



First! Cultural circulation in the age of recursivity

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Abstract

This article develops a cultural theory of firstness and argues for its importance in understanding contemporary cultural circulation. It argues that firstness is a metaculture that plays a role in making culture circulation faster, more reliant on quantification, and more promotional. After drawing support from philosophical, historical, and theoretical understandings of firstness, the article pays particular attention to the cases of web-based comment threads and music blogs to showcase how the competition to be first is central to the cultural ecosystem, especially but not only online. The conclusion suggests how firstness might be indicative of a recursive cultural mode.

Keywords

Circulation, firstness, metaculture, online economy, promotional culture, quantification, recursivity, social media, web history

Introduction

Excitement about possibilities for democratic participation on the web ran rampant during the 2000s, as intellectuals and other observers celebrated the new “networked public sphere” (Benkler, 2006: 212) and the “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006: 3) it engendered. Comments were a sterling example of this. As they migrated from blogs and message boards to eminent news and information sites, they highlighted the web’s interactivity and opened up opportunities for users to “talk back,” if they so chose. But comments often failed to live up to the ideals of democratic expression with which they were so frequently saddled. Flame wars, trolling, hate speech, and spam also surged through these new

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arteries of the body politic, helping validate comments' inglorious nickname, "the bottom half of the Internet" (Manuel, 2013). While these abusive, junky, and emotionally acute genres have received at least some academic attention (e.g. Brunton, 2013; Herring, 1994; Nakamura, 2012; Reagle, 2013), scholars have spent less time unpacking the many peculiar, less incendiary traditions that also took shape.

One of these was "firsties." "Firsties" is slang used to describe the race among commenters to be the first to contribute in an online thread, oftentimes with nothing more than the word "first" or "firsties"; it is sometimes also used to designate an original or not yet articulated observation. Although the practice has become less visible in recent years, in the mid-2000s it was tough to avoid. The term also has retained its competitive, warp-speed connotation, applicable to not just comment threads but to other kinds of online activity. A 2014 film review on *The Onion's AV Club*, for instance, noted that "in this 'firsties' age, when snap judgments are issued at 4G speed and Twitter creates instant critical consensus, time for a critic to consider (or reconsider) a new film's worth has become something of a luxury" (Dowd, 2014). The AV Club even inaugurated a new series during the fall of 2013 called Firsties, interviewing directors, actors, and musicians about formative life experiences.

Firsties was sometimes considered trolling, and during its heyday it often sparked derision from other commenters. "Why do people compete for the first comment its (sic) just immature!," complained one woman on a Jonas Brothers Facebook thread in 2009, where among the first several comments are things like "1st" and "yay first comment" ("Take Nick, Kevin and Joe where you go!," 2009). (Another poster to the same thread noted sardonically, "I love how the first three comments say their (sic) first to comment this.") When Lindsay Lohan took her relationship with DJ Samantha Ronson public the year before, gossip website Perez Hilton ignited with comments, including one directed to "all the REAL Firsties out there" who "were first when it really counted" (Hilton, 2008). SocialDon, an interactive media and marketing company, typified "The Firsty" as one of 36 "Facebook Personalities," explaining that "the Firsty lives and breathes for one thing: getting the inaugural comment in a thread ... their thirst for firsts can never be quenched" (Gill, 2012). Canadian humorist Laura Penny (2010) went further still, lumping competitors for firsties among the "the boob-tube brigade" (p. 189) who "break stories before they have the relevant details."

Technologies to curtail the practice eventually spread across the web. Sites instated or toughened moderation and other filtering mechanisms to thwart all kinds of problematic commenting practices, not just firsties, and despite having lodged its meaning in the cultural vernacular, the trend receded from prominence. It is tempting, therefore, not only to agree with the naysayers who belittled firsties as a sprint to win in a competition of meager rewards, but also to think of it as a momentary blip of immaturity that web users mostly have outgrown. However, I want to utilize the practice of firsties to think through a much larger dynamic that has since come to dominate how culture moves through the world, especially but not only online. Firsties dramatizes the importance of firstness as a central feature of cultural circulation.

