It Takes an iVillage: Gender, Labor, and Community
in the Age of Television-Internet Convergence

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Given its corporate ownership, iVillage.com constitutes a useful case study of the forces shaping online communities in the midst of what has been identified as television-Internet convergence. Not only does iVillage.com complicate conventional understandings of online communities, it also offers compelling insights into how media corporations construct online markets along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. By positioning online communities as vehicles for the targeted delivery of brand messages, media corporations seek to render these online communities commodities in much the way they have historically sought to render commercial television audiences commodities that can be sold to advertisers. Building on the work of Smythe (1977), Jhally and Livant (1986), Terranova (2000), Andrejevic (2004), Postigo (2009), and Bermejo (2010) this study identifies a new mode of consumer work emerging from these corporate-engineered online communities—the "labor of devotion" —where consumers participate in the promotion of corporate brands through interactive media.

When we go to market, we're selling young women and affluent women in a way that virtually no one else can.

~ Jeff Zucker, President and CEO of NBC Universal, 2007
(Becker, 2007, p. 1)

Can women be brought and sold? The above quote appearing in the trade press suggests the head of the media conglomerate NBC Universal believes so. The quote was taken from a press conference in which Zucker promoted NBC Universal's ability to provide advertisers with access to this valuable consumer audience through its media properties targeted at women—the cable channels Bravo and Oxygen, and the online site iVillage.com. Indeed, of all those online commercial communities targeted at women (known in the industry as women's "affinity portals"), iVillage is the clear matriarch. Hosting more than 15.5 million members, 18.6 million electronic newsletter subscribers, and more than 12 million

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annual posts to the site's message boards,[2] iVillage offers an extensive online portal with vast amounts of site-generated content on such topics as health and diet, parenting and pregnancy, fashion and entertainment, and home and garden. The site organizes its considerable content under distinct headings referred to as "channels," using a television metaphor particularly apt in light of iVillage's parent company.[3]

NBC Universal (henceforth NBCU) acquired the site in 2006 for a reported $600 million as part of its Women@NBCU marketing initiative. Under this initiative, iVillage serves as a marketing platform for tapping into desirable female consumer demographics and promoting NBCU's other media properties targeted at women. Of course, a controlling share of NBCU was itself recently acquired by cable giant Comcast. Approved by the FCC and the Justice Department on January 18, 2011, Comcast's acquisition of NBCU has been valued at $30 billion by some media analysts (Arango, 2009). Much of the acquisition's value is found in the enhanced ability to deliver advertisements to specific market segments including women (Steinberg, 2009). As media analyst Steinberg points out, a "combined Comcast/NBCU" could offer marketers "the potential to target female consumers through NBC's Bravo and iVillage as well as Comcast's *E! Entertainment*, *Style* and dailycandy.com" (2009, p. 3).

Given its corporate ownership, iVillage constitutes a useful case study of the forces shaping online communities in the midst of what Parks identifies as "television-Internet convergence" (2004). This study sees this site as an ideal location to explore both questions of ownership (the purview of political economy) and questions of consumption (the purview of cultural studies). Of particular interest are the ways media corporations employ these online commercial communities in the construction "marketable identities" (Dávila, 2001) along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. By positioning online communities as vehicles for the targeted delivery of brand messages, media corporations seek to render these online communities commodities in much the way they have historically sought to render commercial television audiences commodities that can be sold to advertisers.

In this respect, media executives operating affinity portals share many of the institutional perspectives held by television executives (Ang, 1991; Bermejo, 2010). Bermejo notes that "even though the history of the online ratings industry is rather short, it is already possible to see how the overarching dynamics that shape this new industry have been similar to the ones manifest in broadcasting" (2010, p. 142). That those executives operating iVillage view users of the site as commodity audiences is evident in the discourse they use in the trade press. For instance, when discussing the site's recent makeover, Lauren Zalaznick, the president of NBCU Women and Lifestyle Entertainment Networks, commented that iVillage has "had a very passionate and loyal audience base who had been underserved for a good couple

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[2] iVillage Top-Line Metrics available online at www.ivillage.com/about

[3] Consalvo (2002) has discussed the importance of the use of metaphors in helping people understand a new media technology in terms of an existing media technology. Consalvo points out that those metaphors "used to describe the Internet have both helped and hindered by presenting certain 'visions' of what the Internet is or could be" (p. 114). Thus, in using a television metaphor to help users understand the iVillage.com site, the site presents as vision of the Internet based on an existing commercially dominated mass medium; a medium in which audiences are accustomed to being hailed as consumers.

of years" (Jensen, 2009, p. 5). A blatant comparison to television audiences was made by Zalaznick's predecessor, Douglas McCormick, who told the trade press that iVillage is "able to put an audience together of women that you haven't been able to compile since the days of Luke and Laura on *General Hospital*" (as quoted in Miller, 2003, p. 2).

