

Flying Billboards and FAQs

I think the key turning point was the mutual love affair
between television and publicists.

ROGER EBERT
film critic

IN TRYING TO GIVE A film a strong opening weekend, marketers have swelled ad budgets enormously. In 2002 the major studios spent \$3.1 billion on print and media ads, up an astonishing half a billion dollars from the year before. And that year a trailer for a big Hollywood release cost an average of \$500,000 to \$1.2 million. Because of the fierce competition, these expenses cannot effectively be cut, so the problem is to find ways to offset them. The next chapter will consider how fans can be recruited at little or no cost to publicize a release. But, as we will see, those fans may become unruly. The studios have other options that are easier to control. Through the 1990s, a new system for orchestrating publicity and offsetting marketing costs grew to maturity. *The Lord of the Rings* arrived at a moment when its makers could take full advantage of new opportunities.

In selling a film to the public, studios have long relied on the three legs of marketing: theatrical preview trailers, television advertising, and the graphic design that will appear in newspapers and on posters outside theaters. During 2002, the year of the big uptick, New Line spent \$31.4 million to publicize *Towers* in broadcast and print media, with the bulk, \$18.9 million, going for spots on network television; newspapers trailed at \$5.9 million and cable TV at \$4.5 million. The overall ad-buy constituted a respectably low 12 percent of *Towers*' domestic box office by year's end.¹

I'LL SELL YOUR BRAND IF YOU'LL SELL MINE

But New Line did not pay for nearly all the advertising that featured the *Rings* franchise. It drew heavily on a trend toward “brands partnering,” in which a film company strikes a deal with firms that sell brand-name products. Usually the partner agrees to spend a certain amount, often in the tens of millions of dollars, on ads for its own merchandise that include characters from the film. Stores often set up large cardboard “standees” of characters juxtaposed with their product, sweepstakes are run, and publicity materials for the film are packaged with partners’ products. (For *Fellowship*, JVC created a tie-in DVD player with images from the film on the box and a DVD with a brief making-of promo, “A Glimpse of Middle Earth,” in it.)

Brand partnering has had a fairly long history, most often tied to actors’ endorsements of consumer goods. In the 1950s a magazine advertisement might feature a star with a cigarette or a beer, along with mention of the star’s upcoming film. The practice became far more systematic in the 1980s, when makers of children’s films began partnering with fast-food chains. An industry milestone was reached in 1996 when Disney signed a ten-year contract whereby McDonald’s agreed to promote no other company’s movies. Nowadays almost any major brand can associate itself with a film. Cingular linked with *Spider-Man* and saw its sales spike, particularly in downloads of graphics, ringtones, and games based on the film.² If possible, the brand is also featured within the film itself. With a fantasy like *Rings*, product placement was not an option, but in other respects it could maximally exploit partnerships. Here, as on other dimensions, the timing of *Rings*’ arrival allowed it to reap the benefits of a trend that was consolidating in the late 1990s.

Some of *Rings*’ partnerships changed from film to film. Gateway, General Mills, and Sharp came and went, to be replaced by Duracell, 7-Up, Chrysler, and Parker Brothers. Tourism New Zealand was a partner throughout. Verizon Wireless signed as a partner shortly before the release of *Towers* and stayed on. Newman’s South Pacific, a company specializing in tours to New Zealand, was a long-term partner, as was MTV. The film featured unusual promotions, as when a card included in the *Towers* DVD led to a website offering \$500 toward the purchase of a Chrysler minivan—the logic being that the model contained a DVD player.³ This sort of association, with a high-end product or a more dignified service, proved crucial to *Rings*’ brand partnering, reinforcing the film’s image as a prestigious effort, not a popcorn adventure. Comparable partnerships were formed with local brands in other countries.

The risk of going down-market was dramatically illustrated in the run-up

to the first installment. On 1 June 2001, New Line and Burger King announced a partnership. The cast and crew weren't terribly happy with this, but it was sprung on them too late for protest. The fast-food chain committed to a \$30 million ad campaign. Its ten thousand restaurants had *Rings*-themed food containers on which the official website's URL was printed. There were two levels of products: for kids, small plastic giveaway figures, and for older fans, four "collectible" glass goblets with carved likenesses of the main characters and light-up bases for sale.⁴ Burger King ran a sweepstakes for a trip to New Zealand and put a link to *Fellowship*'s trailer on its website. All this did not placate the online fans, who complained loudly that the deal violated New Line's promise not to sully the trilogy with cheap tie-ins. A headline in the *Hollywood Reporter*, "The Lord of the Onion Rings," aggravated the image problem and caught on as a slogan of ridicule on the Internet. In November, Tehanu posted a brief excerpt from Burger King's press release under the title "How Many 'Lord of the Onion Rings' Jokes Have You Heard?" The excerpt included a passage that ran, "To add to the excitement of this blockbuster promotion, BURGER KING® customers can experience new and improved onion rings at the only fast food restaurant that offers this choice. The enhanced onion rings will be offered with a creamy, zesty dipping sauce and are available in three sizes: medium (15 rings), large (20 rings), and king (24 rings)." Tehanu commented, "I guess if they don't agree with you, you can experience 'the return of the king.'"⁵ Significantly, New Line did not partner with Burger King for Films 2 and 3. It is possible that Burger King found the terms too expensive, or maybe the studio was tired of onion ring jokes.

Fans were far more favorable to a higher-toned partnership that was also quite imaginative. Air New Zealand had the advantage of being one of the few marketing partners strongly associated with the country where the films were being made.

Air NZ met with New Line only shortly before *Fellowship*'s release in late 2001. The initial goal was to associate Air NZ with the film and to build up a database of potential customers from people who clicked onto the website. In the autumn of 2002, New Line and Air New Zealand entered into a promotional partnership, covering both the theatrical releases and the DVDs, which lasted for two years. The highest-profile initiative involved decorating the outsides of two planes with giant decal images of main characters. Those two would be replaced by two differently decorated planes for *Return*, but when it was announced that the world premiere would be held in Wellington, New Line gave permission for all four planes to fly until the partnership ended (plate 6). These planes, used only for international flights, generated

enormous publicity for both brands. Despite a rainy day, the media turned up at Los Angeles Airport to see Mark Ordesky, Barrie Osborne, Elijah Wood, and a few of the other actors present the “Frodo” 747 on 18 December 2002, as they were about to depart on it to attend the New Zealand premiere of *Towers*. Fans who spotted the planes sitting on tarmacs photographed them and posted the images on websites.

The partnership also gave Air NZ the right to call itself the “Airline to Middle-earth.” Images used for tourist agency posters and outdoor billboards showed pristine New Zealand landscapes with captions like, “The movie is fictional, the location isn’t” and “Visit Middle-earth. They haven’t taken the set down.” Publicity material for Air NZ was handed out in theaters, and reporters coming to the world premiere of *Return* received the company’s electronic press kits (EPKs) on CD-ROMs. Air NZ travelers watched trailers and making-of documentaries for the film. The seats on the four decorated planes had *Rings*-themed headrest covers, the staff wore *Rings* badges, a lengthy audio program on the trilogy was available, and a postcard with an image of the appropriate plane was given to each passenger. In December 2003, one of the decorated planes carried the actors back to the United States after *Return*’s world premiere. The 2004 Academy Awards presented yet another opportunity for promotion. The airline put tickets for New Zealand trips into the gift baskets given to the presenters, performers, and other VIPs running the ceremony. When Air NZ’s success led it to add a nonstop San Francisco route in June 2004, the “Frodo” was used a final time at the mayor’s request to help publicize the city’s new airport. Air NZ removed the decals one by one. The last flight, on 23 October 2004, carried a group of fifty-four Japanese tourists in *Rings* costumes.⁶

The cross-promotional effects of such partnerships are evidenced by the fact that New Line temporarily added a “travel” category to its online *Rings* shop, giving Air NZ a place to offer its vacation packages to a ready-made audience. The airline in turn provided tickets to allow New Line to run another sweepstakes in August 2003, just before the release of the *Towers* theatrical DVD. New Line also provided licensed merchandise and tickets to premieres so that Air NZ could run contests. Fans loved the Air NZ campaign, and many of them traveled on the airline as they went to tour movie locations.

Rebecca Weaver, manager of partnership marketing for Air NZ’s American office, stresses the degree of coordination among partners that New Line provided, helping them maximize these cross-promotional benefits. Each year before the DVD release, New Line had a “partner summit,” where new partners could learn about existing ones and explain their own plans. Weaver says,

“I would present some background information about Air New Zealand plus some of the past *Lord of the Rings* initiatives that we’d undertaken in this market. It was just a great networking opportunity, then, to be able to sit there and watch the other companies and identify which ones would make good connections.” Arrangements were made in the United Kingdom for partnerships with brands like Virgin Megastore, Royal Mail, and Warner Village Cinemas to promote the “Airline to Middle-earth.”

Lucy Powell, communications manager for Air NZ’s Los Angeles branch, sums up how *Rings* helped draw attention to the company.

We’re a part of popular culture that previously we wouldn’t have been able to be on our own. We show up in the entertainment sections of a newspaper or a magazine. It’s the Tolkien fans, it’s the movie industry, it’s this whole other audience that we could never reach otherwise. I think it’s probably put the country and the airline on the map in a way that we just never had been before.

Even with the end of the partnership and the right to call itself the “Airline to Middle-earth,” Air NZ’s publicity staff still tries to use images that are “Middle-earthly” or “Lord-of-the-Rings-ish.” The offices receive inquiries from travel magazines planning stories that will mention the *Rings* connection. And the effect will probably live on with the franchise. As Powell laughingly notes, there may be an “über-geek” boxed set of the film, reminding fans yet again of the New Zealand connection. Such possibilities could lead to further ad hoc arrangements with New Line, especially now that the production of *The Hobbit* has been announced.

Brand partnerships are easy to control, with studio approval of products and publicity and contractual stipulations about timing and funds spent on advertising. To fans, however, they can sometimes smack of crass commercialism. Another way of partnering for inexpensive publicity, however, is considerably less obvious to the public.

THE RISE OF INFOTAINMENT

We are so used to learning the weekend’s box-office results on Monday-morning TV that we may forget that it was not always so. For most of the twentieth century, the U.S. public ignored the inner workings of the film industry. True, stars showed up to promote a film on a handful of talk shows, either network (*The Tonight Show*) or syndicated (hosted by Merv Griffin, Dinah Shore, and the like). But celebrity gossip was the province of tabloids

and fan magazines, and the audience was unaware of which film won the weekend or the intricacies of power struggles within studio boardrooms.