Following Urban (2001), I conceptualize firstness as a metaculture, or "culture that is about culture" (p. 3). Urban conceives of metaculture as structures of meaning that mobilize culture in space and time: what is said or believed about cultural objects, and the

actions taken to carry out those judgments. Central to metaculture is interpretation, broadly conceived. Urban argues that “[t]he interpretation of culture ... immaterial as it is, focuses attention on the cultural thing, helps to make it an object of interest, and, hence, facilitates its circulation” (p. 4). Take a *New York Times* review of a Broadway show. If the review announces the show is excellent, several things may occur: more people may purchase tickets, or the show may be invited to open in other cities. Alternatively, that review could pan the show, deterring theatergoers, and potentially closing the production prematurely. Though metaculture cannot be distilled down to a single article from a powerful publication, what this example highlights is the relationship between interpretation and circulation which, taken a step further, also can inform cultural production itself (e.g. a director who panders to what she knows the reviewer likes). This is what Urban intends when he notes that “accelerative characteristics ... must be built into cultural elements in order to insure their survival over time” because “survival is the inherent telos of all culture” (p. 19).

Urban categorizes metaculture into two grand themes—tradition and newness (or modernity)—that drive cultural reproduction in this accelerative manner. He is particularly adamant about the current supremacy of modernity, which “[values] the novelty of a cultural expression—for which previous cultural elements are seen as mere precursors leading up to the new element” (Urban, 2001: 58, 66). Firstness, as I am proposing it, shares some important metacultural features with modernity, since they both privilege innovation. Yet I conceptualize firstness as a decisive break from standard newness (perhaps, if I may, a “new” newness); a “first” marks the dawning that by definition has no precursors. Firstness therefore functions in noteworthy ways, making cultural circulation faster, more numerate, and more promotional. As I will argue below, the growing importance of firstness within contemporary culture necessitates thinking about what kind of modes, norms, and consequences it might unearth—especially important when thinking about the potential, as well as the consequences, of increasingly prevalent digital media.

In what follows, I define firstness and offer some historical and theoretical background toward a cultural theory of firstness as metaculture. After providing that context, I return to the development and diffusion of the practice of firsties, to give insight into the cultural impacts of firstness, especially online. The last portion of this article explores the implications of firstness and makes tentative claims on how to understand it as an element of recursive cultural epoch.

The philosophy, history, and theory of firstness

To open up and complicate the concept of “firstness,” let me begin with the *Oxford English Dictionary* (O.E.D.). There, the word first is defined as “that is before all others; earliest in time or serial order, foremost in position, rank, or importance” (O.E.D.). First is the ordinal form of the number one, which lacks “the same relationship to the number word” as most other ordinals do. First therefore is singular not just in its denotation, but also in its linguistic structure—a fact that is true for most languages, not just English (Menninger, 1969: 16). The O.E.D. also points to the “superlative” connotations of first, as well as that first can apply to a general concept of earliness without precise ordinality. For instance, we might say “the first pilgrims to arrive in America” without identifying a

specific person as *the* first. This definition proves useful in distilling a typology of firstness as follows:

1. First as ordinality;
2. First as historicness;
3. First as superlativity.

These meanings can and do often overlap, that is, the first place winner of a race is both the first to arrive across the finish line as well as the “best” runner and, possibly, a record breaker deserving memorialization. Nonetheless, I would like to treat each of these independently to explore what they might portend for media and cultural circulation.

Firstness as ordinality

An example of firstness as ordinality can be found in the notion of first mover advantage, an economic theory that suggests that the first business to enter a new market benefits far more than latter competitors. In a foundational theorization, Lieberman and Montgomery (1988) argue that first-mover advantage is “the ability of pioneering firms to earn positive economic profits” and “may occur because the firm possesses some unique resources or foresight, or simply because of luck” (p. 41). Since its inception, first-mover advantage has been hotly contested, debunked, or modified by notions such as first-mover disadvantage, fast followers, and the like (Blank, 2010). Whether a credit or a detriment to business, first-mover advantage continues to be popular, arguably because ordinality is highly seductive.

By ordinality, I mean the idea that first is an index for the number one, the origin point for counting. As Menninger (1969) explains, one was initially understood as “embodied in the object as such” (p. 21)—not a number, but a quality of a thing, only recognizable “from the direction of plurality,” or as concepts emerged for numbers larger than one. Since one anticipated counting, he continues, it is rife with “philosophical content” (Menninger, 1969: 20), representative of man’s relationship with himself, the world around him, and the spiritual.

