-details/).

14. Post "Two New Slide Shows!" available at http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/ 2008/06/13/two-new-slide-shows/.

15. In the producers' defense, many of the episodes were filmed well ahead of the demands made by the audience, perhaps making it too difficult to retroactively change the credits or add new footage.

16. A summary of the Mortgage Banker's Association December delinquency report is available at http://www.mortgagebankers.org/NewsandMedia/PressCenter/66626.htm.

17. The 2010 census data is the most current for Spring City, Tennessee, and is available at http://factfinder.census.gov/.

References

Altheide, David L. 1996. *Qualitative media analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Andrejevic, M. 2003. *Reality TV: The work of being watched*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

———. 2007a. Surveillance in the digital enclosure. *The Communication Review* 10:295-317.

———. 2007b. *iSpy: Surveillance and power in the interactive era*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Arvidsson, A. 2005. Brands: A critical perspective. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5 (2): 235-58.

Bauder, D. 2005. TLC pays price for "Trading Spaces" success. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 11. http://www.seattlepi.com/tv/219562_spaces11.html.

Baym, Nancy. 2010. *Personal connections in the digital age*. New York: Polity.

Benkler, Yochai. 2002. Coase's Penguin, or, Linux and "The Nature of the Firm." *Yale Law Journal* 112 (3): 369-446.

———. 2006. *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Clarke, J. 1990. Pessimism vs. populism: The problematic politics of popular culture. In *For fun and profit: The transformation of leisure into consumption*, edited by R. Butsch, 28-44. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

De Certeau, M. 1984. *The practice of everyday life*. Trans. Stephen Rendell. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dehnart, A. 2008. Trading Spaces ratings return to their 2005 level. *Reality Blurred* [blog]. February 6. http://www.realityblurred.com/realitytv/archives/trading_spaces/2008_Feb_06_return_ratings (accessed March 4, 2010).

Dyer-Witheford, N. 1999. *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and circuits of struggle in high-technology capitalism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

———. 2005. Cyber-Negri: General Intellect and Immaterial Labour. In *Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in practice*, 136-162. London: Pluto.

Ess, C. 2002. *Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the AOIR ethics working committee* (Association for Internet Researchers). http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf (accessed February 15, 2011).

Fuchs, Christian. 2009. A contribution to the critique of the political economy of transnational informational capitalism. *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 21 (3): 387-402.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2004. *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of Empire*. New York: Penguin.

Hesmondhalgh, David, and Sarah Baker. 2008. Creative work and emotional labour in the television industry. *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (7): 97-118.

Jasanoff, Sheila. 2004. *States of knowledge: The co-production of science and social order*. International Library of Sociology. London: Routledge.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2001. Review: Can immanence explain social struggles? *Diacritics* 31 (4): 3-10.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 2001. *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. 1996. Immaterial labor. In *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics*, 133-50. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lessig, Lawrence. 2001. *The future of ideas: The fate of the commons in a connected world*. 1st edition. New York: Random House.

———. 2004. *Free culture: How big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control creativity*. New York: Penguin.

Levy, Pierre. 1997. *Collective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace*. New York: Plenum Trade.

Lewis, Tania. 2008. Changing rooms, biggest losers and backyard blitzes: A history of makeover television in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 22 (4): 447-58.

Marx, Leo. 1964. *The machine in the garden; Technology and the pastoral ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Miller, Toby. 2009. Media Studies 3.0. *Television & New Media* 10 (1): 5-6.

Mosco, Vincent. 2009. *The political economy of communication*. Los Angeles: Sage.

O'Reilly, Tim. 2005a. Not 2.0? Blog. *O'Reilly Radar*. August 5. http://radar.oreilly.com/
    archives/2005/08/not-20.html (accessed November 18, 2009).

———. 2005b. What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation
    of Software. Blog. *O'Reilly Media*. September 30. http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/
    tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html (accessed November 18, 2009).

———. 2006. Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again—O'Reilly Radar. Blog. *O'Reilly
    Radar*. December 10. http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web-20-compact.html (accessed
    November 18, 2009).

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks,
    CA: Sage.

Schiller, Dan. 2007. *How to think about information*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Sunstein, Cass R. 2006. *Infotopia: How many minds produce knowledge*. New York: Oxford
    University Press.

Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy. *Social
    Text* 18 (2): 33-35.

Bios

Robert Gehl is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University
of Utah.

Timothy Gibson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at George
Mason University.