Now, however, we have infotainment—soft show-business news that permeates serious news outlets, the mainstream general press, the Internet, and a host of entertainment-centered TV programs. Why the shift? During the 1970s, cable television began to be widely available, leading to keener competition to fill swaths of airtime. Like “reality” programming, infotainment was cheap to put on the air, and it tended to be attractive and uncontroversial. Studios were eager to supply clips, canned interviews, and stars to promote upcoming movies. As *Variety* said, “The explosion of channels and celeb-driven publications . . . has fostered a veritable celeb circus.”⁷

This was also the period when morning talk shows began adding brief review segments. Gene Shalit joined the *Today* show in 1973. In September 1975, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert’s film-review series *Opening Soon at a Theater Near You* debuted on a Chicago commercial station. In 1978, renamed *Sneak Previews*, it moved to PBS. Commentary on current films was thus certified as educational—both information and entertainment. As channels proliferated, more infotainment programs appeared, the most notable being *Entertainment Tonight*, launched in 1981. Cable’s success pressured the networks to compete. By 1998, cable channels surpassed the broadcast networks in prime-time viewership for the first time; by 2002, the networks’ overall share of the audience dropped to 48 percent.⁸ They began to include more soft news, as when ABC’s *Good Morning America* devoted enormous coverage to the 2005 Oscars.

The demand for movie-related content intensified with the spread of the Internet. Pundits had long complained that television was discouraging people from reading. Now video games and surfing the Net were luring audiences away from TV. Networks, channels, and websites fought for attention. Soft news—not just show business reportage but coverage of crime (abductions, car chases), real-life melodramas (runaway brides), and faux celebrities (the blonde teenage-girl idol du jour)—could plug the gaps between hard-news stories or even crowd them out.

Changes in the film industry encouraged this trend. During the 1980s and 1990s, the television networks were bought by conglomerates that also owned movie studios. When *Rings* was being released, such conglomerates controlled all six networks: Viacom (CBS and UPN), Time Warner (the Warner Bros. Network, aka The WB), NBC Universal (NBC), News Corp. (Fox), and Disney (ABC). In mid-September 2006, CBS and Warner Bros. merged UPN and The WB into a jointly owned network, The CW.

These networks own *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Late Show with David Letterman*, and other programs that feature celebrities introducing tempting clips from their newest movies. They also control more than sixty major cable channels—including ones that habitually publicize movies, such as E!, VH1, and MTV. They own other media assets, including entertainment and celebrity-oriented magazines like *People*, *InStyle*, and *Entertainment Weekly*.⁹ Not surprisingly, they use a synergistic blend of their media outlets to publicize the films that their studio wings produce and distribute. *Entertainment Weekly* was started in 1990 by Time Warner, which later acquired New Line. The magazine brought out a special edition devoted to *Rings* just as the theatrical DVD of *Return* was about to hit stores.¹⁰

One forerunner was Walt Disney. Ever on the leading edge of film franchises, he started the *Mickey Mouse Club* series in 1955, and ABC paid for it as it would for any ordinary program. Yet the series promoted Disney's characters and products. Beyond the popularity of the show, ABC had another reason for supporting Disney. In 1954 ABC helped finance the building of Disneyland, of which it owned a one-third stake, and late that year it started running a television series of the same name, which advertised the theme park as well as the characters and products.¹¹

Another early example was the Academy Awards, which were broadcast on network TV from 1952 on, and this glamorous event became an early prototype of infotainment. Cable fed the appetite for awards shows, from the Independent Spirit Awards covered on the Independent Film Channel to the British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards (BAFTAs) on BBC 2 and BBC America. In 1996, the Golden Globe Awards moved from cable to NBC and steadily gained viewership. The January time slot and international flavor of the Globes, given by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA), can boost the crucial overseas market for Christmas-season releases. As *Variety* put it, "Studios know the promotional value of awards shows: They're essentially splashy infomercials for new pics." Studios attract viewers' interest by sending celebrities to such ceremonies. At the Oscars, they provide part of the entertainment by laughing at jokes, applauding during tributes, and reacting emotionally to the presentations. Lorenzo Soria, president of the HFPA, which holds the Globes ceremonies during banquets, says of the stars, "If they're not presenting or winning, you see them eating and drinking and hugging friends, and crying and laughing. And I guess in our culture people are fascinated by this sight."¹² Such occasions create further chances for red-carpet or backstage press interviews and sound bites that are stitched into news coverage.

The surest sign of the growth of infotainment is what Hollywood people call the horse race: weekend box-office coverage. In 1976, the Nielsen ratings company founded Nielsen EDI, a centralized service that telephoned theaters across America, gathered box-office receipt totals, and passed them on to the studios. Industry journals like *Variety* subscribed to EDI and published a weekly top-fifty box-office chart, but that didn't appear in print until days after the fact. The mainstream news did not take much notice. But the 1990s saw weekend totals creep into *USA Today* and other newspapers. In 1997 and 1998, several websites like Box Office Guru and Box Office Mojo began to supply overnight box-office figures for free. Now networks and cable channels like CNN could report the weekend numbers as a routine part of Monday morning's news.

Similarly, the seemingly mundane announcements of deals between stars and their producers, agents, and directors used to be confined to specialized journals like *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*. Now, as a writer for *Screen International*, a British film-business magazine, put it,

If a story appears in a trade paper about a new project featuring (say) Leonardo DiCaprio or Harvey Weinstein, it will instantly show up in the consumer press. There is a huge public appetite for information that [a generation ago] would have seemed relevant only to the industry. Newspapers, magazines, and TV shows have specialized departments and reporters devoted to entertainment news. Radio DJs, talk-show hosts, and especially box-office charts often influence the public's movie-going decisions more than film critics' reviews do.¹³

As Alex Fogelson said, coverage of entertainment news had become an industry unto itself.

This change was both a blessing and a curse for the studios. With more attention focused on films and their stars than ever before, studio publicists face a greater task to keep certain information from leaking out. News of plot twists or endings (spoilers) can make the film seem less exciting when it is ultimately released, and actors are routinely required to sign "nondisclosure agreements," vowing not to reveal a film's plot beyond what is okayed by publicists. Even worse, damaging news about stars might make filmgoers stay home. In the summer of 2005 alone, three such incidents occurred. The disappointing performance of *Cinderella Man* was at first blamed on an altercation between Russell Crowe and a hotel employee. Rumors of Brad Pitt leaving his wife, Jennifer Aniston, for his *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* costar Angelina Jolie had studio officials nervous about public reaction. Polls predicted that

Tom Cruise's eccentric, sometimes aggressive behavior on talk shows would adversely affect the box-office take for *War of the Worlds*. It seems unlikely that the stars' offscreen antics harmed these films. (*Cinderella Man* fell victim to a poor release slot, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* earned nearly \$440 million worldwide, and *War of the Worlds* provided Cruise's career-best opening.) The real point is that show business commentators treated speculations about the box-office effects of celebrity behavior as news.

Infotainment poses another risk: broad coverage of too many aspects of a movie might confuse the public. The studio wants to highlight a film's genre, the stars and the characters they play, the plot's main premises (but not its outcome), and so on. Trying to steer the juggernaut of infotainment to stick to such basic information presents new problems, but marketers have overcome them in some clever ways.

THE MAKING OF THE MAKING-OF

Historians looking back at *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) attribute its surprise success to its ingenious website. The film had additional help, however, from two making-of documentaries on cable. In 1998, even before *Blair Witch* had shown at the Sundance Film Festival and been bought for distribution, the Independent Film Channel coproduced a short documentary about it. After Artisan acquired *Blair Witch*, the Sci Fi Channel ran an hour-long program a few days before its release.

Making-ofs have become routine, but behind-the-scenes footage was shot for many older movies. In the 1950s and 1960s, there seems often to have been someone with an amateur film camera on the set. Such material was usually handled casually, as mementos for cast and crew, without an eye to its being cut together into a comprehensible documentary. But studios sometimes created making-ofs to screen at exhibitors' trade shows, hoping to entice theater chains to book the films. Until recently the public seldom saw such footage. Since the late 1990s, however, making-ofs are routinely arranged in advance of a film's production.

Such documentaries form one of the main components of a DVD's supplements. In the age of infotainment, a making-of for a major film is also likely to be broadcast in advance of the release, usually on a cable channel aimed at an appropriate audience.

Who makes the making-of documentaries, and how do they get on television? Since they are in effect advertisements, we might expect that the studio pays the cable station to run them, and sometimes this happens, espe-

cially if the studio is mounting an Oscar campaign. Yet during the 1990s, Hollywood came to recognize that people would buy promotional items that had once been free. Fans, they discovered, would buy posters, character standees, and other items that companies previously had supplied just to theaters. Likewise, in the infotainment era, a cable channel considers a documentary about a major upcoming film to be a highly desirable program. Initially cable firms would buy the rights to air such making-ofs as if they were standard television fare, but as such documentaries have proliferated, channels often run the program only if the studio buys a certain amount of advertising time. In either case, the studio might enhance the documentary's appeal to the channel by including an exclusive peek at a scene from the film. The *Quest for the Ring* program on Fox in 2001, for example, contained a portion of the Moria sequence that before then had been seen only in the Cannes preview. It also had a short ad for *Fellowship* at every commercial break—small promos wedged inside a large one.

Peter Jackson began making features in the mid-1980s. The Criterion company had released the first laser discs with supplements in 1984, with its *Citizen Kane* and *King Kong* releases. Given that Jackson was a laser disc collector, it seems highly likely that he was aware of these, especially the latter. He has arranged for extensive behind-the-scenes documentary footage for all his films. (He speaks of someday going back and assembling a making-of for each.) He directed a four-and-a-half-hour film, *The Making of "The Frighteners,"* for the 1996 special edition laser disc of *The Frighteners*. (In 2005 this making-of was rereleased on the Director's Cut DVD of *The Frighteners*.) Jackson was also well aware of the historical importance of *Rings* and knew that he should not treat its making-of shorts casually. He arranged for particularly detailed video documentation of every stage and ordered that virtually everything from the production be kept. Each version of every shot or sound that was saved to hard disk was preserved, so that a filmmaker could trace the entire evolution of special effects or the mixing of sound.

Although a few one-off films about one or another installment were made, three filmmakers recorded throughout the production process. Costa Botes shot candid footage for one feature-length, unnarrated documentary for each part. Dan Arden combined interviews and on-set footage to create making-ofs for cable and for the theatrical DVD supplements. Michael Pellerin shot additional material and put together more extensive documentation for the extended-edition DVD supplements.

Botes's friendship with Jackson went back to the 1980s, and they had codirected *Forgotten Silver* (1995). When Botes heard about the *Rings* project, he

told Jackson that he was interested in covering it, and New Line agreed to pay to have it done. According to Botes, “Peter’s only instruction to me was to try and document it warts and all.” New Line seems not to have realized what a mammoth task documenting *Rings* would be. As of 1999, before principal photography began, the plan was for Botes to direct three forty-five-minute making-of programs (one-hour TV shows with room for commercial breaks), to make a feature-length documentary about the whole trilogy, and to assemble eight hours of documentary material on each film for the DVD supplements. (At this point there was no distinction between the theatrical and extended-edition DVDs.) Botes suggested that six hours per part might be more feasible, and he set out to create this mass of multipurpose footage.