Charles Peirce also concerned himself with the ontological and its relationship to signs, including numerical signs. His 1868 piece “On a New List of Categories” introduces the notions of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. He identifies the category of first as “[t]hat of relates whose reference to a ground is a prescindible or internal quality”; first is senuousness, feeling, or experiences of the body. Though he is largely in conversation with other three-part divisions of consciousness common across the disciplines (Houser, 1983: 331–332), Peirce’s linkage between firstness and the primary, original experiences of the body also calls to mind deep, age-old philosophical understandings of the number one.

It is interesting, then, that first’s numerical qualities, which on one level are deeply human and subjective, also endow it with a veneer of objectivity. This is the sense in which first qua one marks the beginning of a set, of either objects oriented in space or moments oriented in time. The ordinality of firstness, then, is deeply empirical: it

concerns the observation of phenomena and the detached description of their features. Thus, we can think of firstness as mathematical in the most rudimentary sense, if mathematics is defined as “the science of space, number, quantity, and arrangement . . . ” (O.E.D). First articulates, chiefly, the *numberness* of the thing it describes, relating it to an objective, or at least abstracted, set of principles.

In essence, first communicates both moral and scientific epistemes. It is a way of translating qualities into quantities, and back again. It obfuscates sensuousness with an intangible numeracy while simultaneously serving as a predecessor to “qualculation,” or a situation in which perpetually made calculations lose their grounding of precision to become “means of making qualitative judgments and working with ambiguity” (Thrift, 2004: 584). In this sense, first is a basic, foundational point from which to think about the powers of numeracy—the sense of empiricism, objectivity, facticity, and comparability that numbers confer.

Firstness as historicness

Bestowing notice and renown upon “first” accomplishments and events extends well into antiquity. Moreover, Western practices of historiography are in many ways analogous to the finding of firsts, to the degree that firstness acts as an emblem of significance, worth, or memorability. First thus may play a prominent role in defining the historicness of an event, both in specific ways (e.g. the first man to walk on the moon) and general ways (e.g. first peoples). If, as Cohen (2006) argues, “to *historicize* . . . means to lend time as a power to an existing claim,” (p. 11, emphasis in original) then first as a temporal designation is one way to impart that power. In fact, when employed by the powerful, historic firstness communicates possession and, often, conquest (Kolodny, 2012: 263).

Firstness-as-historicness also establishes the narrativity of an event and supplies a way to connect the past to the present and the future. Cohen continues, “to *historicize*, infinitive mode, is to subject the innumerable happenings of life to functions of time-management and social regulation” (Cohen, 2006: 187–188, emphasis in original). First, used in this fashion, suggests linearity and signals an origin point from which to understand and distinguish between before and after. The first time something happens, be it the first democratic elections in Iraq or the first email message ever sent, signals an interruption between the past and the present, as if to announce the onset of a new era.

Yet as Koselleck (2004) argues, time has a history. He writes,

The pressure of time on political decision-making, the impact of the speed of means of transport and communication on the economy or on military actions, the durability or flux of social conduct in the context of political or economic exigencies of specific and limited span: the mutual interaction or dependence of all these and others force the emergence of temporal determinations which, while certainly conditioned by nature, must still be defined as specifically historical. (pp. 2–3)

Though first communicates a connection to natural, scientific time, used in this historical sense, first is often a far more conditional claim. This is not only because, as Koselleck reminds, multiple ways of experiencing time co-exist in any given era, as

well as between eras. In addition, piecemeal historical records, politicking over power and position, and the ways in which historicness can be used to garner attention all easily destabilize the grounding of historic notions of firstness. First connotes a rooted and secure sense in time, the avowal that something happened during a precise moment, prior to other moments. But, very easily, firstness can be something else entirely, giving way to instrumental uses of history, inexactitude, and attempts to make old things seem new again. Given the difficulties of Internet history and the precariousness of digital archives (Ankerson, 2009; Cohen and Rosenzweig, 2005), these slippages gain particular purchase.

