FANSUBBING, PIRACY & LOCALIZATION OF JAPANESE MEDIA

A Comparative Paper of the Positive and Negative Aspects

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

The last two or so decades has seen a rapid advancement in the field of technology. This has allowed countries and people from all around the world, who would not normally meet every day, to get together and share experiences across cultural planes. Thanks to advancements to technology people can more easily communicate and again accesses to another culture. It is understandable, now, that people would become interested in the media that someone from another country enjoys. Recent years have seen the explosion of anime and manga from Japan to across the world, mainly the United States. As well as other Japanese media, like music and dramas, have slowly begun their journal onto foreign shores.

Yet despite the rapid interest and demand for products of Japan, exporting is still in the early stages of infancy, and products are not being brought into America as fast as the fans want them to be. Because of this lack of exporting and localization of Japanese media, anime especially, has led to the recent rapid development of fansubbing groups and piracy and bootleggers in order to for the foreign fans to get what they want.

There are many aspects to the concept of fansubbing, bootlegging and piracy. For fansubbing there are positive aspects and potential benefits to companies and industries from this happening. On the other hand, bootlegging and piracy faces many negative aspects and provides no potential benefit for companies or the industry. In the end, while fansubbing has positives and the other two don't, all of them face illegal issues and the possibility of a large punishment for the people involved. What are the positive and benefits of fansubbing groups? How can companies use fansubbing groups to their advantage? How to fans benefits from being able to watch subtitled original shows? What are the negatives of fansubbing groups? What problems could they cause? What about bootlegging and piracy? What are the problems they could cause?

Additionally, the idea of localizing media has started to become bit of an issue, at least with the fans. This also brings up the issue of should Japanese media, mostly anime, be sold as a subtitled products or should America continue with it localization process? This issue is a concern with people who care for cultural values from the original Japanese show to be saved and not edited out and also the lack of consideration for proper pronunciation of Japanese names or words used. Is localizing Japanese media the best way to?

WHAT IS FANSUBBING?

In the case of dramas, it was the fansubbing groups that initiated the exporting of successful shows in the 1990's when Japan was not so willing to export according to the textbook *Scripted Affects, Branded Sleeves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan* written by Gabriella Lukacs. Fansubbing had opened the door for Japan to export their media to other countries, but what is fansubbing? The term fansubbing is just that, it is a group of fan who work together to subtitle dramas or anime from another country then distributing it for free on the internet.

There is not a lot that goes into subtitling a show, according to the article *Anime Fandom and the Liminal Spaces between Fan Creativity and Piracy* written by Rayna Denison. Denison states that the "processes involved in fan subtitling requires both technological and linguistic knowledge-bases to succeed (Denison, 2011)." Even though it does not require a lot of aspects of complete a subtitling project, these two aspects can be difficult to succeed in. With how integrated technology is the daily lives of the majority of people, learning how to use a program for subtitling may not be all that difficult to do. Once a person figure outs all the ins and outs of technology needed, it becomes easier and easier to use.

Where the most difficult part lies in subtitling is in knowing the language. One must be fluent enough to understand at least most of the content being said in the show, so that they can translate it somewhat accurately. Additionally, the translator would also have to know and understand the many slang words, informal dialogue and phrases that could be confusing to people who don't understand Japanese well enough. Another difficult aspect of translating would be deciding between direct and literal translation or choosing a more general translation style that would make more sense in the target language. With direct and literal translations, there would be phrase that would not make sense to people of another country, but unique Japanese phrases and concepts would be preserved. On the other hand, with a more general translation cultural aspects of Japan could be lost in translation because of the dialogue would become more Americanized.

While fansubbed shows and fansubbing groups are not terribly complex or confusing, there are still many positive and negative points that can be complicated. There are big issues and the possibility for terrible punishments if legal issues are concerned. But despite this major negative, there are some good aspects that balances this situations out and makes fansubbing possible.

What are the Positive Aspects of Fansubbing?

There are several positive aspects of fansubbed shows and fansubbing groups that benefits viewers and the big company. Fansubbed shows gives the opportunity for people outside of Japan to view and enjoy a drama or anime series that may never be brought overseas. According to the article, *Participatory Media Fandom: A Case Study of Anime Fansubbing,* by Hye-Kyung Lee, because of the easy access to technology and the plethora of groups dedicated to subtitling anime, popular or not, anime that would never be considered for legal distribution

and dramas as well, gives audiences the chance to view as many shows that they like fast and in a comfortable manner (Lee, 2011). This accessibility can allow for the anime fan base to grow and expand fast, which is good when trying to encourage Japan to export more of its media overseas. It also provides more exposure for Japanese dramas and anime and can show a wider demographic and appeal to companies.

If companies were to look at the demographic of oversea fans, who are watching what shows that they may never would have access to if it weren't for fansubbing, they may see unique trends and patterns that the Japanese company may not have considered. Thus Japanese companies could use this to their advantage when they want to consider exporting to other countries. They would already have a good background knowledge of what to expect, demographic wise, can could use to target other items overseas.