Botes and Hayley French, a second camera operator, spent nearly every day of principal photography recording behind-the-scenes footage on digital video. It was all candid material, with the subjects in some cases not realizing they were on camera. About halfway through filming, New Line began to realize the scope of *Rings* and decided to bring in separate directors for the publicity making-ofs and the DVD supplements. Botes carried on, trying to condense his mass of footage (all of which is the property of New Line) into three feature-length documentaries. His hope was for a theatrical or at least a DVD release. In late 2004, Jackson spoke of an eventual reissue of *Rings* on high-definition video: “I am really determined to make sure that those are a main feature on this box set that will be coming out in a year or two. They are really great.”¹⁴ Instead, however, New Line chose to release a third round of film-plus-supplements DVD sets on 29 August 2005. Each of the three sets included both the theatrical and extended versions of one part of the trilogy, accompanied by the appropriate Botes candid making-of. Reviews and fan comments expressed annoyance that New Line would try to sell the trilogy yet again and wondered why Botes’s documentaries were not simply released separately on DVD. In fact, the actors and filmmakers had agreed to have documentary camera operators constantly observing them only if the resulting making-ofs were used to promote the trilogy and not to make money separately. Oddly, the advertisements for these DVD sets simply mentioned “all-new documentaries” in small print, minimizing the one appeal these new releases would hold for most fans.

As soon as Arden and Pellerin began their work, both were given access to all of Botes’s footage. He sent copies of what he had shot to New Line to form a library for other filmmakers to use. Arden credits Botes with making *Rings* “the most documented movie project ever.” Botes’s footage is, however,

as Arden points out, very different from what one sees on the typical DVD supplement: “I think that what he was able to do gives you a closeness to the production, almost like home movies, that you never see on big movies.” Arden and Pellerin both drew upon it extensively. As Pellerin says, “It would be ridiculous not to. His stuff is through everything.” Throughout the documentaries that New Line sponsored or sanctioned, most of the candid, behind-the-scenes shots come from Botes’s footage.

Botes has expressed disappointment that so much of his material reached the public eye before he could finish his own films. Still, much unseen footage remained, and his three features are very different in tone and style from what fans had seen up to their release. Until the belated 2006 release, the sole public screening had been, by permission of New Line, at the Wellington Film Festival in July 2004. Botes’s program note said, “It was never designed to be part of a marketing effort. It wasn’t even meant to be seen for another couple of years, when it and its two companion pieces are provisionally earmarked for release as part of a DVD box set. It is presented here, exclusively to this Festival, as a work in progress, and a taste of things to come.”¹⁵ The major fan website TheOneRing.net reviewed it, noting how the cast and crew got so used to Botes and his partner that the pair could “candidly observe what went on around them. The result is that you see people laughing, swearing, and working through disasters and triumphs. The whole thing leaves you in awe at the achievement of every last one of them.”¹⁶ Ultimately these three making-ofs, as New Line marketing executive Matt Lasorsa said, gave the studio “the chance to refresh the franchise.”¹⁷

Once the impossibility of one filmmaker handling all the documentary projects became apparent, Dan Arden was brought aboard to produce and direct three shorter, more infotainment-oriented making-ofs. He had made TV shows on various subjects, often for the Discovery Channel. He was a longtime Tolkien fan and a Jackson fan as well. During the making of *The Frighteners*, Arden visited Wellington to interview Jackson and some crew members for *Movie Magic*, a TV series on special effects. That contact proved crucial when Arden heard about the *Rings* project and wrote Jackson about possibly making the related documentaries. Jackson sent him to Mike Mulvihill at New Line Home Entertainment, but Mulvihill told Arden that Botes was already making them.

At that point Sandy Murray, with whom Arden had worked previously, was hired by New Line. Among her duties was the supervision of the *Rings* promotional programs. Arden, still eager to participate in the project, floated the notion of a documentary series that would intertwine the making of the

films and an exploration of the book's themes and Tolkien himself. Murray agreed to partially fund the project with travel and expense money during his early visits to England and New Zealand. Material Arden gathered by interviewing Tolkien experts ended up not only in the TV documentaries but also in a tape Arden made, *Welcome to Middle-earth*, which ran in bookstores to promote Houghton Mifflin's tie-in guides and visual companions to the film. (It was recycled in the *Fellowship* theatrical DVD supplements.) The Tolkien material also went into a separate documentary on *Fellowship* that Arden produced in 2001 for National Geographic Television, *Beyond the Movie: "The Lord of the Rings."*

It wasn't long before Arden was working consistently on the film's documentation and marketing. Starting later than Botes did, in July 2000, he visited New Zealand half a dozen times during principal photography and pickups. He interviewed Jackson three times and most of the main cast members about four times, so that they appear in different clothing and settings in the course of the documentaries. The exception was Cate Blanchett, who was in Wellington only for a single two-week stretch. Arden was told he could have one hour with her, but every day the word was, maybe tomorrow. On Blanchett's last day, when she was finishing many hours of work and faced a 6:00 A.M. flight the next day, Arden was told that the interview was impossible. After much pleading, he got producer Barrie Osborne to concede that he could have ten minutes with Blanchett—but that if he went a second over, he couldn't come back on set. Osborne would stand behind Arden during the interview to enforce that dictum. Arden told his cameraman to tap him on the shoulder to signal time running out. The interview came in at nine minutes and forty-five seconds. Arden recalls, "She was so remarkable that there literally wasn't a second of that interview that didn't end up getting used a zillion times." It was the only on-set filmed interview with Blanchett.

Between interviews, Arden shot behind the scenes. Out of this footage, supplemented by Botes's material, he made a documentary for each part of the trilogy. *Quest for the Ring* appeared on Fox (and again on FX) in the autumn of 2001, preparing the way for *Fellowship's* release. *Return to Middle-earth* (2002) ran on The WB to promote *Towers*. Arden's final film, *The Quest Fulfilled: A Director's Vision* (2003), was used to promote *Rings* to Academy members and as a DVD supplement. After Arden's first National Geographic Society special, *Beyond the Movie: "The Lord of the Rings,"* was aired, it was released as a separate DVD and later also included in the gift-box edition of *Fellowship's* extended version.¹⁸

Like Botes's behind-the-scenes footage, Arden's material was shared among people making a variety of documentaries. He sent his master tapes to New Line, which copied a set for his use. Another set was given to editor Karina Buck, hired by New Line to assemble footage for the electronic press kits and the brief clips that were at intervals put onto New Line's official *Rings* website. The Botes and Arden material was also available for other TV-promo films like *A Passage to Middle-earth: The Making of "The Lord of the Rings,"* made in-house at New Line for the Sci Fi channel (shown in 2001 before and after the release of *Fellowship* and included on its theatrical DVD); Starz Encore's *On the Set: "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers"* (2002; also on the theatrical DVD); and MTV's *Making the Movie: "The Lord of the Rings"* (2002; not included on the DVDs). Certain striking quotations tended to show up over and over in these documentaries and clips.

With Films 2 and 3 New Line stopped depending so much on making-ofs that it had commissioned. Perhaps there was by this time not enough of the Arden interview material to stretch to yet another round of documentaries. New Line permitted certain TV venues to make their own programs. It was another way for other firms to pay for *Rings* promotional materials. With New Line's cooperation, Bravo produced a making-of documentary. *Page to Screen: The Lord of the Rings* premiered on 17 November 2002 and ran several times during the season of *Towers'* release. Although New Line provided publicity photos and clips from *Rings*, as well as some behind-the-scenes footage, Bravo's production team did an informative new round of interviews, including some with Bob Shaye, noted Tolkien authority Tom Shippey, and the editor of the *Hollywood Reporter*. The National Geographic Society made a second film, *Beyond the Movie: "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King"* (2003), which included excerpts from another round of interviews with cast and crew members done by Arden during *Return* pickups. *Beyond the Movie* used interviews with historians, stock images, and reenactments to draw parallels between the *Rings* story and actual historical events. It appears as a supplement on the *Return* theatrical DVD.

E! also produced its own special, *Behind the Scenes: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, the Biography Channel carried *Bio Extra: The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, and A & E ran perhaps the most original and effective of the late making-ofs, *Journey to Middle-earth*. Produced by ABC News and shot during the pickups for *Return*, it traces a single day in the filming and includes interviews with Jackson between takes and a scene being shot in the Edoras interior set.¹⁹ In February 2004, a Canadian production firm filmed a live concert of Howard Shore's "The Lord of the Rings Symphony" in Mon-

treal. Some comments by Shore were added, and the program, *Creating The Lord of the Rings Symphony: A Composer's Journey through Middle Earth*, aired on Canada's Bravo! Channel on 4 September. Adding "Howard Shore" to the beginning of the title and correcting the final name to "Middle-earth," New Line Home Entertainment created a DVD that was made available exclusively in the gift-box edition of *Return*.

In all, combinations and recombinations of the footage shot by the three main documentary filmmakers showed up in many contexts. Some of these publicized the film and its ancillaries, some generated additional revenue *as* ancillaries, and some did both. Arden's *Welcome to Middle-earth* was shown in bookstores, some of his making-ofs were shown as in-flight movies by Air New Zealand, and some of his interviews were excerpted on the EPKs. When New Zealand's national museum, Te Papa, mounted its touring *Rings* exhibition, it wanted some explanatory clips available at the push of a button on monitors next to the displays. Director Roxane Gajadhar, employed by Story! Inc., drew upon a dizzying variety of sources, primarily Botes's footage, some interviews with Richard Taylor, Barrie Osborne, and Alan Lee that she shot herself, other interviews by Arden and Pellerin, and Weta Digital archive footage.²⁰ The official website, lordoftherings.net, at intervals posted behind-the-scenes clips edited by Buck from Botes's and Arden's footage. These were also recycled as theatrical-version DVD supplements. And Pellerin shot and edited a fifteen-minute preview each for *Towers* and *Return* for inclusion on the *Fellowship* and *Towers* theatrical discs, respectively. These were also shown to distributors—sort of a less dramatic version of the Cannes preview of 2001.

Rings squeezed more publicity out of its making-of footage than any franchise had ever done before. Once again, the historical timing of the trilogy proved perfect. The films were released just as behind-the-scenes documentaries were becoming a major promotional tool, and New Line realized that such ancillaries could be used and marketed in multiple ways, just as *Rings* itself could. The huge amount of background footage remaining unused promises that still more documentaries will be made. Jackson has spoken of assembling a diary of the making of *Rings*, which would further extend the franchise.

By now making-ofs are routinely done for virtually any film, since even without an airing on television in advance of the release, they can provide supplements for the DVD. Even TV series have begun this practice. In 2004 the producers of *Lost* sent a crew to Hawaii to film the making of the two-hour pilot.²¹

A GLANCE THROUGH AN EPK

You're a reporter for a small fan magazine or a local morning-news program assigned to write a brief article or a three-minute TV segment about *Towers*. You've seen the film at an advance press screening, but you need to know more about it. You also need some photos for your article, or clips to spice up your TV spot. As with most of the entertainment press, your knowledge of the franchise consists of having seen *Fellowship* a year ago and read some stories in popular magazines. Where can you turn to make yourself seem reasonably expert? The electronic press kit that your editorial office or station received from New Line Cinema's marketing department would be your starting point.