Firstness as superlativity/uniqueness

To connect firstness-as-historicness and firstness-as-superlativity, consider a story about historian Richard Hofstadter, best known in the United States for his 1965 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* Hofstadter's book was lauded as a triumph upon publication, widely viewed as responsible for revising perspectives of the populist movement of the early 20th century. But Hofstadter was also subject to numerous criticisms for his work and accused of distorting the facts under the allure of a compelling narrative. In commenting on Hofstadter's predicament and what he deemed the "originality trap," Richard Collins (1989) suggests that for historians

[S]ome tension between a desire for originality and a regard for historical truth and accuracy may be inevitable. Nevertheless, the drive for originality remains fundamental to the discipline. It spurs historical scholarship; it contributes to the constant renewal of history's intellectual and social relevance; and it exemplifies the plasticity and expansiveness that are among the discipline's greatest strengths. The emergence of whole new fields of study and fresh angles of approach in recent decades bears witness to the value of history's questing aspect. And yet the pursuit of originality brings with it the constant danger that in our haste to say something new we may overstate or even misstate the historical thought we mean to communicate. (p. 166)

Phelps (2009) has contended that this tyranny of firstness is a problem intrinsic to all academic scholarship, not just in history. Like the originality trap, the exigencies of communicating the merit of academic work justify the use of exceptionalism, even when it can skew into exaggeration. Such an insight extends beyond the scholarly world. Athletes, advertising agencies, politicians, restaurateurs, and more trade on their ability to distinguish themselves from the rest, and firstness can be a surefire strategy for distinction.

Firstness as superlativity departs from both the numerical and the temporal designations of firstness to emphasize specialness or uniqueness. Firstness, in this connotation, is a singularity as well as an attempt to make the incomparable comparable. As Karpik (2010: 11, 39–43, 49) notes, when trying to make determinations between singular goods—wines, therapists, art, and so on—consumers never know enough to make the perfect choice; sometimes, satisfaction can only be ascertained well after the fact, and sometimes not even then. What value, then, is selecting a "first-rated" wine or doctor when the metrics of evaluation are so subjective? A similar argument applies to ideas, where marginal differences can accumulate into more important revelations and deeper truths, though rarely can these things be known *a priori* and no knowledge is entirely

without antecedents. In both these cases, being first matters more as a designation than it does as a reflection of inherent worth.

Superlative firstness raises general considerations about cultural economics and the significance of extraordinary speech. The words we use to communicate value are themselves abstractions that change meaning the more widely they circulate; calling something “first” can mean different things in different contexts. And yet, in underscoring the superlativity of a thing, first becomes currency that can be put toward promotional and instrumental, quantifiable ends. This is a pitfall, for the tactic of firstness may be employed to garner attention, it may also deplete its effectiveness overall.

The metaculture of firstness

Understanding how the concept of firstness emphasizes numberness (through ordinality), temporality (through historicness), and promotion (through superlativity) helps to clarify how it functions as metaculture, an agent which propels cultural circulation. As Urban (2001) suggests, longstanding “inertial” notions about culture—for instance, that it is passed along from generation to generation—do little to explain cultural change; instead, they suggest cultural stagnancy and a world beholden to tradition (p. 19). Yet, an era replete with momentary trends, demands for disruption, and constant talk of innovation needs clear and rigorous means for grappling with cultural metamorphosis. While the notion of newness or modernity explains some of these features, it is no longer adequate to account for the pace of change, the increasing reliance on quantification and measurement, or the rampant promotional culture (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010) which defines our age. Firstness, in articulating and melding these issues, also aids in recognizing the technological realities that concentrate, excite, and reinforce the aforementioned dynamics.

Firstness has become imperative in an age of information abundance. With so much data easily accessible and generated via an Internet connection, “shortcuts for managing large amounts of information without necessarily having to delve into, engage with, or even understand it” become indispensable (Andrejevic, 2013: 4). Cohen and Rutsky (2005) agree, noting “as the quantity of information available for consumption has increased, so have the number of ‘top ten’ and ‘best of’ lists, ‘buying guides,’ ‘idiot’s guides,’ ‘FAQ’s,’ and similar meta-texts offered to help us navigate the time-space of information” (p. 1). Yet while information explodes, the techniques used to organize it can move in the opposite direction. For instance, content and conversation on social media such as Pinterest, Twitter, or Instagram crowd around hashtags, and keywords are essential to computer-assisted information filtering. Viewed this way, firstness is among the dwindling set of tools utilized to identify information and attract attention.

Thus, the metaculture of firstness is compatible with, and built into, technological platforms. I will address this issue again in the subsequent section, but for now let me make two observations. To begin, it is not merely that these technologies run algorithms that are numerical or mathematical, and in so doing “subject human discourse and knowledge to these procedural logics that undergird all computation” (Gillespie, 2014: 168). It is also that they tend toward systems of ranking, rating, measurement, and order that force “calculability” even in contexts where it is ill-fitting, easily gamed, or biased.

