

## Enunciative Fan Production and Social “Flow”

### **Fansub Production and the Liveness of Anime Discourse**

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The liveness of experience available to North American fans of anime (Japanese animation) is historically different from that of many other types of television fandom. Since many anime fans in North America are not fluent in the Japanese language, not only have the barriers to experiencing anime in real time been technical, but linguistic as well. However, the time gap between when a show airs on Japanese television and when it becomes available for non-Japanese fans has been steadily shrinking since North American anime fandom began coalescing in the late 1970s. This was facilitated by the fan production of subtitled episodes, a practice that has been decreasing due to lack of need in the last few years.

In the 1970s and '80s, few anime titles were commercially available in North America. Most fans watched anime programs on video tape that had been obtained through personal connections, such as a friend in Japan or a local club. These episodes generally lacked subtitles, so early anime fanzines often contained detailed English synopses of episodes in order to enhance the viewing experience. Because physical media had to be mailed out and sometimes duplicated again for circulation among clubs, the time between when an episode aired and when it was viewed could be weeks or months. Synopses in the fanzines were also useful because there was no formalized distribution system, and the availability of episodes could be sporadic. Beginning in the mid-1980s, personal computers with video cards allowed anime fans to subtitle shows themselves, creating what became known as "fansubs." These were first circulated on video tapes, and later on digital media like CD and VCD.

Although online distribution had been occurring via Internet Relay Chat for a number of years in the 1990s, the invention of the BitTorrent protocol in the early 2000s made it much easier for people without a technical background to easily access fansubbed anime episodes. Coincidentally, this time period also saw the rise of commercial US-based distributors of anime programs. By this time, however, North American anime fandom had developed a general acceptance of fansubs. It was often taken as granted that, while supporting an official releases is preferable, the use and distribution of fansubs was acceptable to both keep abreast of the latest developments in anime as well as to demonstrate interest in a particular title to US licensees. The popularity and ease of access to online fansubs led to an even greater awareness of the shows that were currently being broadcast in Japan. However, it also led to many people downloading, but not purchasing, significant quantities of anime titles, even those that had been officially licensed and released in North America. The release speed of fansubs depended on many factors, but episodes could sometimes be online within a couple of days of initial Japanese broadcast.

In the mid-2000s, websites like Crunchyroll.com, which allowed users to watch fansubbed anime online, became popular. A couple of years later, thanks to an influx of

capital, Crunchyroll removed all of the infringing content from the site in favor of shows they had officially licensed. Many Japanese rights holders were initially wary of showing their programming on the Internet in North America, since this was not something they had attempted in Japan. However, online streaming services like Crunchyroll were seen as a way to allow fans to still have the same kind of immediacy they had grown used to with digital fansubs, while putting the shows back under the auspices of an official licensee. Shows can now be available to watch subtitled in English within an hour of its broadcast in Japan. This practice of simulcasting anime online has caught on, and there are now multiple anime streaming sites, many of which are associated with a distributor of physical media. This has introduced a new wrinkle into the type of fan discourse around an anime series. Because so many shows are streamed online, there is often much discussion, speculation, and anticipation about the shows a particular service will be showing each season.

As it stands right now, North American anime companies have been able to replicate, to a greater or lesser degree of success, a kind of synchronicity with anime broadcasts in Japan, which allows fans to keep up with the latest programming. This is also facilitated by social media like Twitter, which allows English-speaking fans to follow and interact with Japanese accounts for shows and creators and communicate with them using translation software. However, in reaching this point, the culture of fansubbing, which had existed in the anime community for decades, is falling by the wayside even as the experience of liveness that fansubs helped to foster increases in its wake.