Even though, the recent years have seen a decrease in anime and dramas being bought overseas by fans, but by showing that there is a strong and growing fan base for anime and dramas may provide some benefits for both the fans and the Japanese companies. The existence of fansubbing groups has provided opportunities for many fan to experience shows that they would never have been able to. While fans are able to benefit from the ability to have exposure to something they would not have, companies can use the information about demographics and appeals of another country before deciding to export. Although as a result of how accessible free subtitled anime and dramas are now in days, there have been a decrease in the willingness and eager to actually buy legal copies of shows in general. Despite this minor issue, this easier access to a larger selection of anime can help in expanding the fandom for anime and dramas overseas (Lee, 2011). Fansubbing has created a good middle ground for people to explore many possibilities.

What are the Negative Aspects of Fansubbing?

There are the negative issues about fansubbing that cause potential problems and misunderstand for fansubbing groups and the viewers for the most part. The first issue, which is a major problem and concern for the concept of fansubbing is the problem with copyright laws. This issue is a huge concern in this day of age and has been cracked down on hard these recent years. Unfortunately what fansubbers do, does infringe copyright laws. These groups are illegally downloading raw footage and then distributing it without consent from the company or the creator of the show.

While this is a huge ethical concern because it does break the law, copyright companies and the company who own the rights of the show tend to look over or ignore the facts that these groups are illegally gain this material. The reason for this is the fact that the fansubbing groups are not doing this for profit. Some groups may seek donations (Lukacs, 2011), but these are purely voluntary action and does not count as making a profit. People do not always gives donations and it is done so at random, yet this only income that fansubbing groups earn for doing these projects.

In addition to the companies overlooking the legal issues, there is an unspoken rule that "fansubbers must respect the licensing announcements of the cable networks and stop distributing a title if a cable network decides to broadcast it (Lukacs, 2010)." Although, this ethic that fansubbing groups are generally supposed to follow, in some cases it is ignored so groups can continue to put out subbed episodes faster than they will air in America. An example given by Lee are "speed subbers who work on popular, ongoing series such as *Naruto Shippuden* – which are already licensed- insist that fans should have the access to the latest episodes as soon as they are aired in Japan." But many groups do tend to follow the unspoken rule or in some case

stop the project if asked by Japanese companies. The problem then lies in that fact that there are other groups that quickly continue where the project cut off (Lee, 2011).

While this whole issue is largely negative because it breaking the law, it does not have a direct negative affect fansubbing groups or the fan. As long as there is no profit being made nor is a fan buying fansubbed products, copyright companies tend to turn the other cheek. Also the Japanese companies that are producing the shows do mind until a series is localized in another county. Some Japanese companies even give out praise and encourage to fansubbing groups because they realize the benefits and advantages they will gain from them (Lee, 2011).

WHAT IS BOOTLEGGING/PIRACY?

Bootlegging or piracy is the "illegal reproduction and distribution" of media outside the original country, according to the Lukacs' book *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves.* This sounds awful like what happens during the process of fansubbing. With fansubbing there is reproduction and distribution of illegally obtained media. The large difference between them is in the purpose behind doing so. With fansubbing the purpose is not make a profit what so ever (Lukacs, 2011), the intents is to spread the enjoyment of previously un-understandable shows while also providing the anime and drama fandom easier access to it. With people who pirate and distribute bootlegged media the main purpose is to turn a profit for solely themselves. So the main difference between these concepts is non-profit verse making a profit off stolen content.

Another difference is between them is fansubbing groups will clearly state a disclaimer, making sure that they get no credit for the actual creation and production of the show. People selling pirated and bootlegged media will make no claim of who properly owns the material and possibly make buyers believe that there is no legal issue going on. Bootleggers have even gone

as far as forge copyright information and company logos onto packages to make them look real to buyers (Lukacs, 2011).

Bootlegging and piracies have been an issue for a while, nowadays with more accessible technology and easier and faster ways of distributing things, it has become a fairly large issue for all types of media and copyrighted materials. For Japanese dramas, bootlegging and pirating became an issue in the 1990s. Southern and Eastern Asian countries were actually the culprits of illegally obtaining the media. During this time, these Asian countries were very interested in Japan's pop culture scene at the time. Pop cultural concepts such as fashion, Japanese lifestyle and other trends. As a result, a large network of the piracy was created and it expanded across the world beyond just Southern and Eastern Asia but to North America as well where it became very common (Lukacs, 2011).

How the Selling of Pirated Media has affected Un-expecting Buyers

As mentioned earlier, the formation an intense network that connected globally and allowed for a much larger range to sell pirated media, especially in this case Japanese dramas and anime, had opened starting in the last two decades. In recent times, the most common place to sell and distribute pirated media to a vast amount of buyers is EBay. There have been a number of cases, where people have fallen victim unknowingly to the scandals going on EBay according to Lukacs' book.