However, conceptualizing users of an online community site as a commodity audience does not settle well with conventional views of Internet users found in the cyberculture literature (Baym, 1995, 1998; Campbell, 2004; Kendall, 2002; Mitra, 1997; Smith & Kollock, 1999; Watson, 1997). Given that the discourse appearing in the trade press suggests that media executives operating commercial community sites seek to replicate many aspects of the traditional relationship linking media producers and media consumers online, cyberculture scholars may need to distinguish between the roles played by members of organically evolving online communities and those played by users of corporate-engineered community sites.

As with commercial television audiences, users of these corporate-engineered communities must expose themselves to advertisements in exchange for access to the cultural and social resources offered by these sites. Thus, in line with Jhally and Livant's (1986) model of the "work of watching," members of these commercial communities perform a type of work on behalf of corporations that parallels the work television audiences perform in exchange for television content. However, interactive media adds a significant new dimension to this long-standing implicit contract between media producers and media consumers. Users of these commercial community sites engage in a form of immaterial labor where they actually generate some of the content that adds value to these sites, investing both their time and their emotional energy in such commercial endeavors. Building on the work of Jhally and Livant as well as Andrejevic (2004), Bermejo (2010), Napoli (2003), Postigo (2009), and Terranova (2000), this study identifies a new mode of consumer work emerging from these corporate-engineered online communities: the "labor of devotion." On commercial community sites such as iVillage, consumers not only view brand messages, but also actively participate in the promotion of corporate brands.

This *labor of devotion* resembles in many respects what Hochschild's (1983) identifies as "emotional labor" and is engendered through the corporate hybridization of community and brand as reflected in sites such as iVillage. A form of what Postigo (2009) identifies as "passionate labor," this mode of voluntary work is predicated on the gendered assumptions of marketers that men loyally consume their favorite brands whereas women actively promote their favorite brands to other women. These gendered assumptions are evident in the ways iVillage hails women as parents, as homemakers, as (heterosexual) wives and girlfriends, and (most importantly) as devoted consumers. In this respect, iVillage illustrates the ways that, as Seiter (2003) points out, new media can reinforce rather than undermine existing hierarchies of gender.

This study sets out with three primary objectives. The first object, in line with any political economy of communication analysis, is to trace the historical development of this commercial site with a particular focus on its institutional ownership. Unlike those online communities examined in the earlier cyberculture studies scholarship, this site is not the organic result of the activities of its members. Rather, it is the product of purposeful corporate engineering. This key difference invites a new way of looking at

online commercial communities, one that takes into account the influence of market forces at a moment when the Internet is converging with other media forms dominated by commercial interests.

The second objective is to examine the modes of labor performed by users of the iVillage site. The particular focus here will be on the labor of devotion and the value of this particular form of immaterial labor to marketers and media executives. The final objective of this study includes examining how this mode of labor is framed—it's cultural context—in an effort to understand how users of the iVillage site perceive the work they perform. This study rejects notions that users of iVillage or any commercial community site are operating under some form of "false consciousness" or are simply being "duped" by marketers. Rather, this study holds that the emergence of these commercial community sites necessities a more complex conceptualization of what forms of nonmonetary rewards users receive for their valuable efforts.

History of an Online Village

The founder of iVillage, Inc., Candice Carpenter, initially conceived of the company as an online support service for parents, something absent during the electronic frontier days of the Internet. Prior to iVillage, Carpenter had consulted for America Online, served as president of QVC's Q2 division, and held the position of CEO of Time-Life Video and Television (*Your Company*, 1999). Not only did Carpenter's business connections and track record of entrepreneurial success afford her the venture capital necessary to start iVillage, Inc., it also established the aegis under which iVillage would operate—that of a commercial enterprise.

In 1996, the company launched ParentSoup.com, a site providing parents with chat rooms and messages boards where they could share child-rearing advice. Although marketing research revealed that the vast majority of users visiting these parenting sites were women, iVillage narrowed its focus into a "woman's network" only after it became clear that "advertisers and sponsors were use[d] to marketing to a narrower demographic (specifically, women between the ages of 25 and 45) than to parents in general" (Kim, 2000, p. 6). In 1998, iVillage launched iVillage.com, a site targeted specifically at women.[4] By the end of the year, the new iVillage.com had attracted more than half a million members and the interest of major media corporations (Consalvo, 2002).

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[4] Of interest is how the timing of the launch of the new iVillage.com site corresponds with a significant shift in popular perceptions of the Internet occurring between 1995 and 1998 as documented by Consalvo (2002). During these years, the understanding of cyberspace as a space of communication was supplanted by the image of cyberspace as a space of commerce in the popular press. This shift in the popular press mirrored a shift in the demographic composition of online users. In 1995, it was estimated that women represented 17% of online users. By 1998 that percentage had risen to an estimated 48% of online users (Consalvo, 2002). Consalvo sees a correlation between the significant increase in the number of women going online and the domination of commercial images of cyberspace in the popular press: "Women are an important demographic for marketers, and the Internet during this period has become more of a place for selling than for exploring or creating" (p. 133).