Since the silent era, distributors have supplied the media with a press kit for every major release. In the old days, the kit consisted of packets of eighty-by-ten publicity photographs along with a booklet of background information, including feature stories for lazy journalists to replicate. Today, EPKs make texts and stills available in compact, downloadable form, along with interview clips, trailers, and musical passages. New Line was among the first studios to add an interactive marketing department, and in 1994 its head, Gordon Pad-dison, experimented with digital means of replacing press kits, mainly to save the costs of shipping. Websites did not exist at that time, but he tried delivering materials to journalists by file transfer protocols and on floppy disk.²²

The producers grant permission for all this material to be used in a media context publicizing the film. As we have seen, the contents were assembled by Karina Buck, who made use of Arden's interviews and of the still images taken in New Zealand by the official *Rings* stills photographer, Pierre Vinet. Publicists Claire Raskind and Melissa Booth gathered information from the various heads of departments and sent it in, mostly for use in press releases but also for the EPK. Each of the actors sat down for a lengthy on-camera interview from which brief clips were extracted.

The press kit for *Towers* consists of two CD-ROMs packaged in a modest cardboard slipcase. The cover shows a key image already seen in posters and other advertising visuals: Sauron's Dark Tower in the left foreground and Saruman's Orthanc in the distance at the right, with a vertical grouping of the main characters. Disc 1 contains "Photography" and disc 2, "Special Materials." Disc 1 starts with a brief trailer for the film, similar to ones shown on TV and included on the DVD, with Cate Blanchett's voice intoning over a collage of shots: "There is a union now between the Two Towers, Barad-dûr, fortress of the Dark Lord Sauron, and Orthanc, stronghold of the wizard Saruman." This statement succinctly explains the film's dramatic prem-

ise and the title. The trailer goes on to emphasize Gollum, the most important new character in Film 2, and we glimpse him and hear his muttering as he creeps up on the Ring-bearer in the clip's ending. If you're a TV presenter, it's likely you'll cut to this trailer as you are describing the film.

As the trailer fades, the menu appears, accompanied by Howard Shore's music. Navigating through an EPK is similar to looking at DVD supplements that consist mostly of galleries of images. The user has a choice of thirty photos of various characters, displayed in sets of six thumbnails. These lead to small selections of the photos of the main characters that became so familiar in fan magazines: a view past Saruman's and Gríma's shoulders of the immense ranks of Uruk-hai assembled outside Orthanc, Théoden surrounded by his soldiers on the steps of Helm's Deep. Since Orlando Bloom has become popular, you glance over the images of Legolas on offer. There are two, one with the Elf just standing and looking beautiful, another with him brandishing knives. You choose on the basis of whether you assume that your audience slants more toward females or males. The last batches of photos on offer emphasize Rohan, which is a major new element in the second film, and Saruman, the Uruk-hai, and Helm's Deep, all connected with the great battle scene that was a big draw for action lovers. The final images show Jackson, who became a star in his own right after Film 1, directing on the plains of Rohan in one, simply looking thoughtful in another, and in the Osgiliath set talking with cast and crew.

You don't need to write your own captions for your article if you don't want to, since each photograph has an accompanying line. One of the Saruman images, for example, is labeled "Saruman (Christopher Lee) commands his legions of Uruk-hai to attack Helm's Deep in the central film of New Line's epic-adventure trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*." But Jackson's team wanted to keep secret the designs of the two most eagerly anticipated characters of the second film: Gollum and Treebeard. The EPK provides only tantalizing glimpses of them.

If you're a television journalist, you'll find the contents of the second *Towers* EPK disc more useful. A tiny segment of four shots leads to the general menu: Characters, Gollum, Helm's Deep, and Special Materials, each with its own submenu. Under "Characters," we can choose "The Fellowship" (figure 17), "Rohan Culture," "Gondor Culture," "Creatures," and "Evil Forces." Choosing that intriguing "Creatures" section, you are not surprised to find it again hurrying past the two main attractions. The Treebeard section is quite brief, with text focusing on Merry and Pippin's encounter with the Ent. There are two pictures of Treebeard himself: a fairly close one and a rather



Figure 17. The electronic press kit: Under the “Characters” category, there is the Fellowship, including images of and text about Aragorn.

unclear little one of him holding the two Hobbits. These two particular images are not downloadable, so you could describe Treebeard if you want, but you couldn’t illustrate his appearance.

Thwarted, you move to the “Gollum” section, which masterfully provides considerable information without allowing any of its photos or clips to show more than flashes of the new character. (*Fellowship’s* brief, darkly lit glimpses of Gollum essentially revealed only that there was such a character. He was extensively redesigned for the following installments.) One computer-generated image presents an unrendered Gollum as a shape made up of shiny bands. A text explains how the animation was based on Andy Serkis’s performance, and a clip of nearly two minutes shows Jackson watching Serkis performing for motion capture. Another clip offers part of Gollum’s first appearance in *Towers* and his fight with the Hobbits, but it is cut so quickly that the viewer can catch only an impression of the creature.

The “Evil Forces” section is fairly detailed. A twenty-second clip shows

Saruman and his battle preparations. Gríma appears in a flurry of images lasting twelve seconds—and, interestingly, containing two shots atop Orthanc in the scene where he finally stabs Saruman. This scene was originally planned to come late in *Towers*, but instead it was put off until *Return* and ultimately seen only in the extended DVD version. The inclusion of these shots illustrates a persistent problem. Marketing staff had to work on the publicity and merchandising while Jackson's team was still shaping the film. The EPK "Evil Forces" chapter ends with brief synopses, and photos (mostly without clips) are provided for some of the more prominent Orcs and the Wildmen (the Easterling troops seen by Frodo, Sam, and Gollum marching through the Black Gate into Morder).

The final section, "Special Materials," offers the original theatrical trailer, from which most of the clips on the EPK are derived, as well as logos of the film's title, two maps of Middle-earth, the two standard posters, a text on Howard Shore's sound track with photographs, and production notes, all downloadable. When you have taken what you need and exited the EPK, you come to a page of contact information for the heads of New Line's various marketing offices.

Reporters were not limited to the thirty illustrations on this pair of discs. New Line also had an Internet press site where production photographs could be downloaded. For *Towers*, a separate disc 3 was circulated, containing information on special effects. Similarly, the main two-disc EPK for *Return* was supplemented by an extra single disc of additional photographs, and as the Oscar race geared up, a series of EPKs of photos were issued for Sean Astin and other possible nominees.

For a journalist working in the world of infotainment, the EPK is a godsend. You know only what the publicists want you to know, but you know enough to appear well-informed. You can cover the film as if it were news, illustrating your piece with images and footage, all the while hitting the notes that the marketers want hit. Like brand partnerships and making-of documentaries, the EPK demonstrates the full range of control that a modern film enterprise can exercise over the image of its product. And like other publicity artifacts, the EPK itself has value. Wait a few years, and sell your *Towers* kit to an avid collector prowling eBay.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

EPKs go out far and wide, and reporters for small media outlets must rely mostly on them and the Internet. Writers working for national media out-

lets, as well as for major-market newspapers and television stations, get a more select introduction to the film. They are invited on press junkets.

A junket brings the reporter to a central site—the studio, a location, a rented hotel meeting room in a city where a premiere is occurring—for intense but orchestrated exposure to the film and its stars. The company provides transportation, lodging, and a per diem (in the \$150 to \$200 range). Junketers receive goodie bags, known cynically as swag bags, full of licensed products, some promotional items for the film, and perhaps a costly gift or two.²³ The reporters get brief access to the stars and key behind-the-camera talent, and in some cases they visit the set. Such junkets have been widely criticized as pressuring reporters and reviewers to create favorable stories so that they will be invited on future junkets.

Such press events have been going on for decades. *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert recalls one lavish junket when Warner Bros./Seven Arts flew a large number of reporters to the Bahamas for a week, showing off five of its main 1969 releases, including *The Wild Bunch*. Ebert was also among a group of journalists who visited the set of Blake Edwards's *Star!* (1968). Yet in the 1960s, junkets were rare. It was cheaper for studios to fly stars and directors to the main cities for interviews with local reporters. In Chicago, Ebert was able to have fairly lengthy interviews with such figures as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Otto Preminger. Usually when journalists did the traveling, they were not in groups but did one-on-one interviews with stars or visited sets on their own, as Ebert did for films like *Camelot* (1967) and *Ryan's Daughter* (1970).

The situation changed in the 1980s with the burgeoning of infotainment coverage on television. As Ebert points out, local news is often among the highest-rated programming for a station: "Local TV stations, especially in mid-sized markets, love to be able to say, 'Our Joe Blow or Jane Doe was in L.A. last week and talked to Tom Cruise about his new movie.'" Brief access with the reporter and star facing each other in director's chairs and with a poster behind the star could yield a three-minute segment or, as Ebert says, "Maybe it would be a series, you know, 'Our chat with Tom Cruise continues tomorrow.'" With so much publicity available outside the biggest cities, studios started bringing the press to the stars.

Junkets are costly, but the advantages are considerable. The event attracts reporters who write for influential publications all over the world. (Distributors in some countries pay the expenses for a journalist or two to attend.) Apart from content, the agreement with the studio typically controls how

the result can be published or broadcast. As Ebert describes it, “When can it run, where can it run, how can it run, how long can it run.”

Above all, the junket situation allows the studio’s publicists to guide the interview process. Reporters may agree in advance to avoid certain topics. Hints that an actor may be gay or references to arrests or marital discord can get an interviewer ejected and banned from future junkets. In June 2005, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie appeared at two thirty-minute press conferences for *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. Rumors of a romance between the two that had damaged Pitt’s marriage led lawyers to warn the roughly one hundred international journalists present that if they asked any personal questions, the event would terminate immediately. When publicists demanded that the published stories “not be used in a manner that is disparaging, demeaning and derogatory,”²⁴ reporters complained. Still, information about new films and their stars is the coin of infotainment, and news media have a vested interest in remaining in the favor of movie companies.

The mechanics of most junket interviews are standardized. A star or a small number of stars will sit in a hotel room, a film location, or a set throughout one day, perhaps joined by the director or other key crew members. Batches of print and radio journalists come in and spend perhaps fifteen minutes asking questions in the manner of a news conference. As soon as one group leaves, another takes its place. A second day is devoted to TV reporters, who receive one-on-one face time. This privilege is balanced by the brief exposure—around five minutes, ordinarily—that the reporter has. The cameras filming these interviews are run by the studio, which may request retakes or edit the results. Tapes or discs are then given to the reporter.²⁵

Anyone who followed media coverage of the *Rings* saw the same photos and clips over and over and heard familiar answers to familiar questions. We might think that a studio publicity department would want more variety, to keep spectators interested while following such coverage. The studio’s goal, however, is to link each main character, each major plot line, and other important components of the film to one or two simple concepts that will “brand” the film and help it float above the clutter of competing publicity. Diversity of coverage matters less than keeping journalists on topic.

Such repetition happens in most press junkets, since the reporters have so little time with the stars and have probably not done much research concerning the film. The bane of most interviewees is the most frequently asked question. In 2005, Leonardo DiCaprio, asked about such questions, responded, “The one that comes to my mind is: ‘What do you have in com-

mon with Howard Hughes?’ I just got off this huge press junket for ‘The Aviator,’ so I got asked that 50 times a day.”²⁶ Publicist Ernie Malik recalls how he triggered a question while working on *The Alamo*:

When they had the junket at San Antonio, I had put in my production notes that Jason Patric, who played Jim Bowie, had drunk a shot of Tabasco sauce every time he had to hack—because Bowie was dying of consumption or whatever it was, and so he felt the way to get that hacking to an extent that looked really painful to the character was to drink straight Tabasco sauce. Well, I put that in the notes, and *every* journalist that came into that interview room with him asked him about that!