Reagle (2014) explores one instance of this in his work on Photo.net. Beginning in the early 1990s as a photo-sharing site, Photo.net quickly developed numerical ratings that condensed the myriad variation in photographs into two categories, “cleverness” or “originality” and “aesthetics.” The numeric ratings that resulted—ostensibly if imperfectly separating the best from the worst—presaged today’s pursuit of likes and followers, and parallels weighted hierarchies such as Google’s Page Rank or Twitter’s Trends that have come to define the Internet’s ecology.

Also crucial to note is the outsize role that virality or “spreadability” (Jenkins et al., 2013) plays in cultural circulation. Audiences now “share content for their own purposes” (Jenkins et al., 2013: 3), marking a huge change in cultural consumption. Yet the metaculture of firstness also inhabits this shift. Our ability to share content often comes alongside metrics that enumerate how widely something has been shared, for instance—not just further quantifying circulation, but also providing relative importance of content. Moreover, sharing something before others in one’s social networks can become its own motivation, enhancing self-perception or increasing follower counts or favorites. Many platforms encourage these practices tacitly (through time-stamping content or displaying it in reverse chronological order), but others do so actively. For example, sharing something within Facebook that a friend shared with you first acknowledges that person by name. Twitter does this as well, through the built-in capability of retweeting, as well as through the norm of mentioning someone (“MT”) who might have directed you toward content or made a point first.

Though the online universe may have some unique aspects, it also reflects the values of the world around it, in which claims of firstness continue to harbor tremendous value despite their manipulability. English (2009) makes two observations that help to explain this paradox. He observes that there is “[t]he sense that the cultural universe has become supersaturated with prizes, that there are more cultural awards than our collective cultural achievements can possibly justify”; yet despite this exhaustion, “[i]t is almost as though winning a prize is the only truly newsworthy thing a cultural worker can do” (English, 2009: 19, 21). In a similar vein, firsts multiply though they can seem like little more than a cascade of negligible honorifics. The point is that the constructed nature of firstness is the very thing that prompts its growth. Like a prize, a first appears to have a ready-made value independent of its community or network of origin; both function not just as modes of distinction, but also as claims for recognition. Yet as much as these demands seem justified from the outset, too many of them undermines the point of being recognized at all.

Consider, for instance, that in February 2014, Katy Perry became the first person on Twitter to reach 50 million followers, and that one month later, Justin Bieber became the second person—but the first Canadian—to do so (Hernandez, 2014; Leyfield, 2014). Or that in 2007, Beyonce became the first black non-model to appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*; the photogenic singer needed the designation of “non-model” lest she lose the title otherwise held by Tyra Banks, who in 1997 became the magazine’s first black cover model. In 1996, David Dicks became the first person 18 or younger to sail around the world—but since he ran into trouble and required a hand from the British Navy, he cannot rightfully claim to have made the journey unassisted. Enter Australian Jesse Martin, then, who in 1999 laid to that circumnavigational feat. Yet never fear, Zac

Sunderland: 17 in 2009, he became the first person under 18 to circle the globe, thus finding a spot in the record books as well (Gunther, 2012).

These examples highlight firsts that correspond with real social values—technological achievements, feats of human endurance, tumbling racial barriers. At the same time, they demonstrate that the meaning and definitiveness they appear to confer is far from guaranteed. As records of human experiences continue to multiply, the opportunities for firsts need not diminish; on the contrary, it seems we seek out ever more terrains in which to assign value and historicity. The explosion of categories in which being first is purported to matter, the embedment of firstness into our platforms as well as our tools of publicity and promotion and the role firstness plays in contestations over politics and culture endeavors work in tandem to evacuate firstness of meaning even as they attempt to harness its power and esteem. In this way, firstness dilapidates as it pushes evermore forward, exposing the cracks within the game while simultaneously raising the stakes.