In 1999, iVillage Inc. went public, filing a $46 million initial public offering, and gaining the support of NBC as a major shareholder. Notably, 1999 is same year NBC launched its own Internet company, NBCi, as part of an overall strategy to keep the network "at the forefront of the convergence of traditional media and the Internet, transitioning TV and radio audiences into Internet users with electronic commerce at the centerpiece of the new strategy" (as quoted in Parks, p. 138). Despite the influx of capital, iVillage Inc. remained unprofitable, with losses amounting to $107.5 million in 1999 (Walsh, 2000). In response to sagging stock prices, Douglas McCormick, the former chief executive of Lifetime Television, took over as the company's president and chief operating officer. In July of 2000, Carpenter— the individual seen as embodying the iVillage ethos in the popular press—relinquished the title of chief executive to McCormick (Hansell, 2000). Not surprisingly, questions arose in the trade press regarding the wisdom of appointing a man to replace the founder of a women's network.[5] However, questions regarding the gender equity of upper management were consistently overshadowed by questions concerning the company's profitability. McCormick's first step in addressing this problem was to eliminate the leading competitor by acquiring Women.com in 2001. In August of 2003, McCormick continued his strategy of acquisition by purchasing gURL.com from Primedia Inc., a site that would allow iVillage to expand its target audiences to include teenage women. In 2004, McCormick's initiatives proved a success when the company announced its first annual profit of $2.7 million (Fung 2005).

After acquiring a series of smaller sites, iVillage was itself acquired by NBCU in March of 2006 for a reported $600 million (Oser, 2006). NBCU immediately replaced McCormack with Deborah Fine who would serve as president of NBCU iVillage properties. Fine's primary duty was to integrate iVillage into NBCU's corporate digital media strategy, which included using the portal to promote those NBCU television properties popular with women, notably *The Today Show*, *Project Runway*, and *The Biggest Loser*. In November of 2008, Fine was replaced by Jodi Kahn as the new executive vice president of iVillage and direct report to Lauren Zalaznick, the president of NBCU Women and Lifestyle Entertainment Networks (Fung, 2008). Shortly after Kahn's arrival, NBCU conducted extensive marketing research on iVillage and female consumers. The results of that proprietary research led to an extensive redesign of the site, which was relauched in phases throughout 2009. In an interview, Kahn indicated that the relaunched site and its new interactive features resulted in a 170% increase in unique page visits as well as an increase in site engagement and click-through rates (Wong, 2010). As Kahn comments, corporate advertises liked the redesigned environment and "how we're infusing the community experience with content" (Wong, 2010, p. 2).

The historical development of iVillage demonstrates both that the site has been shaped primarily by designs of corporate agents rather than the activities of its users, and that the site "sits squarely in the

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[5] This would not be the last time the trade media questioned the idea of men running a site targeted at women. In June of 2004, when iVillage named Steven A. Elkes as its chief financial officer, questions were again raised over the fact that the upper management of a company targeting women was predominantly male. In response, Carl Fischer, chief of public relations for iVillage and also a man, indicated that such decisions were based purely on getting "the best person for the job," commenting: "Is Nickelodeon comprised of a management of children?" (Dash, 2004, p. 2). Still, it is notable that as the company grew and expanded its enterprises, iVillage's upper management became predominantly male.

territory of global media conglomerate ownership" (Worthington, 2005, p. 49). Furthermore, as those actors instrumental in iVillage's evolution—Carpenter, McCormack, Fine, Zalaznick—joined the venture from the ranks of commercial television, the site inevitably reflects many of the institutional perspectives of television networks. Jenkins' observation that media convergence is, in part, "a top-down corporate-driven process" (2006, p. 18) is evident in the shared business imperatives between this online enterprise and NBCU's television properties. However, Jenkins also points out that convergence "requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions" (ibid.). This need to "rethink old assumptions" is clearly playing out in the approaches NBCU executives are employing in constructing demographically desirable audiences through the iVillage site.

So who constitutes iVillage's demographically desirable audience? Zalaznick clarified its targeted audience when introducing the marketing term "affluencer" in the trade press: wealthy, well-educated, influential women with an interest in fashion and pop culture trends. In an interview, Zalaznick commented on the desirability of belonging to this demographic: "Who doesn't want to be that person with the cute boyfriend and the hot cellphone? You want to influence people, and you want to have money. It's like American" (as quoted in Carter, 2008, p. 1). For Zalaznick, this is not solely a demographic, but also a psychographic, indicating that one of the aims of iVillage is the selling of a particular lifestyle. The affluencer is the ultimate gendered market identity, a construct of the corporate media that collapses a specific gender, age, and class with a particular consumptive behavior.

While Zalaznick never explicitly characterizes the affluencer as white or heterosexual, such can be inferred by the illustrations of the affluencer appearing in NBCU's corporate literature and the accompanying corporate website, www.affluencers.com. These presumptions of race and sexuality can also be inferred by the site-generated content of iVillage. As Eble and Breault point out, "it is the silence of Whiteness, sexuality, and socio-economic status that speaks most loudly about the audience at the iVillage site, an audience that is presumed to be heterosexual, White women of the middle class" (2002, p. 319).[6]

Of course, promoting this image of the affluencer in the trade press does not necessarily indicate that Zalaznick believes all the users of the site truly fit this exacting demographic and psychographic model. Rather, Zalaznick's discourse suggests that she and other media executives know this consumer image attracts the interest of marketers and advertisers. Given this, it is fair to suppose those executives operating iVillage will endeavor to draw this lucrative demographic to the site by providing site-generated content tailored to the interests of so-called affluencers. This use of tailored content to hail a very specific audience is by no means new for, as Turow points out, the intensification of competition for advertising revenue in the 1980s and 1990s led media corporation "to create 'signature' materials that both drew the 'right' people and signaled the 'wrong' people that they ought to go away" (1997, p. 5).