During the shooting of the first *Rings* installment, there had been press conferences in Wellington, and individual reporters were allowed to visit the set. The press junket to Cannes in May 2001 was the first time that the actors sat down for small-group interviews. New Line gave over the usual one day to print journalists and one to broadcasters. Art director Dan Hennah did not participate himself, but he was nearby, supervising the ongoing preparations for the party on the last night, and he describes the cycle of interviews as “relentless.” Costume designer Ngila Dickson was helping set up the party and provides a vivid description of the scene: “I watched those actors talk to people *all day long*. They sat at these tables, and the interviewers just revolved through the seats opposite them, and the same questions were being asked, and on it went, and I just thought, ‘You people are remarkable!’” Philippa Boyens, who had never taken part in a junket before, commented: “I didn’t realize what I was letting myself in for. I did 50 interviews a day, one after the other, each about five minutes long, where the journalists asked me almost exactly the same questions each time. I realized then that the film industry isn’t as glamorous as you think it’s going to be.”²⁷

The *Rings* cast soldiered through many other junkets and interviews. During the pickups for *Towers*, journalists from New Zealand, England, France, Sweden, Italy, Germany, Japan, the United States, and Australia spent five days on the set, interviewing the actors and talking with Jackson between takes.²⁸ Groups of stars flew from city to city for the main premieres, with a press junket at each stop. For *Fellowship* these included the world premiere in London on 10 December 2001; the North American premiere in New York, with the proceeds benefiting World Trade Center causes; Los Angeles for another benefit screening; and on to the New Zealand premiere in Wellington on 19 December. The success of the first film ramped up the attention paid

to the other two. On 30 November 2003, the members of the cast and crew of *Return* faced hundreds of reporters in Wellington on the eve of the world premiere (see plate 1). The day after the premiere they flew to Los Angeles and immediately faced another set of interviewers at a two-day junket at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills. One Internet reporter remarked, “The [interview] rooms were as small as they were for *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (my room was only five people—a delight for L.A. and even more so for a movie this large).” Groups of three exhausted people, including actors and other talent like Howard Shore, cycled through brief question sessions. Asked whether he was relieved or sad that *Rings* was over, a jetlagged Elijah Wood replied jokingly: “It doesn’t feel over because we have so much to go in terms of releasing the film and the promotion of it. In terms of relief, next year when we don’t have another junket to do and we don’t have to plaster on a fake smile and plow through this shit again . . . (laughs).”²⁹

Facing a new round of interviews each time one of the film’s three parts was released, the large cast and crew heard the most popular questions very frequently indeed. Ngila Dickson told me that hers was, “How many times did you have to design Gandalf’s hat?”—and warned me that she ups the number each time she is asked. Sure enough, months later when I opened the *Rings* special number of *Entertainment Weekly*, the article on Dickson quoted her as saying that she did twenty designs for the hat. Assuming the questioners meant start-over, from-the-ground-up designs, one has to believe that a costume designer who had to do that would not have a job for long, but clearly it was the sort of thing that reporters thought fans wanted to hear. Indeed, reporters seem to be aware of this repetition. McKellen notes that during a junket, “Someone will come forward and say, ‘I know you get asked all sorts of questions. I’m not going to ask you the questions everybody else asks you, so I’m going to say, ‘What is the question that you’re most asked?’”

Filmgoers almost never see the regimen of junket interviews. A rare exception comes in Jackson’s filmed “Production Diaries” for *King Kong*, where the entry for 26 November 2004 shows unit publicist Melissa Booth talking to the camera as she ushers a small group of journalists onto an exterior set and improvises some brief question sessions with the stars between takes.³⁰ In the postproduction diaries on the film’s two-disc DVD, Jackson remarks on the *Kong* junkets, “I think the question I ended up talking about the most with the journalists was how I saw the original *King Kong* on TV when I was 9 years old. I told that story . . . often.” Another revealing scene is included in the *South Bank Show*, a British television documentary about McKellen that was being shot during *Return*’s pickups and premiere. One segment cuts

together shots of reporters questioning the actor during the 30 November 2003 junket in Wellington.

- FIRST INTERVIEWER: What's the most frequently asked question?
MCKELLEN, with no hesitation: "How does it feel coming to the end of this long journey of making the films?"
SECOND INTERVIEWER: What's it like, coming to the end of this long journey?
THIRD INTERVIEWER: Is there a real sense of achievement for you?³¹

This, of course, was a generic question that worked for any member of the cast or crew.

Reporters are quite aware of this convention. One who was able to talk with McKellen and Andy Serkis directly after the Los Angeles junket described earlier wrote: "Sir Ian, 64, and Mr. Serkis, 39, who portrays the creature Gollum in the film, had flown in from New Zealand just two days before. They were suffering from jet lag and from answering the question 'Is it bittersweet to be at the end of the trilogy?' 65 times in a row during publicity interviews."³² That particular question, however, worked only for *Return*. There were plenty of others. The Hobbit actors were repeatedly solicited to tell their tale of woe about getting up at 5:00 A.M. to have their false feet applied. McKellen was asked over and over whether it bothered him that he would be remembered more for playing Magneto and Gandalf than Richard III and other classical roles. In discussing Shelob in *Return*, Jackson repeatedly obliged reporters who inquired about his fear of spiders. The actors who played the Fellowship (apart from John Rhys-Davies) all got tattoos with the Elvish numeral nine. Once this secret slipped out, interviewers batted onto it.

The publicity campaign comes to resemble a game of "Jeopardy," with the EPKs (along with the film's website and periodic press releases) supplying the answers to the journalists, who are supposed to come up with the right questions, which will then elicit the correct answers from the actors. The reporter knows what the actor will say, but he or she can play the insider, with access to the stars, and elicit the same information worded differently. As one studio head of marketing remarked, "EPKs provide stars with their templates for the interview shows."³³ Indeed, the texts in the *Towers* EPK sections on the characters sometimes quote the actor, who gives the same sort of brief description of the character that he or she might later repeatedly provide to any number of journalists—if those journalists are savvy enough to ask the right questions.

Ebert points out that repetitiousness is almost inevitable in questioning stars

because the sessions are so short and because the nature of television is that you have to get *them* to say it. They get pretty stupid questions. For example, I may well know who Hilary Swank plays in *Million Dollar Baby*, but it doesn't work on television unless *she* says, "I play a woman who wants to be a boxer." You have to have *her* saying it. So you say, "Well, tell me about this character you play."

Similarly, when the actors repeat a small repertoire of responses, they're not just being lazy or unimaginative. Their task is to ensure that consistent information and ideas about the film come across in the vast numbers of articles and interviews that will be published, broadcast, or posted. That was especially true for *Rings*, with its numerous characters and complex plot. During the junket and talk-show interviews, stars have to concentrate on maintaining their enthusiasm and giving the impression that they are hearing these repetitive questions for the first time. It might be more exhausting for them to field unexpected questions and conjure up fresh answers. Viggo Mortensen occasionally dragged interviewers into less familiar territory. One fan-magazine reporter who failed to steer him back on track determinedly provided the answer that she had failed to elicit from the star—the by-then-famous anecdote about the "Fellowship" actors getting souvenir tattoos. Wrapping up the article, she wrote, "It's clear that he holds [his *Rings* experience] in high esteem, as something unique in the rubber-stamp machinery of Hollywood filmmaking (he even famously got a tattoo, along with his nine [*sic*] Fellowship castmates, to commemorate the event)."³⁴

Normally the performers and filmmakers who participate in junkets don't receive extra pay for them. Keith Stern, webmaster of McKellen.com, describes the stress of it. "They're very well cared for generally, as movie stars are, but that doesn't make up for the grind and gruel of traveling, packing, unpacking, hotel, driving, everything else that's involved. And then sitting there and answering the same questions over and over and over again. But it's part of their job." Most contracts stipulate that the actor will participate in the publicizing of a film—doing any number of junket interviews, traveling from one national premiere to another, and appearing on talk shows—unless he or she is actively working on another project at the time. There are ways of dodging the junket, but actors understand the long-term benefits. If the film succeeds partly because of their support, they can command a higher

salary in the future. As junkets expand in size and length, however, there are occasional rumblings from actors that some pressure should be brought to have studios pay them for all this additional time and effort.

Despite the grinding routine and the hundreds of thousands of dollars they cost, junkets remain an efficient marketing tool. They lead to widespread, largely enthusiastic coverage in most of the significant media outlets worldwide. They allow the local reporter to give the sense of having direct access to the star and thus speaking authoritatively. The public will usually get no sense of how short and orchestrated that access was or how many other reporters might have been present. This is partly because journalists have refined a writing approach that disguises the nature of their reporting. All of them clearly have a stake in giving the impression that they have exclusive news. Writers have become adept at implying that during a set tour they were alone or had only a photographer in tow. The typical article starts with an anecdote about an actor's or director's behavior during or between shots, revealing something characteristic about the production and ideally emphasizing some visual detail to make it clear that the reporter was really there. Then the writer fills in the backstory, explaining the origins of the project and how key personnel overcame difficulties in script preparation, casting, or location shooting. In an article on *Superman Returns* for *Newsweek*, the reporter begins by describing a scene in which the villains beat up Superman and push him over a cliff:

Playing this scene just once would be rough. [Brandon] Routh will be beaten and tormented for hours. "He's very heroic normally," says director Bryan Singer, sipping an iced vanilla latte. "You just happened to catch him on a bad day."

By the time "Superman Returns" lands in theaters next summer, it will have taken Warner Bros. 11 torturous years to get the movie off the ground. At one point in the mid-1990s, Tim Burton was going to direct Nicolas Cage as the man in tights.³⁵

This article, published more than eight months before the film's release, ends with another anecdote from the filming, a chat with the costume designer about the controversy over the tightness of Superman's trunks. If an article is to be published shortly before the film's release, however, the writer may mention having "caught up" with the filmmakers during postproduction. The fact that many other journalists have been granted access, usually at the same

time, is artfully omitted, as is the possibility that the catching up was done via a phone call.

Once in a while, a reporter will be charmingly straightforward about the limited access. Melissa J. Perenson, of *Sci Fi*, wrote, "It's early Friday evening, usually a key social hour for a Hollywood 20-something. But [Elijah] Wood isn't enjoying an evening out—at least not just yet. For now, he's on the phone with this journalist, evangelizing about *Return of the King*." A representative of the *Rings* fan club magazine attended a junket for *Fellowship* at the Waldorf Astoria in December 2001 and began his report, "What fan wouldn't want to attend a Hollywood press junket? Imagine a whole day of major stars and filmmakers being trotted out one by one to answer whatever questions you can throw at them." The author explains how junkets work and describes the stars and other talent entering and leaving the room for twenty-minute sessions of questions.³⁶ The result is a livelier piece than more discreet infotainment reportage.