Sellers on EBay have perfected the art of making sure that potential buyers believe their products are legal versions. It is here where the quality of the wrapping, logos and copyright information paid close attention to by the sellers. Unless the buyer is well informed about the show and can spot minor details and knows what has been legally subtitled for foreign buyers,

but in most cases buyers become the victims of the scam and buy the pirated product. The buyers are then left with a product that is actually poor quality and that could have many technical issues (Lukacs, 2011). This current issues with bootlegging could be easily fixed, if companies actually recognized the potential of producing shows with subtitles for foreign audiences. At the very least, by allowing other countries to have permission to sell dramas and anime with the foreign country's language, there would more access to audiences to get what they want and hopefully hinder bootleggers from selling.

WHAT IS LOCALIZATION OF JAPANESE ANIME

According to volume 5 of *Mechademia: Fanthropologies* by Frenchy Lunning, the localization of anime is where a country, for example America, adopts an anime so that it could be broadcasted in America. In most cases, especially early ones, editing to the original footage is done in order to Americanize, so that the audience can connect better with the content (Lunning, 2010).

For America, anime was not first localized until the late 1970s and American companies saw and took an opportunity for free-range. Lunning writes "Such shows took the source animation as a kind of raw material and completely rewrote the stories to make them something unique for presentation to American audiences as well as to televisions audiences around the world." This early localization process, completely reworked and changed many anime that were brought into America for years (Lunning, 2010). This had caused issues between Japanese companies and American one, for example Studio Ghibli and Buena Vista (Lunning, 2010). This free-range editing that America took on brought many negatives, but it does have it positive aspects, although few.

What are the Positive and Negative Aspects of Localization?

The positive aspects of localization of anime in America are few, but when it does come down to it the editing that is done to make an anime appropriate for kids is very important. For many anime, such as *GoLion* and more, one big issues was violence and the shedding of blood. Scene with such content that America considered inappropriate for children to watch was edited out and made cleaner and safer for kids to watch. The book *Mechademia* states that "any sort death was taboo (Lunning, 2010)." So show like Voltron and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* had any and all death related content edited out (Lunning, 2010).

In recent years, hot issues have been about tobacco and alcohol consumption in media targeted for kids has been discussed. It is understandable as to why such adult concepts would want to be removed before children were allowed to watch it, but other times American companies went beyond removing inappropriateness to fully trying to Americanize the anime. Sometimes this was to the point, where all essences of the original Japanese origins were removed.

By doing pointless editing, or editing out thing not because they were inappropriate but were different culturally, is a great lost, especially for children. By importing from another country and culture, is a great opportunity to learn about that culture not edit them out and Americanize concepts. Looking at personal experiences with localized anime, I could say that it was a great lost to not have known about the origins of the shows I had grew up with. Especially, once I had found out that these were Japanese, it really caught my interest and inspired to want to learn more about the culture.

Besides the loss of a learning opportunity, it is also not considerate or respectful the Japanese culture and the creator of the anime. It shows Japan the closed mindedness of America and unwillingness to learn, accept and appreciate another culture. Also by editing in general, show a lack of respect to what the creator had originally intended for his audiences to see. A great example of this would Miyazaki Hayao's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind.* Buena Vista had completely disrespected what Miyazaki wanted to say with his film by all the editing that was done to it. In the end, Miyazaki told the company that if they wanted to continue to working with him there would be absolutely no editing to any of films, which is how it is today (Lunning, 2010). While understanding that America has it standard for what is age appropriate for kids, there should be limited on pointless editing that ruins the original work and shows an ignorance towards Japanese culture.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I believe that the groundwork that fansubbing groups have laid for what should the standard to importing Japanese dramas and anime should be followed and would be very successful with the fan base. By prioritizing subtitling the original work, rather than focusing on localizing and Americanizing, it would allow viewer to experience another culture and learn about, without it being edited to by the America expectation and cultural understanding. Also it would allow for a closer representation of the creator was trying to express to their audiences to be seen by foreign viewers.

In addition, there would a possibility for faster importing and or broadcasting into America. Several website, such as Crunchyroll, have already shown the success of airing subtitled anime and drama. Where this website was once a fansubbing group, they were contracted by Japan to allow the showing of subtitled works. With this example in mind, we are able to see how fast just-

aired-in-Japan episodes can be subtitled, which is usually done within in a few hours (Lee, 2011). We know the success of Crunchyroll, because their services is still up and running. In general, a majority of drama and anime fans prefer their shows to be subtitled instead of dubbed and localized. This is because most fans start with the Japanese version and are general disappointed in voice actor cast in English. Also since the dubbing of live action media is not popular as it was decades ago, it would allow the import for Japanese dramas as well, because the standard would have been moved towards subtitling and preserving the original product as much as possible. In the end subtitling could open new and more doors for anime and j-dramas to be imported, and allow for a wider selection of shows to be available in America without it Americanized.

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