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[6] During a phone interview on June 9, 2006, Susan Hahn, vice president of community and customer support, indicated that approximately 90% of those registering with iVillage identify themselves as white.

With such a specific audience in mind, the question then becomes what forms of labor do media executives expect the users of iVillage to perform on behalf of NBCU?

The Labor of Devotion and Working in the iVillage

There are a number of user activities on the iVillage site that would fulfill Maurizio Lazzarato's criteria for *immaterial labor*. According to Lazzarato, immaterial labor "involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as 'work'—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (1996, p. 133). Although not generally viewed as "work," these activities do align with Marxist understandings of labor as those processes that add value to existing resources. Thus, as Terranova points out, the "productive capacities of immaterial labor on the Internet encompass the work of writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/Web sites/chatlines" (2000, p. 42). Indeed, as Postigo notes, "anyone who produces content online can be viewed as being, in some form or another, part of a free labor system of immaterial labor that is characteristic of post-fordist, information economies" (2009, p. 463).

However, it is important to acknowledge that immaterial labor need not be exploitative; the conditions under which such labor is performed is critical in determining whether it should be characterized as exploitation. For instance, when gay men constructed chat rooms during the 1990s on IRC (Internet Relay Chat) in which they could explore their own sexual identities, a tremendous amount of immaterial labor was involved (Campbell, 2004). Importantly, this labor was not performed with the aim of generating material profit on the part of any individual or group. The labor was freely shared among the community and all members benefited equally from the effort. Given this, these sites can hardly be characterized as exploitative. Indeed, it could be argued that all noncommercial online communities evolving organically from the activities of their users constitute a form of public good.

Applicable here is Jenkins' (2006) notion of participatory culture made possible through the advent of digital media technologies. In his understanding, these new media venues empower media consumers to play an active role in cultural production resulting in a more diverse and vibrant media landscape. However, commercial online communities that are engineered by corporate actors with the intent of generating a profit and promoting commercial brands potentially complicate this celebratory view. Postigo examines these competing views, noting an the "underlying tension between a free labor perspective and a participatory culture perspective that centers on what each believes will be the outcome of the overlapping and at times conflicting forces of participation and exploitation" (p. 464). These tensions may also reflect the different vantage points of fans and users (and those scholars who adopt their perspective) versus those of marketers and corporate agents. What a fan sees as participation, a marketer or corporate executive may see as free labor and lucrative promotion.

On sites such as iVillage, we can identify several forms of user activities that would be viewed by corporate actors as free labor. The most obvious form of labor being performed on iVillage is that most associated with television, what Jhally and Livant call the "work of watching." Expanding on Smythe's (1977) concept of an implicit contract between media corporations and media consumers whereby media

corporations sell the leisure-time attention of television viewers to advertisers, Jhally and Livant (1986) frame this "commodity-form of watching" as a mode of labor that speeds up the circulation of goods from production to consumption by the human activity of watching commercials. As Napoli points out, by giving advertisers a means of getting their messages to audiences, "media films essentially deal in human attention" (2003, p. 5). This is why the CEO Worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi, Kevin Roberts, proclaims that "[h]uman attention has become our principal currency" (2005, p. 33). As with other commercial community sites, iVillage makes much of its revenue through posting advertisements on the site under the marketing assumption that users spend time looking at these ads as they navigate the site.

Concerned with the growth of corporate surveillance, Andrejevic argues that interactive media adds a new dimension to this economic arrangement. Now in addition to viewing advertisements, consumers "are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to that in which they sell their labor power" (2004, p. 6). Andrejevic refers to this form of labor as "work of being watched," arguing that if watching commercials is a form of work, then "the work of being watched helps to rationalize this labor" by providing media corporations and marketers with more precise information about the composition of particular audiences, and thereby their value as a commodity (p. 97). Indeed, when users register with iVillage, they provide NBCU, and in turn marketers, with potentially valuable information about themselves as consumers. In fact, to participate on the site (i.e., post on the message boards), users must register; they must, in essence, engage in the work of being watched.

In his study of AOL volunteers, Postigo examines a form of online labor of significant value to media corporations: the generating of content for these commercial sites. He employs the term "passionate labor" to characterize this mode of immaterial labor involving certain emotional rewards similar to that described by Jenkins in his discussion of participatory culture. For Postigo, passionate labor "describes the structural conditions of co-creative work, the subject position of those doing free labor and the discourses and perspectives they make possible" (2009, p. 467). Key to framing any form of work as "passionate labor" is the conditions under which the labor is actually performed. These conditions, Postigo argues, essentially determine if the worker becomes emotionally alienated from his or her labor. It is this broader social context that allows the emotional rewards of the labor to be sufficient so other forms of compensation are not necessary on the parts of those who actually capitalize on the fruits of this labor.