Junkets aim at getting as many articles and reviews and clips into the popular media as possible. Their opposite is the exclusive article, granted to a major outlet like *USA Today*. In such cases the reporter is allowed on the set during filmmaking under carefully controlled circumstances. Claire Raskind and Melissa Booth escorted and supervised reporters and photographers during their on-set visits. In such cases, a clear arrangement is made, with the studio agreeing not to allow other reporters the same kind of access and the publication agreeing to run the story at the time designated by the studio. For *Fellowship*, New Line wanted early images that reached the public to show the Hobbits and Gandalf in the bucolic Shire. So in January 2000, *Vanity Fair* came onto the Matamata set of Hobbiton, when those scenes were being shot. "The Hobbits Are Coming" appeared in the October issue, presumably timed to start a slow build of publicity up to the release of *Fellowship*, still fourteen months off. The *Vanity Fair* coverage happened before the Cannes preview of 2001, though, when few journalists had any idea of just how important this film would be. The four-page article was buried in the back of the magazine and wasn't mentioned on the cover.

Today's wealth of publicity options holds out the possibility that a tiny film like *The Blair Witch Project* can become as widely known as *Titanic*, the current benchmark for a must-see movie. Brand swapping, infotainment, and other new means allow a studio to construct a strong image of the experience that the film will provide. A franchise amplifies the effect, since once the first film becomes successful, infotainment providers will be all the more

eager to cover the subsequent entries in the series. The studio can also promise to extend that experience through merchandising, making-ofs, and other supplementary promotion. *Rings* took advantage of all the promotional resources that had been developing throughout the 1990s.

While publicity was being arranged in the real world, New Line's interactive department was designing an Internet campaign. Huge numbers of Tolkien fans were on the Web already, and they were eager to help spread the word. But not all of them were going to stick to studio press releases or stay on message. They had their own ideas of what was interesting about this movie, and some of those ideas lay well outside the realm of infotainment.

Click to View Trailer

When you buy a commercial on television, you lease the consumer for 30 seconds. But if you can get a consumer engaged online, you can own that viewer for 30 minutes.

JIM MOLOSHOK
Yahoo!

STUDIO MARKETING RELIES ON CONTROL over publicity, but control is hard to maintain. With the rise of infotainment, the more people know about the inner workings of show business and the private lives of its celebrities, the more they want to know. The introduction of the Internet provided a new forum for the circulation of fact, rumor, and opinion. For many spectators shopping for a movie to see, a casual glance over some general film sites might provide enough information. For the devoted fan of a specific star or director or series, there is no such thing as enough. Harry Knowles, founder of the most successful fan-originated movie site, Ain't It Cool News (AICN), has said, "When I consulted with Lucasfilm on StarWars.com, they asked me, 'What is it that fans really want?' And I said, 'Fans want to know if you're using Phillips head or flat-head screws on your sets, don't you understand!? Fandom wants to know *everything*. There *isn't* enough information you can give them.'"

Studios might be willing to reveal what sorts of screws they use in their sets, but they're not about to tell fans everything. Inevitably their need to keep many things confidential clashes with the fans' desire to know every last detail, and the Internet has become the main arena for this struggle.

Online information can come from official and sanctioned websites supervised by the studios or from the unofficial sites run by fans. Fan webmasters

and their collaborators are willing to pour astonishing amounts of their own time and money into sites that publicize the products of big Hollywood studios—even in the face of secrecy or downright opposition from the studios themselves. For years Hollywood had ignored the tremendous value of this free publicity, but during the period of *Rings*' production and release, it began to understand the potential of online fandom. Such enthusiasm and labor are, however, difficult to control. Fans may provide extensive publicity, but they can also ferret out secrets and post them in cyberspace. Letting the fans find out enough to keep them intrigued without allowing them to divulge too much is a balancing act that Hollywood has still not fully mastered. Peter Jackson's clever handling of the problem provides a model that will surely be taken up by others.

HOLLYWOOD DISCOVERS THE INTERNET

There's just an amazing timing issue, that the 'net came into general, everyday use for most people in the western world at the same time as this film was announced.

ERICA CHALLIS

"Tehanu," TheOneRing.net

Internet movie marketing is sometimes assumed to have begun with the official website for *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), but many movies had sites before that. New Line's senior vice president of worldwide interactive marketing, Gordon Paddison, was a pioneer in this regard. In 1995, Paddison built an official site for *Mortal Kombat*, generating 100,000 hits in an era when few fans were on the Internet.¹ In March 1998, about three months before the *Blair Witch* site appeared, Paddison's team launched The Lost in Space Galaxy. Apart from information on the film *Lost in Space* and the original television series, the site offered games, downloadable wallpapers, an online shop, and other interactive components.²

Still, the *Blair Witch* site did differ from the typical official movie site in important ways. It went online extremely early (June 1998), promoting a film that did not even have a distributor until more than half a year later, when it screened at the Sundance Film Festival on 24 January 1999. The site proved that a microbudget independent film could be publicized online to spectacular effect, and far more cheaply than on television. It also demonstrated the power of initially targeting a niche market, in this case young

horror-film fans who were likely to use the Internet. The filmmakers cleverly presented the site's content as factual documents concerning a case of witchcraft and murder. Many Web surfers took the film to be a documentary. One person who caught on to the ruse helped perpetuate it by starting the first *Blair Witch* fan site in December 1998. Responding to fan interest, the filmmakers added new information to the official site weekly.³ The *Blair Witch* campaign was too oddball for all its tactics to be completely replicated, but it demonstrated to Hollywood how original thinking could make websites more effective. The film, with an estimated budget of \$35,000, grossed \$204 million worldwide.

At the same time, New Line was also proving the power of the Internet. In June 1999, a month before *Blair Witch* was released, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* reached the theaters. By the week before the film's opening, its modest site was receiving more than a million page views a day. In 2000, New Line's poorly reviewed *Final Destination* was a hit largely based on Paddison's website.⁴ Meanwhile, New Line was initiating its campaign for *Rings*. In this case, however, there were many Tolkien fans who already had websites and thousands more who were willing to work for those sites or build their own once they became fans of the film. A huge unofficial campaign grew up in parallel with the official one.

SPY VS. SPY

Blair Witch emerged from nowhere and had to create attention with an online gimmick. *Rings* did not. Publicist Melissa Booth says with a laugh, "Unlike some productions, where you're trying to encourage people to come to the set and have a look and cover it, our main job was to *not* be in the press every day. Because otherwise, with the Internet, as soon as you've got something in a local newspaper, you've got it all over the world."

The key to whetting fans' appetites was limiting access, but fans proved hard to manage. They were prepared to spend time and money to get even a glimpse of inaccessible material. On 30 September 2002, for example, the first full-length trailer for *Towers* was made available for twenty-four hours exclusively on AOL, before being placed on the official site, lordoftherings.net, on 1 October. Several show business and Tolkien-fan websites with access to AOL quickly uploaded the trailer themselves, so non-AOL users had access to copies during most of that twenty-four-hour period. Because these copies could take an hour to download on a dial-up connection, fans had to go to some trou-

ble to view those fuzzy, jerky images. Nonetheless, as remarks on those websites clearly indicate, fans reveled in getting something highly desirable ahead of its official date of availability. The same trailer premiered theatrically on 4 October, an event of considerably less note to site managers and fans, since trailers are viewed far more often online than in movie theaters—and, besides, anyone can go to a movie theater.

Sites were also keen to get graphics of unreleased publicity materials and licensed products. On 13 September 2002, for example, Lights Out Entertainment posted two new “screen shots” from the menu of the extended DVD version of *Fellowship* well before its November release.⁵ Around 17 September 2002, TheOneRing.net displayed four hitherto unseen *Towers* graphics for popcorn bags (figure 18).⁶ In January 2003, waroftherring.net posted images from the tie-in calendar for *Return*, several months before the calendar itself became available.⁷ Descriptions of trailers and DVD footage were posted as well. Knowles apparently was given a copy of the *Towers* trailer about a week before it appeared in theaters, for he described it shot by shot, complete with dialogue, on Ain’t It Cool News.⁸ On 12 September 2002, Tolkien Online summarized the additions to the extended-edition *Fellowship* DVD from a script. The same site ran a sketchy account of the first full *Towers* trailer on 24 September 2002, a week before its Internet release.

Authors of such articles are coy about their sources. Knowles attributes his access to the preview footage to Gandalf, while the Tolkien Online folks write: “We sent a flock of Crebain from Pasadena to see what news they could find of the upcoming trailer, and they reported back, ‘The trailer is AWESOME, the fans have much to look forward to next week.’” (Crebain are the birdspies that fly over the Fellowship.) Fans who had not seen the trailer itself but only read this description of it reacted with comments that must have been gratifying to those publicizing the film: “Oh GOD! I can hardly wait!!!! * jumps up and down * // OMG!!!! // Can’t Wait!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! // What a Teeeeaserrrr!!! // woood!!!!”⁹

Initially the filmmakers sought to conceal as much as they could from snoopy fans. On 30 August 1998, Jackson went on Ain’t It Cool News to answer fans’ questions. He said good-naturedly in his introduction, “After this brief warm shower together, Harry and I return to our different sides of the line—us trying to maintain secrecy . . . and he using his low-life methods to publish it all on the net.” On 31 December, he returned for a second round of questions. One fan asked him to reveal where some of the location shooting would take place. Jackson responded, “We have a few key locations nailed down. I’m not going to be specific because I don’t want to see photographs



Figure 18. Anything might count as news on fan sites, including popcorn-bag designs. (Courtesy TheOneRing.net.)

appearing on the net.”¹⁰ Jackson told me that his main use of the Internet was to monitor spy material:

The only real, serious reason, I guess, that we were reading it, beyond just being curious and having amusement from what people were perceiving we were doing, was in case there were any leaks or security issues that we needed to know about, so suddenly if something showed up on the Internet that shouldn't have done, then we had to know about it, because for all we know, we may have had an employee that was stealing stuff. I mean, we actually didn't have that at all. We had one person that stole some tapes at one stage, with some footage. But you're sort of monitoring it just to make sure that there's nothing going on out there that you need to know about in terms of material leaking out.

Jackson refers here to an incident that occurred in 2000 during principal photography, when a stuntman pleaded guilty to stealing the tapes and trying to sell copies over the Internet.¹¹

Rumors and hints fed fans' appetites, but the ultimate dream was to leave the cyberworld and hit the set. From the start of the production, fan sites competed to feed that desire by posting scoops or “spy reports” that helped their readers vicariously experience the filmmaking process. These sites recruited spies living in New Zealand, and a long-running tussle between webmasters and New Line began. The studio was happy to provide news to a limited number of popular, trusted sites, but it wanted to be the origin of all information about the filmmaking. Throughout the shoot, security guards and fences surrounded areas where filming occurred. Scenes for *Rings* were shot on roughly 145 different locations, so savvy spies could track down a unit filming in local parks and valleys. Security was a particular problem in the quarry in Lower Hutt where the filmmakers built full-size sections of the Helm's Deep and Minas Tirith sets. Fans trained cameras with long lenses across the valley to capture images probably made more intriguing because of their fuzziness. The cliffs and tangled fields above the quarry became hiding grounds for spies trying to photograph a corner of a set or costumed extras smoking between takes.¹²

Jackson and his team—most of them Internet users themselves—would come to be slightly less worried about curious fans as the project progressed, and they began cooperating in a limited way with two of the most powerful of the “spy” sites. They would drag New Line with them. Ultimately, the unofficial Internet campaign for *Rings* taught Hollywood much about how fans could promote a blockbuster.