Firsties and the circulation of culture

It is enormously difficult to know precisely how “firsties” came to establish itself as a common practice on the Internet, but allow me to make a few connections. One curiosity is that “firsties” is the nickname for senior military cadets, particularly at West Point. As highest ranking students, they enjoy special privileges and lord power over younger students. Because it is beyond the scope of this essay to mine this coincidence, future scholarship may determine whether this correlates to other militaristic elements of the Internet’s history. Non-military related usages of the specific term “firsties” emerged by the 1970s. In 1972, *Women’s Wear Daily* proclaimed that a new Manhattan club was “making a big splash with the Firsties, those young New Yorkers who are the first anywhere” (Kent, 1972). Four years later, a book explaining an English game called “chestnuts” instructs that to commence play, someone shouts “first” or “firsties” (Milberg, 1976: 152). Both may be sheer coincidence, but at least suggest that “firsties” communicated competition or standing long before it became common online.

Cultures of computing redeploy the competitive streak apparent in other arenas of everyday life, using accomplishments both large and small as means to assign status and value. Races and tests of stamina have been integral to Internet and computing cultures since their inception. Taylor (2012), for instance, has traced the roots of competitive computer gaming back to 1972, noting that “from the start, computer game players seemed drawn not only to their interaction with the machine but to the competitive space against one another it could facilitate” (p. 3). Such contests are not confined to gaming alone, however. Rehn (2004) has researched the software hacker community known as “warez,” (p. 363) where members focus on cracking locked versions of popular software packages. He notes that “participants compete about being the first to have supplied a functioning version” of a coveted software; later cracked copies relegated to duplicate or “dupe” status. Moreover, despite the fact that hackers are necessarily “interdependent,” the community also displays “an elitist stance that places an extremely high premium on self-reliance, individual achievement, and meritocracy” (Coleman, 2012: 94, 106).

Though it is unlikely that every first poster on mainstream comment threads during the peak of firsties was a categorical hacker type, the practice of firsties did showcase

how geek culture continued to frame participation on the web even as Internet usage became commonplace. To wit, “firsties” or “first post” practices appeared on early bulletin boards and websites like SlashDot and Mindvox during the mid-1990s, when Internet usage was much more niche (“First Post,” 2005). Those deeply involved in computing subcultures likely would have been familiar with it; in 2000, for instance, e-vendor, Geek Culture, humorously marketed a T-shirt reading (First post! ... the t-shirt!, 2000) “first post” (Geek Culture). Wikipedia, launched in 2001, had an entry on the phenomenon as early as 2004 that read,

“First Post” is a strange phenomenon in Internet discussion groups (particularly Slashdot) similar to a marking of territory. Site participants race to be the first to add a comment (“post”) to a new article. These comments have no use and usually do not contain any text other than “First post!” or variations thereof ... The purpose of a first post is therefore just to annoy site users and entertain the site trolls by allowing them to race for the “honour” (sic) of being on the top of the (chronologically-ordered) list of comments. (“First Post,” 2004)

This entry shifted over the years before finally being deleted sometime during 2007. While the logic behind this disappearance is elusive, what is clear is that by the mid-2000s, firsties had spread around the web, including highly popular websites such as Perez Hilton, LiveJournal, Facebook, *Entertainment weekly*, and YouTube.¹ Alongside the popularity of firsties, resentment and bewilderment also grew. On LiveJournal, a 2005 post entitled “First Comment, Suckers!” pondered “What is so rewarding about being at the right place at the right time ... Is this some sort of LiveJournal subculture of people who want their username to be seen in popular places?” (Khristomophelle, 2005). The frustration with “firsties” and the like also pushed websites to do more to moderate comments, including sometimes shutting them down temporarily or altogether (Reagle, 2015). Engadget, a technology blog, explained as much in a 2005 post, noting “we’ve all gotten a little tired of spending so much time deleting comment spam and dealing with trolls and all that ‘first post!’ crap, so we’re switching off comments ... while we think about what we’re going to do” (Rojas, 2005).

Firsties, though, is not just a competition: it is also a temporal distinction built into the way comment threads configure time. Though the infrastructure of many Internet platforms privileges newness to the diminishment of history (Vaidhyanathan, 2011), the Internet’s reliance on interconnection produces a variety of ways in which lineage, citation, and order also matter. The tendency for many comment threads to be displayed in reverse chronological order, for instance, makes it possible, if sometimes tedious, to mark the “origin” of a conversation. Similarly, hyperlinks, retweets, and shares not only form the foundation of social media but also embed our activities there with a sense of debt or genealogy. These examples underscore how the ordinality, historicness, and superlativity intrinsic to the metaculture of firstness become embedded into technological operation.