On iVillage, the lion's share of user-generated content appears on the site's popular message boards. Most other sections of the extensive site consist almost exclusively of site-generated content, and those corporations paying to advertise on the site sponsor much of this content. For instance, the entire entertainment section of the relaunched site is now sponsored by Hasbro (Thielman, 2009). Despite being confined to the message boards, the value of user-generated content on iVillage should not be underestimated. Based on interviews with regular contributors to the site, the message boards are the emotional heart of the community for many users.

Emotion is central to the form of labor this study focuses on—the labor of devotion. The ideal emotional tie marketers seek is the intense loyalty of specific consumer groups, what marketing executive Kevin Roberts identifies as "loyalty beyond reason" to a particular brand (2005, p. 66). This passionate consumer loyalty can be characterized as devotion. Here *devotion* is understood as an intense and active

form of consumer loyalty. *Loyal* customers can be expected to consistently purchase the same brand when shopping; *devoted* customers actually see the brand as integral to their identity and thus promote the brand to others. Loyalty can be viewed as an emotional disposition, while devotion in the marketplace can be viewed as a form of labor benefiting the manufacturers of commercial goods and services. For instance, in his study of cults that form around brands, marketing consultant Douglas Atkin relates the story of a devoted Apple consumer who "spends his Saturdays at a computer store barging into sales assistant's pitches for PCs to sell the buyers Apple instead" (2004, p. xvi).

This form of labor is also illustrated in Muniz and O'Guinn's discussion of "brand communities." Brand communities come into existence when consumers devoted to a particular brand (e.g., Saab, Macintosh, Bronco) use the Internet to create Web sites and social networks celebrating and endorsing that brand. In essence, these community-created Web sites function as promotion tools for a particular brand, and as Muniz and O'Guinn note, these pages can represent a substantial amount of effort: "These Web pages were often quite elaborate and included text, pictures, and sound" (2001, p. 417).

Many marketers view this word-of-mouth promotion as significantly more effective than conventional mass-media advertising campaigns (Gobe, 2001), and it may well be such a belief that led NBCU to invest so heavily in media outlets targeting women. This is certainly suggested in the words of Peter Naylor, senior vice president of digital media sales at NBCU, when commenting that "[w]omen sell what they buy" (quoted in Miley, 2009a, p. 2). Indeed, marketing consultant Barletta claims that "because word of mouth is more prevalent among women" advertisers that target women are "getting free marketing of the most powerful kind" (2006, p. 13). In this respect, marketers associate emotional dispositions to brands with gendered understandings of the roles of consumers; that is, male consumers will *loyally* purchase their favorite brands, but female consumers will *devotedly* promote their favorite brands to other women.

This notion of emotion as a commodity in the capitalistic marketplace is not new. In her study of flight attendants and bill collectors, Hochschild introduces the term "emotional labor" to refer to the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" that is "sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*" (1983, p. 7, emphasis original). Indeed, Illouz explores the ways "emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other" (2007, p. 5). What is new is the expectation among marketers that consumers can now be induced to perform this emotional labor through online communities.

Here the labor of devotion is understood as a mode of immaterial labor that specifically involves consumers using interactive media venues—such as online communities—to promote commercial brands to other consumers. This is a mode of "word of mouth" advertising that through new digital media technologies takes on the form of consumer-crafted commercial appeals. The individual performing this labor receives no form of monetary compensation for their efforts despite its considerable financial benefit to the owners of the brands being promoted. Rather, the individual receives only intangible emotional or psychological rewards for this work. Commercial community sites constitute the ideal venues for eliciting this mode of labor as they can provide their users with intangible rewards in the form of those emotional recompenses associated with community membership, in particular, a sense of belonging.

Contemporary marketing literature indicates that advertisers and marketers well understand the psychological importance of these emotional rewards, particularly the need to belong. For instance, Atkin studies cults in an effort to discover potential marketing techniques that can be used by corporations in constructing intense emotional connections between consumers and the brands they purchase. Atkin argues that both religious cults and brands with cult followings address the same "universal needs"—to belong, to make meaning, and to create identity (2004, p. xvi). By doing so, both religious cults and brands with cult followings generate an intense form of *devotion* among their cohorts. Following this line of thought, media executives likely view these community sites as the ideal commercial vehicles for fulfilling this "universal need" of belonging. As Atkin concludes: *"Few stronger emotions exist than the need to belong and make meaning.* And brands are poised to exploit that need" (p. 199, emphasis original).

The desire of marketers to associate particular brands with a sense of community and belonging would explain why so many of the brand messages appearing on iVillage are integrated into the site content. In some cases, this integration takes the form of more conventional sponsored content where a corporation subsidizes the cost of an article, or series of articles in exchange for endorsement of their brand. In other areas, such integration takes the form of a recipe that prints with a coupon for a particular brand (Jensen, 2009). Such brand integration can be very compelling when linked with forms of information vital to users of the site.