THE BULL'S-EYE: OFFICIAL AND SORT OF OFFICIAL SITES

At one point when the trilogy was still being released, a search on the string “Lord of the Rings” resulted in about eleven million hits. A significant proportion of those pages represented companies selling *Rings*-related merchandise and others focused on the novel, but there were also many sites consistently devoting much or all of their content to the film itself. Although some of these sites were doing things of which New Line disapproved, all of them were publicizing *Rings*.

Imagine this vast campaign, official and unofficial, as an archery target. The few sites that had New Line’s complete or nearly complete approval would be in the bull’s-eye. The first ring—a very narrow one indeed—we can call the “quasi-sanctioned” sites. These obtained limited access to the production through the filmmakers’ cooperation but without any initial agreement from New Line. Moving to the next ring, we encounter sites that gathered news from a variety of sources but had no direct access to the filmmakers. The more important ones did have the privilege of being on New Line’s list to receive press releases and other publicity material. Such sites are sometimes called “multipliers,” because other sites link to them or repost the news items, thus carrying New Line’s information to an ever-expanding audience. Such sites also usually depend on volunteers around the globe to send in news, gossip, scans of magazine articles, and so on. Farther out on the target, we find the fan sites that center not on news but on the webmaster’s personal interests. Often they concentrate on photographs, typically of one or more actors. Finally, in the margins outside the target’s rings lie fan-generated parodies, fiction, and art.

New Line created or endorsed only four websites to publicize *Rings*.¹³ Most centrally, of course, there was (and is) the company’s own *Rings* site. Its home page included a link to the website of the licensed Lord of the Rings Fan Club.¹⁴ New Line bolstered its official site by arranging for a general entertainment website, E! Online, to run a series of on-set reports. The studio did not plan to exploit personal cast or crew websites—such sites were in their infancy at the time. Nonetheless, Ian McKellen’s site quickly became one of the main sources for fans wanting behind-the-scenes *Rings* news.

New Line’s Official Site

New Line’s publicity department began with one signal advantage: many fans desperately wanted to love the films. (The same phenomenon can be observed in other fandoms, such as those for the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* series.) One

such fan, Scott Edelman, the editor of fan magazine *Sci Fi*, articulated this desire clearly and succinctly in an editorial. Edelman identifies himself as an ex-hippie who loves Tolkien's novel. He recalls:

So when I first heard that director Peter Jackson was going to tackle filming the trilogy, I grew fearful. I had long since given up the dream. Perhaps, I told myself, turning those particular words into cinematic reality was unfeasible. Not every story is filmable. Maybe we should just be glad that the books had been written in the first place, and forget about trying to do the impossible.

Even though I had enjoyed Jackson's earlier films, I was confident that when *The Fellowship of the Ring* appeared on the screen, it would cause me to weep. I can't remember when I was so nervous attending a screening. I guess that was because my lifelong love of Tolkien had left me feeling invested in the critical success of the film in a way that just wasn't present for the average genre film.

As it turned out, the film indeed brought me to tears, though not for the reasons I feared. At my first glimpse of The Shire, I was able to relax. And with each passing instant, I nodded and thought, "Yes, yes, that's it, he's nailed it." Jackson's obvious love for Tolkien filled the screen, and I was transported to many places—not only back to Hobbiton, but back to my childhood dreams as well.¹⁵

As this passage suggests, however, many fans were also extremely skeptical about the movie. The studio and filmmakers tried to reassure these people via the Internet. Like the film itself, the Internet campaign had to both appeal to the built-in fan base and create a new, larger audience. Given that more than three years passed between New Line's acquisition of the project and the premiere of *Fellowship*, the wooing of these two publics was lengthy and convoluted. The studio started by concentrating on the existing fans.

New Line established the Lord of the Rings website (www.lordoftherings.net) quite early, in May 1999.¹⁶ Here the producers and others with financial ties to the films released news tidbits at brief intervals, with the occasional large revelation. Such a tactic aimed to maintain fan interest during the long gaps between the interlarded releases of the films and DVDs and to whip up enthusiasm before each release. Many webmasters cooperated enthusiastically, and their sites linked to lordoftherings.net. *Variety* wrote of it, "There are global armies of devotees who view the Tolkien epic not as a corporate asset but as holy writ, and Paddison straddles the line between their needs and the demands of AOL Time Warner's global marketing machine."¹⁷

Among other things, the Internet made it possible for digital publicity items

to be given away on a mass scale at minimal expense. As Paddison said, “We go where the fans are and give them stuff.”¹⁸ The film’s website featured downloadable screen savers, wallpapers, interviews, brief behind-the-scenes clips, and trailers. On 7 April 2001, the first theatrical trailer for *Rings* was made available exclusively on the site. It set a record, with about 1.7 million downloads in the first twenty-four hours and 6.6 million in the first week. (For a comparison, the trailer for *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* was downloaded a million times on its first day.)¹⁹ The website was covered widely in print, broadcast, and online media, generating additional free publicity.²⁰

Since New Line is owned by Time Warner, Paddison could easily place advertisements, links, short informational texts, and the like on AOL itself (including a link to AOL’s online ticket agency, Moviefone), Netscape, and AOL’s instant-messaging service, ICQ. New Line could run travel sweepstakes on these sites, with trips to New Zealand as the top prizes, as well as smaller contests giving away licensed merchandise. The AOL keyword “Lord of the Rings” was included in much print advertising, drawing more people onto the Internet. In many cases, the much-vaunted synergy that was supposed to develop among the components of large media conglomerates in the 1990s didn’t meet expectations, but Paddison managed to make alliances within AOL Time Warner work for *Rings*.

The official site proved inexpensive, too. Although New Line spent only 2 percent of its marketing budget on its web campaign, exit polls after *Fellowship*’s release revealed that more than half of the spectators had gained some information about the film from the Internet. As Paddison pointed out, the Internet’s efficiency as a marketing tool comes from the fact that it is the cyberworld equivalent of word of mouth (word of keystroke, perhaps). Like Jim Moloshok of Yahoo!, Paddison knew that the Internet can give potential moviegoers a longer exposure to publicity, at a fraction of the cost of TV ads. New Line’s *Rings* site has been highly influential, and it literally became a textbook example when Paddison contributed a 54-page case study of the trilogy’s marketing campaign to the second edition of *Internet Marketing*.²¹

Later in the official campaign, lordoftherings.net sought to lure in those who had not read Tolkien’s novel. As Paddison said, “People click down into the site, and before they know it, they turn geek.”²²

E! Online and the Force of Hobbit

While lordoftherings.net concentrated on wooing existing fans, New Line sought a partner to help make the film appeal to newcomers. During the summer of 1999, as the start of principal photography approached, Paddison

arranged a deal with E! Online, which had an editorial partnership with AOL. (This deal was consummated before AOL merged with Time Warner.) Apart from the connection with AOL, E! Online's audience offered what the studio considered desirable demographics. On the basis of New Line's early market research, female filmgoers would constitute, as Paddison put it, "a secondary but key audience." The research had indicated, misleadingly as it turned out, that nearly 75 percent of Tolkien fans were males in their early teens to early thirties, went to comic-book conventions, participated in role-playing games, and liked *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *Rings* was not, New Line feared, a date movie.²³ E! Online's audience was 61 percent female, 63 percent of whom were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four and went to the movies monthly.²⁴

E! Online was commissioned to create a series, "Force of Hobbit: On Location," that would appeal to people who had never read Tolkien. Scott Robson, executive editor for the website, contrasted the series with what the official site was posting: "It's a different kind of content, for people who might not know the difference between Frodo and Sam Gamgee."²⁵ An agency in Auckland hired John Forde, a 1999 graduate in film and media studies from the University of Otago.²⁶ According to Melissa Booth, Forde was given monthly access to some aspect of the filmmaking. The reports were approved by New Line and Jackson before being uploaded.

Forde got along well with the cast and crew, which shows through in the enthusiastic tone of the reports. Like many visitors, he was invited to be an extra, as a Gondorean soldier, an experience that he described to envious fans. Forde's series began appearing on 12 January 2000, a few months after the beginning of principal photography, and it ended on 1 December 2001, with *Fellowship's* London premiere.²⁷ Traffic on E! Online spiked for a few days after each posting. Overall, there were on average 700,000 page views per month. During the period immediately preceding the release of Film 1, *Rings* was generating 34 percent of all traffic on E! Online.²⁸

The Lord of the Rings Fan Club

We may think of a fan club as expressing the spontaneous upsurge of devotees' idolatry, but more often than not the film industry creates fan clubs. On 17 October 2001, two months before the release of *Fellowship*, Decipher Games announced the formation of the Lord of the Rings Fan Club. Decipher was licensed by New Line to run this club and to publish *The Lord of the Rings Fan Club Official Movie Magazine*. (A prominent games firm founded in 1983, Decipher also produced the licensed trading-card game and role-playing game

based on *Rings*.) Dan Madsen, who had started a fan club for *Star Trek* in 1979 and subsequently founded a business to run the official *Star Wars* fan club, was Decipher's partner in obtaining the license. He subsequently managed the club and conducted many of the interviews for the magazine.

The Fan Club offered some commonplace benefits, including a "collector" lithograph, the bimonthly magazine, and a 10 percent discount on merchandise.²⁹ In addition, it hit upon a brilliant gimmick. Charter members would have their names listed after the credits on the DVD versions. (The extended-version DVDs had not then been announced, but ultimately the names appeared there rather than on the theatrical versions.) The densely packed list runs for twenty minutes. Elijah Wood was the first member to sign up, and other actors' and crew members' names appear as well. This unprecedented acknowledgment of the fans, absorbing them into the most authoritative version of the film they adored, represents the sort of strategic inclusion that its makers—many of them possessed by the fan spirit themselves—offered to *Rings*' admirers.

The same sort of inclusion was offered online. As a licensee of New Line, the Fan Club was able to run a sanctioned website, which set up a community area in which fans could interact. Through it, individuals or small groups spontaneously began forming local branches of the Fan Club that could meet in person. In Düsseldorf, Kathryn Buchhorn (Skybly) organized such a branch, creating another website, www.of-the-shire.net, with a chat room, reports on local Fan Club get-togethers, and a "Middle-earth Scrapbook" that introduced members to each other through photographs and biographical sketches. By early 2002, the Düsseldorf group included 230 members, big enough to warrant an article in the Fan Club magazine, which also launched a regular column called "Fan Focus." Buchhorn voiced a common view among fans, online and off: "This is what I still love most about this place—we are a really diverse group, with people from all walks of life, and yet there is a real family feeling about the Fan Club."³⁰ The "family" notion crops up again and again in this club and in some of the unofficial fan sites. In the case of the Fan Club, the metaphor was literalized more than once. Madsen corresponded with a woman on the website, met her in person at one of the Oscar parties put on by TheOneRing.net, and eventually married her.