Online norms of competitiveness and interdependence point toward how “firsties” migrated beyond the comment thread to become a tactic and an allegory for status seeking in other arenas. One clear place to see this unfold was in the musical blogosphere. After peer-to-peer filesharing networks fell out of prominence in the mid-2000s, habits

of acquiring MP3s decentralized. As this happened, there began an intensification in “anticipation not just for the release of a new album, but for the pre-release acquisition of that album’s digital leak” (Harvey, 2013: 2). Describing leaks as “temporal and technological transfigurations of music recordings,” Harvey (2013) suggests they are infused with “collective anticipation” (p. 6) in at least two senses: preludes to formal releases and catalysts of excitement and hype. It should not surprise us, then, that the first moment when leak appears has the capacity to ignite a flurry of attention and enthusiasm, manifesting in swarms of traffic to a particular hosting site.

But while “collective anticipation” might explain why users would descend upon a blog to obtain music, it does not do enough to explain why this variety of “firsties” took hold and persists. What motivates a blogger to post first, and what happens when he or she does? Human values, such as charity, goodwill, and allegiance, may play a role to different degrees for different users, but so might less noble aims. Another effect of communal peer-to-peer file sharing ceding to individualistic yet interconnected blogs was the creation of a system where it became possible to identify the location of desirable MP3s and, with that, to establish a kind of meritocracy around musical discovery (Powers, 2012: 864–865). For example, *Elb.ows*, a now defunct music blog aggregator, flagged the origin point of wanted tracks and provided the number of days that had elapsed between that initial post and the rest of the blogosphere catching up. With badges like this, networked attention through comments, quotes, and links, and social behavior both online and off, music bloggers could utilize their curatorial savvy to gain a range of reputational and material advantages. These benefits included the social capital of being most “in the know,” the cultural capital of consecrating an up-and-coming musical wunderkind and, of increasing importance as the blogosphere matured, the economic capital that could come from capturing the most page views, clicks, and incoming links. The UK-based blog, *Breaking More Waves*, reflected upon these incentives in a 2013 post entitled “First to the Post—Our Perspective on New Music Blogging ‘Firsties’ (2013).” For them, being first achieves the following:

1. It boosts our ego (Although it’s already big enough).
2. It makes us feel like we’re good at what we do (discovering new music).
3. It gives us pleasure to see those artists that we were first to discover and write about then grow their careers.
4. But most of all we love the thanks that comes from those artists that we post first.

In the music blogosphere, firsties unfolded not on comment threads but on a wild frontier of digital prestige, the arbiters of which had yet to be defined and seemingly could emerge from anywhere. As Bill Wasik, originator of the flash mob concept and Senior Editor of *Wired* observed in 2009, “[t]o be an insider today one must merely be fast” (Wasik, 2009: 50). In certain ways, this resembled the breakneck pace of a 24/7, scoop-hungry media environment—one much older than the web, even if it also intensified there. Yet following the themes of acceleration, quantification, and promotion, firsties may be distinguished from scoops and other, older practices of competitive cultural circulation.

For example, back in 2009, Ashton Kutcher “raced” CNN to be the first account on Twitter with a million followers. Many news outlets reported the accomplishment as a

metric of Kutcher's, Twitter's, and the democratic web's value, and Kutcher exhorted, "[w]e have shown the world that the new wave is here, it is present and it is ready to explode" (Kaufman, 2009). But the spectacle also revealed its constructedness in a variety of ways. Kutcher, famous for movies and television, held a news conference on CNN, live-tweeting the event; he appeared on *Oprah* later that week, introducing the host to Twitter; and there was a storm of news coverage analyzing the occasion. In short, a "first" was predestined. The abundant news coverage and celebrity earned in other media spheres more or less insured that the follower counts would mount.

In many ways, then, this was not so different from familiar media competitions—for instance, television networks during "sweeps" weeks. Yet, this new media first relied upon several assumptions about how precisely firstness could be quantified, including that Twitter counted followers added in real time, that each follower was qualitatively equivalent to every other, that the site would be able to handle all the incoming traffic without glitches, and that the proverbial playing field between the two entities was even. In hindsight, we have less naiveté on all these points. Though "one million followers" flaunts both exactness and gravitas, in so doing it reveals as well as conceals, making it debatable what the "first" to reach it has actually achieved. More recently, the celebration of K-Pop star PSY's "Gangnam Style" as the first YouTube video to receive two billion views (Stapleton, 2014) has a similar flavor: the number is the event, marked as a triumph for both PSY and YouTube despite (and, indeed, in ignorance of) whatever defects it may contain.