For example, on December 30, 2007, a link appearing under the "iGet It Done" section on the home page appeared to lead to important advice on caring for infant children. When patrons followed the link, they were brought to an article, "Sleep Method Decoder," discussing how to determine why a baby may be having difficulty sleeping through the night. The article was sponsored by Children's Tylenol. The information in the article arguably represents a useful contribution to a community composed largely of women with young children. However, the article is framed by large advertisements for Children's Tylenol, making the brand's sponsorship of the story impossible to go unnoticed. Such sponsored content frames corporate entities advertising on the iVillage site as contributing *members* of the iVillage community.[7]

Occasionally, brand messages are also incorporated into user-generated content appearing on the message boards. Notably, on December 31, 2007—the day after the above referenced sponsored content appeared on the home page of the portal—Hrdorfm created a message board entitled: "Yeah! Free Children's Tylenol." The initial post to the board read as an endorsement for the product and Target stories:

> Target is having a sale on Tylenol. I bought both an infant and children's tylenol with 2 of the $5 coupons off of the Tylenol site AND got both for free with a few extra cents taken off the rest of my groceries. I also got a great deal on diapers and wipes at Target-used manufacturer coupon, store coupon, and the deal where you buy to big boxes you get a $5 gift card. I ended up getting Huggies size five for about 16 cents a

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[7] Some may even read Tylenol as exhibiting a sense of moral responsibility toward the iVillage community.

diaper. I got the tips on the website http://www.babycheapskate.com/ They always
have such good tips. :)[8]

It is not uncommon for brands advertised on the site to be included in discussions appearing in the
message boards. Such user-generated content in which recommendations are made for a particular brand
represent one aspect of the labor of devotion. While some of these posts may represent a form of
astroturf marketing, the prevalence of such discussions makes it unlikely all such posts are generated by
corporate actors, especially given how many are integrated into ongoing discussions.[9] Indeed, the labor of
devotion makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between corporate attempts at viral marketing and
"authentic" manifestations of consumer loyalty.

Interactive media play an indispensable role in fostering the intense emotional connections
underlying the labor of devotion. Indeed, it is through such media technologies that users of the site are
able to communicate with each other, become invested in social networks, contribute to community
discussions, and promote the brand/community ethos to newcomers. More fundamentally, it is arguably
the very experience of interactivity that provides consumers with the sense of being a member of a
community rather than merely part of an audience. As with Andrejevic's concept of the labor of being
watched, the labor of devotion rationalizes the work of watching, enhancing the efforts of advertisers and
media executives in realizing value in the marketplace.

The significance of all of this to marketers and media executives is clear. For instance, when
Verizon wanted to market its new Hub phone, it didn't just target the women using iVillage; it actually
"sought their help in marketing the product" (Miley, 2009b, p. 18). Based on "extensive research using
members of the iVillage community," Verizon was able to hone its marketing campaign to target the
precise lifestyle segment it wanted to reach with its brand message (ibid.). However, less clear is what
users may be getting out of these activities. Thus, understanding the context of this labor is critical.

iVillage as a Community of Women Workers

As Postigo points out, "conditions exist both in the experiences and expectations of volunteers
and fans and in organizational structures that allow for understanding work either as passionate labor or
as exploitation" (p. 465). Building on Postigo's observation, this study contends that the context within
and the conditions under which immaterial labor is performed play a critical role in assessing how such
labor should be characterized. What is evident from interviews with those frequenting iVillage's popular
message boards is that many users view the site as something more than a commercial portal. This is
indicated in posts made by members to the "In the News" message board in response to my question of
whether iVillage is a community.

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[8] http://messageboards.ivillage.com/iv-ppfrugal/?msg=43461.1&ice=ivl,searchmp

[9] According to SearchCRM.com, "Astroturfing is the artificial creation of a grassroots buzz for a product,
service or political viewpoint." When done for commercial purposes, astroturfing is known as "astroturf
marketing." Astroturf marketing represents the covert promotion of a brand in discussion forums or blogs
disguised as an unsolicited endorsement by a community member.

Britestarlite32205 on December 17, 2007: "iVillage is a community of ideas and comments of various kinds . . . We have an armchair vehicle to bring us in contact with other people all over the world. We can be participants in a world-wide community."

CI-libraone on December 17, 2007: "Most definitely we are a community. How could one be detached from others who regularly communicate thoughts & ideas?"

cl-nwtreehugger on December 21, 2007: "I've formed friendships that are truly important to me. I have friends IRL, but this allows me to create a feeling of 'community' with people from all over."

Numerous posts appearing on the message boards suggest many regular users view iVillage as a vibrant online community worthy of their emotional investment. Of course, this perception of iVillage as a community is not accidental. Every facet of the portal is discursively framed within a context of community. For instance, under the "About iVillage" section on the iVillage site, the following description appears: "iVillage offers an authentic community infused with compelling content from experts on health, parenting, pregnancy, beauty, style, fitness, relationships, food and entertainment."[10] Furthermore, the iVillage message boards are described as a place to find "community advice and support," while under iVillage Connect patrons are told: "Discover a network of friendship, conversation, support, and community . . . without leaving your desk!"[11] Throughout the site, patrons are rhetorically addressed as "community members." For instance, after completing the registration process, members receive a welcome e-mail from iVillage stating: "Welcome, you are now a member of the largest and most powerful community of women online."[12] There is little doubt that the designers of this site intend patrons to think of themselves as members of a vibrant online community and that the brand NBCU executives are promoting is the community itself.

More importantly, the site is discursively framed as a very specific form of community, a place constructed by and for women. Eble and Breault note how the designers of the site "hook their audience through the promise of familiarity and security, playing on the real fear many women have about personal safety and vulnerability in both physical and virtual spaces" (2002, p. 320). Concerns over safety are understandable given the way the Internet was presented to women in the print media in the 1990s. In her examination of invitations for women to go online made in the print media from 1995 to 1997, Warnick notes the abundance of "articles in the popular press reporting abduction, harassment, and intimidation of women participating in chat rooms, listservs, and bulletin board postings" (Warnick, 1999, p. 7). This, in turn, had a "chilling effect on women's interest in venturing on line" (ibid.). However, the

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[10] This description appeared on the "About iVillage" page on December 9, 2007 at
http://www.ivillage.com/about/0,,799xklpf,00.html
[11] This description appeared on the iVillage Connect page on December 9, 2007
athttp://connect.ivillage.com/people
[12] This e-mail was received from iVillage on April 10, 2006 with the subject line: Welcome to iVillage: Here's Your Membership Starter Kit.

emergence of sites specifically focused on the needs of women—online safe spaces for women—would certainly offer an incentive to venture online.

Eble and Breault note this sense of security is, in part, achieved through frequent references to pregnancy, babies, and childrearing, commenting that the ubiquity of images of babies on the site "helps identify and establish credibility with the target audience, as well as create a safe, female community" (2002, p. 321). Although Eble and Breault's observations were made in 2002, prior to the site's acquisition by NBCU, their assessments remain fundamentally accurate as demonstrated in a textual analysis of the site's main page on December 1, 2007.

Figure 1. iVillage.com homepage on December 1, 2007.

On this day, the lead story on the site was "Great Gifts for Mom," which promises to help the reader "Find the perfect gift for a new mom, your mom or even grandma." The other featured stories included "Stylish looks for holiday parties" and how to "Look flawless in 5 minutes." Under these lead stories, the "iGet It Done" section lists such articles as: "Cozy up with these comfort foods"; "Easy low-calorie dessert recipes"; and "Whip up these quick chicken dinners." The "iHave Some Fun" section features such stories as "Celebrity winter hair how-to," "Never have a bad hair day again," and "Is it too soon to bring your new

guy home." The section devoted to the *In the Loop* show promises such topics as "bedroom makeovers" and "great pork recipes." Based on the headlines, the site-generated articles featured on the homepage focus on activities related to consumption, romance, or the domestic sphere.

Even after a much-hyped "makeover," including the introduction of a new logo in April of 2009, intended to make the site hipper and more appealing to young women (Jensen, 2009), Eble and Breault observations hold true. On February 11, 2010, the top stories on the site included "Reading Sarah Palin's Palms: The former VP candidate turns 46 today. Get her horoscope," "Beyond Canadian Bacon: In honor of the Vancouver Olympics, 8 tasty local treats," "Oh Honey, You Shouldn't Have: 12 horrendous Valentine's Day gifts we actually received," and "Snowed In? Keep your kids entertained with these fun (and TV-free!) activities."

Eble and Breault note in their analysis that the "arrangement and titles of the channels on iVillage work rhetorically to attract and hold a specific audience" (2002, p. 321). Arguably, this still proves true as those channels listed are arranged in very particular order: Pregnancy & Parenting, Beauty & Style, Home & Garden, Entertainment, Go Green, Food, and Health & Diet. These channel designations speak to a particular audience, one with a strong interest in babies, parenting, beauty, fashion, and domestic matters. By absence, these channels signal those whose primary interests are in business, politics, religion, and social activism that this may not be the site for them. This supports Worthington's (2005) assessment of iVillage as offering members a mode of "commodity feminism" where women's social and political problems are best addressed through the marketplace.

Given the discursive framing of the site, it is likely users of iVillage view their work as a form of what Postigo identifies as passionate labor. When users post messages on the boards recommending a particular brand, or alerting other users to good deals on a particular product, or even providing information on where users can find a particular consumer good, they may well understand their efforts as a form of community contribution; sharing with other members of their community information they believe is beneficial.

What forms of compensation do users receive for their efforts? Perhaps the most valuable form of recompense these sites offer is a sense of *belonging*. Through interactive features, these sites afford users the opportunity to communicate with each other and, at least in part, gain some sense of communal membership. Even if these sites are only approximations of community—what Fernback argues is "the mere *idea* of community, an ersatz community with no true referent" (2004, p. 227, emphasis original)—members may still experience a real sense of utility in belonging to them.