Quantification and measurability are therefore central to promotion online, and may transform into real value—established forms, like money and attention, as well as newer currencies such as clicks, likes, or shares. And while the "firsties" game is less visible today than it was several years ago, the economic ramifications of firstness render it even more important online than it was during the 2000s. During January 2014, for example, *The Defamer*, a website in the Gawker suite, posted a link to the script for upcoming film *Hateful Eight*, written by Quentin Tarantino and distributed in print to a small ring of associates. Even though Tarantino followed this purloined script with a lawsuit against the website, *Defamer* clearly gained by posting the screenplay before anyone else (Rizov, 2014). Though counter to traditional regimes of intellectual property, firstness here nonetheless monetizes creative production, altering the relationship between creator, distributor, and exhibitor.

Journalism, transpiring within an environment of "firsties," faces similar stresses. Breaking a story first has long been vital to the news economy; scholars argue that technology has sped up competition among news outlets and, in turn, that the hastened pace of news adversely affects quality (Hume, 1996; Stephens, 2010). These concerns have amplified since the rise of the Internet, where news outlets must not only compete all day long, but also across an array of platforms and against an enormous number of outlets. Given how the online economy operates, then, "there are trade-offs in balancing authenticity with the need to act quickly in a hyper-connected age" (Somaiya and Kaufman, 2013). As Ryan Grim, Washington Bureau Chief for *Huffington Post*, explains, "[i]f you throw something up without fact-checking it, and you're the first one to put it up, and you get millions and millions of views, and later it's proved false, you still got those views ... The incentives are all wrong" (qtd. in Somaiya and

Kaufman, 2013). Firstness has become a core value in the system of economic rewards connected to, and reliant upon, cultural circulation. The accolades for being first can and often do outstrip those for being credible, comprehensive, or right.

Firstness in the age of recursivity

As I have argued above, firstness may be critiqued for its relativity, its constructedness, its imprecision, and its mutability. Audiences have also responded to the ubiquity of firstness with skepticism and backlash—from cultural movements like Slow Listening or Slow Living to takedowns of falsified firsts across a range of categories (Davidson, 2014; Hartnett, 2012; Hernandez, 2014).² Nevertheless, firstness continues to impact cultural circulation, working to accelerate it, make it more promotional, and stress its numerical aspects. Digital media were not the sphere within which the race to be first was invented, but they are clearly one in which it can be measured, codified, and exacerbated. Moreover, as firstness nests within more technological platforms—from search engines that privilege highly ranked results to the dark fiber lines that allow one Wall Street firm to make trades a fraction of a millisecond faster than a competitor (Steiner, 2012: 114)—it increasingly translates into sizeable sums of money, real power, and the difference between notice and obscurity.

Yet, a world dominated by firstness is not one with only victors. It also births a new normal: one of flash market crashes and hoaxes, clickbait and faux social media followers, and a sinking sense that there is never enough time to fully digest, verify, or reflect upon information. The need to be constantly racing one's competitors toward *right now* results in a kind of cultural stagflation and overzealous presentism that can actually keep us “reacting to the ever-present assault of simultaneous impulses and demands” (Rushkoff, 2013: 4). In this way, firstness contributes to a recursive mediascape, where unreliable or precarious information circulates so quickly that it feeds back into cultural production and decision-making almost instantaneously. Hassan (2009) theorizes cultural recursion as “a relentless recirculation and recombination of the myriad existing signs and symbols of our culture in ways that can be readily repackaged and resold” (p. 339)—a world of endless remakes, remixes, covers, sequels, and perpetual retro. I do not want to carry my argument quite to that conclusion. But I do want to suggest that firstness is symptomatic of deeper, post-postmodern changes of our times—ones that might be helpfully understood as an age of recursivity. And that while much may be gained in this unyielding pursuit of winning, something profound is being lost too.

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Notes

1. A Google search between 2004–2007 shows examples of firsties in comment threads on all of these sites.
2. Snopes.com is another leading site for dispelling rumors on the Internet, including firsts.

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