The importance of this sense of community to iVillage members was evident in numerous posts appearing on the iVillage message boards. For instance, on November 5, 2007 a message board was created under the "In the News" category to discuss the sale of iVillage Inc. to NBCU for a reported $600 million. Representative of the posts made to this particular board was one by volcanogirl2007:

Wowzers! $600 Million Dollars? I feel like I want a piece of that six-hundred-mil since as a contributor here, I and my fellow iVillagers actually make the site possible. We are

here on the message boards, we are actually contributing some of the content that people visit this site for and what they are selling. We are the ones who log on to the site and enable iVillage to get the advertising and sponsorships that they do. I feel a sense of power actually when I think about it, we are all contributors here, if all of us fell off the map, maybe iVillage wouldn't shut down, but the message boards are an attraction here for sure – and without the sense of "community" that iVillage offers (even the name suggests community) iVillage wouldn't have the draw it does . . . and wouldn't make the money it does.[13]

Volcanogirl2007's comments reflect the general consensus of contributors to the message boards that a primary draw of the site is the sense of community users experience. Her comments equally suggest that at least some iVillage members are aware that their efforts add significant value to the site as a commercial enterprise, dispelling notions that users-as-workers are operating under some form of "false consciousness."

Eble and Breault (2002) propose iVillage's interactive features provide more than a sense of belonging. Rather, they argue the site's interactivity actually serves to empower users: "For the women who visit iVillage and engage in the interactive features there are significant opportunities for empowerment through agency" (p. 318). Although conflating interactivity with empowerment is deeply problematic (Andrejevic, 2004; Fernback, 1999, 2004), the ability of members to network and share information relevant to their day-to-day lives through the interactive elements of these commercial community sites can constitute a very real social resource.

The importance of this social resource was evident in the comments of users posted on the message boards. For example, britstarlite32205 commented in a post to the "In the News" message board on March 23, 2007: "I think they [iVillage] deserve some praise for furnishing us with an avenue to express and find out information about things that happen in our everyday life." Melowinney made a similar observation in an e-mail dated March 23, 2007: "Ivillage is a great way for people of so many different backgrounds and views to come together and express ourselves and not have to worry about who is judging us." CI-nwtreehugger discussed the importance of the site as a social-networking resource in a post made on December 21, 2007: "Anyway, communication is the big key in feeling like I belong."[14] These characteristic comments suggest that at least for regular users of the message boards, iVillage represents a valuable social resource in their lives. Thus, the question is not one of whether members receive some form of benefit from participating on these commercial sites, but rather if this benefit constitutes adequate compensation for the work members perform.

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[13] http://messageboards.ivillage.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=iv-elinthenews&msg=13220.6&x=y

[14] http://messageboards.ivillage.com/iv-elinthenews/messages?msg=13475.18

Conclusion: Old Models and New Media

Parks characterizes iVillage as embodying the ethos of "corporate feminism," a form of "late capitalistic feminism wherein the demand for returns on investments commingles with liberal feminist agendas" (p. 146). As Parks points out, this corporate feminism has an "ambivalent politics" expressed in the production of online sites that serve to both empower and exploit women (p. 147). This political ambivalence parallels in many respects the ambivalence surrounding the future directions of these two media—television and the Internet—as they converge. Will sites such as iVillage simply replicate the existing relationship between media corporations and media consumers embodied in the broadcast-television model? Or will a new model emerge online where media consumers play a meaningful role in shaping the production of media content?

In the case of iVillage, the evidence suggests the portal will continue for the foreseeable future to operate as an online platform for the marketing initiatives of NBCU and Comcast. Unfortunately, there is little to indicate that the site's future development will not be shaped more by the interests of advertisers than by the activities of its users. The interactive features of the site also enable marketers to overcome many of the limitations of conventional television in constructing ever more narrow and ever more emotionally involved targeted audiences. Ultimately, the emotions that sites such as iVillage foster among their users—emotions arising from a sense of belonging to a community—seem only to facilitate marketers in their efforts to extract the labor of devotion from users of these commercial community sites. Notably, the labor performed by users includes generating much of the very content that attracts people to these sites.

None of this suggests that users of commercial community sites are unaware of the profit imperatives of media corporations or that they are unaware of the value they add to these sites. Clearly, users of iVillage are not simply being deceived, but rather are deriving something of worth in patronizing this online community site. Arguably, some of the social resources these sites provide do empower their users in various aspects of their everyday lives. In the case of iVillage, this would include the ability of women to network and share information directly relevant to their experiences. Although the site-generated content that dominates the portal focuses on pregnancy, parenting, health, entertainment, consumption, and domestic matters, the user-generated content disseminated through the popular message boards covers a much broader range of topics, including career advice, current political issues, and opportunities for social activism. The market value of user-generated content can be considerable as the recent sale of *The Huffington Post* to AOL for a reported $315 million demonstrates (Carr, 2011). The question that merits further exploration, however, is whether users are receiving sufficient value from these sites to compensate them adequately for the very lucrative labor they perform on behalf of corporations.

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