The magazine was built around interviews, notably an update with Peter Jackson in nearly every issue. The editors captured some of the sense of participation associated with the Internet by inviting readers to submit questions and by including some of those questions in every major interview. Club member Mary Kiesling wrote to praise an interview with Howard Shore:

“Also, he answered the question I submitted! I’m over the moon!”³¹ The magazine contained numerous regular features, including letters to the editor (MailBaggins), announcements of new merchandise, and a section of minor news items. Most issues also included one surprisingly detailed article profiling a manufacturer of licensed merchandise, from the huge video game company Electronic Arts to Star Toys, a small German company creating resin and vinyl model kits. The series “Unsung Heroes” profiled lesser-known members of the crew, such as the greensmaster and a helicopter pilot. The “Artifacts” series dealt with the craftspeople responsible for the props and costumes. Despite its cumbersome title, *The Lord of the Rings Fan Club Official Movie Magazine* offered a serious and thorough survey of the entire franchise. In 2004, it won an award for excellence in layout and design.³²

McKellen.com

If the official film site was aimed at existing fans and E! Online’s series attracted neophytes, the site that drew people from both groups came from one of the most respected British stage actors of the day and the third oldest of the major cast members. Christopher Lee remarked, “In the film we were both several thousand years old, but in the real world he is some twenty years younger than me, which is young enough to have the habit of keeping a diary in a laptop.”³³ (McKellen was sixty when he began work on *Rings*; Lee was seventy-eight.) The diary was added to McKellen.com, which had gone online on 1 September 1997—nearly two years before its owner was chosen to play Gandalf.

The site grew out of McKellen’s resistance to the idea of writing his memoirs. The introductory note calls it “my online autobiography.” The impetus to start it came in early 1997, when the actor was in Los Angeles to star in *Apt Pupil* (1998). During filming, he had enough spare time to act in *Gods and Monsters* (1998) and to perform his one-man stage show, *A Knight Out*. Not having a laptop to revise the latter, he contacted a computer-adept acquaintance, Keith Stern. Stern recalls, “He found out that I was doing these newfangled things called websites. I’d done one for myself and done one for Spinal Tap, the group and the movie.” Given that the proceeds from *A Knight Out* were going to charity, Stern donated his services to create a website for the show. “People came in from all over the country after seeing it on the Internet. Those were early days, early 1997, and anything you put on the Internet that was of any interest or quality at all would tend to get more than its fair share of attention.” Impressed, McKellen asked Stern to create a personal website for him.

Many of the features of the site have become fairly standard, but at the time there were no models. “Even the idea of separate photo galleries and the terminology of labeling them ‘galleries’ was original,” says Stern. “Maybe somebody else did it before, but not to my knowledge.” Even today, few sites devoted to an individual are so elaborate. From crates stored in McKellen’s basement, Stern rescued photographs, programs, and other memorabilia, creating an online archive of modern British theater history. By June 2005 the site contained more than a thousand pages, and many boxes of documents remain to be uploaded.

To keep the site fresh, Stern encouraged McKellen to keep a behind-the-scenes *Rings* diary and suggested he call it “The Grey Book” and later “The White Book.” The names derived from Tolkien’s original “Red Book of Westmarch” (the book containing *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* that Frodo gives Sam), adapted to Gandalf’s colors. The first entry in “The Grey Book” was posted on 20 August 1999, shortly after McKellen was cast in *Rings*. Stern couldn’t take a camera on set, but his posted snapshots showing McKellen and the other actors amid stunning New Zealand scenery impressed fans. The last entry of “The Grey Book,” on 14 December 2001, covered the London premiere of *Fellowship*. On 25 June 2002, “The White Book” began. It dealt with the pickup footage for Films 2 and 3 and ended on 12 November 2003, after McKellen had done his last dialogue dubbing.

When McKellen arrived in New Zealand in January 2000, he was the only one of the major cast members posting on a personal website.³⁴ The reaction of the other stars to Stern’s initial visit to Wellington suggests the novelty of actors’ sites at the time. “It all started about the day I arrived on set in May of 2000. I mean, every one of the actors wanted a website, and as soon as they found out that I was there—and they’d all seen Ian’s website—it was just a series of meeting after meeting with all the actors in their hotel rooms to do what I could to get their feet wet on the Internet.” Hectic shooting schedules prevented them from creating sites right away, but eventually Stern built websites for Andy Serkis and Sean Astin.

McKellen wrote the first on-set Grey-Book report (25 January 2000) in Matamata, where he had begun with the scenes in Hobbiton. His diary created an unintended rivalry with Forde’s “Force of Hobbit,” which contractually had exclusive rights to on-set coverage. By this point Forde had posted only one “Force of Hobbit” entry, which appeared on 12 January 2000 but covered a day of shooting in the Queenstown area one month earlier. Forde had the advantage of using official publicity photos, and he also talked with stars and key behind-the-camera people like Jackson and Richard Taylor. In

Forde's second report (1 February), Elijah Wood remarked excitedly, "This is the first interview I've had. I haven't been able, really, to talk about it, so this is cool now that I'm right into the project. I've been looking forward to this!"³⁵

McKellen, however, was already known to millions of fans as Gandalf (and as Magneto in *X-Men*). His website was well established and had been successful from the start. During the release of *Rings*, it fluctuated between 4 and 8 million hits a month, peaking at more than 25 million in December 2003.³⁶ Fans loved the site because McKellen made interaction with them an integral part of it. When the site was launched, it linked to McKellen's personal e-mail address, and on most days he would answer fifty to sixty messages. When he was cast as Magneto and Gandalf, the flow of inquiries soared. This mail was a revelation for the actor, who had not read the novel before he was cast and knew little of its immense fan base. Later he told an interviewer, "I learned very early on, because I've got a website, and people communicated with me, and they said, 'Look, get Gandalf right, or there'll be trouble!'"³⁷ By the end of 1999, the number of e-mails flowing in had risen to about two hundred (in a pre-spam era). According to Stern, "With some regret he asked me to take the link off. It seemed to me that I might somehow screen the e-mail coming in so I could pass the most interesting ones on to him. Geek that I am, I naturally thought a forum would be the best way to do it, and the idea of the 'E-Post' was born—'e-mail' being too American for my anglophile taste."

On 22 February 2000 (the month after McKellen arrived for principal photography), the "E-Post" section went online. Each major project had a separate E-Post, with the ones for *X-Men* and *Rings* commencing simultaneously.³⁸ The contact address given on the website leads, of course, to Stern, who winnows the fans' messages, but McKellen does personally answer each one that appears on the E-Post.³⁹ His replies occasionally shed light on such matters as changes from the book, as when one fan asked why Gandalf looks so messy and haggard in *Fellowship*. McKellen replied: "Gandalf the Grey is a wanderer and survives a number of long journeys by foot and horseback—he is rarely sitting out of harm's way in his pony-trap. So of course he gets dusty and dirty, without benefit of wayside washrooms."⁴⁰ Even now that the trilogy and DVDs have long since been released, the *Rings* E-Post is updated occasionally. McKellen has remarked, "With an autobiography, you finish it, stop writing, go on with your life, but this is always there. I imagine one day I'll be dying and say to the doctor: 'I just need to post this e-mail, to let the fans know I'm dying!'"⁴¹

The chatty, heavily illustrated diaries and the *Rings* E-Post elated fans even

more than the official and the E! Online series. Now they were getting access to the production, “talking” to one of the primary players. The news sections of many fan sites have immediately posted links to each new *Rings*-related addition to McKellen.com. After *Fellowship*’s success, the media promoted the website to a wider audience. *Entertainment Weekly* recommended that new fans eager for information about Tolkien turn to McKellen: “You’ve got to hand it to Gandalf for delivering the most *fun* site about the films this side of the Misty Mountains.”⁴²

Although New Line was not entirely happy with having a second on-set series appearing on the Internet, it did not discourage McKellen from posting *Rings* material. The studio tended, however, to take a conservative view of what information should be released, and McKellen was eager to give fans more than they were receiving on the other official sites. As Stern put it, “Our objective was to give people enough information so that they would have an understanding and a confidence that the material was being treated properly and that Ian had a proper respect and understanding of the material and fans.” The result was a constant process of negotiation, with Stern as the cautious member of the team. McKellen told me that Stern “found it *extremely* difficult to be taken seriously by New Line, in terms of having meetings or in terms of leeway with what he could or couldn’t do without their say-so. It was me who kept saying, ‘Oh, publish! Put it on and be damned!’”

Stern agrees that he was more cautious. “My approach was to basically make an agreement with New Line that we would let them see anything and comment on anything that we were getting ready to post. And in exchange for that courtesy, we would hope that they would only squelch what really needed to be squelched.” The system worked well. In practice, New Line did not always have time to check the proposed postings. Stern estimates that he sent about 75 percent of stories to the publicity department. In those cases he might say, “I’m getting ready to post something, and if I don’t hear from you by tomorrow or the day after, away it goes.” Occasionally New Line asked that the piece not be posted; usually, however, the studio approved or did not respond. The rest of the time Stern would simply post and tell the studio to check it online.

Confidentiality remained an issue, since McKellen tended to conform to Jackson’s view of what constituted spoilers—not New Line’s: “I kept a diary, ‘The Grey Book,’ and we showed that to New Line, and they took forever approving it. One of the major problems that they were concerned with was revealing the plot. We had to explain to them that the plot was well known [laughs]—particularly to people who would be accessing the website.” As Stern

says, “The thing about a confidentiality agreement, of course, is, how do you enforce it? What are you going to do, in the end? Big star, little star, what are they going to do, cut him out of the film?” With millions of fans on his side, McKellen could afford to be, as Booth affectionately terms him, “cheeky.”

On the few occasions when New Line requested that something be removed from McKellen.com, Stern complied. Deleted items are difficult to track down, of course, since they usually vanish quickly. I happened to check the site on 30 December 2003, and witnessed the beginning of what might be called “The Case of the Missing ADR Pages.” ADR, or automatic dialogue replacement, is the recording and postdubbing of vocal material. It was two weeks after *Return*’s release, and ten pages of McKellen’s ADR scripts had just been posted. These listed snippets of dialogue, breathing, and laughter that he had recorded in a Soho studio, including the scenes in Edoras where Pippin looks in the *palantír* and where Aragorn and Gandalf discuss whether Frodo is alive. New Line urgently demanded that the pages be taken down. Within twenty-four hours they were gone.

Stern and McKellen were never given a rationale, but both were disappointed. For Stern, “It was at a time where we wanted to kind of remind people a little bit about the great dialogue in the film, and particularly Gandalf’s great dialogue. I thought these ADR scripts were something that most people hadn’t seen before and would find quite interesting.” He hopes to re-post the pages: “I think they’re wonderful and historic, so I think it’s perfectly appropriate for us to post them again.”

Despite occasional problems like these, New Line learned from experience and changed its strategy. Stern saw an evolution in the firm’s attitude toward fans on the Internet: “It worked out just the way I hoped it would: that they would include the fan sites, support the fan sites, and be clever about the way they used the Internet. I realized the Internet would be very, very important to *Lord of the Rings*. I realized that the fans were on the Internet. I was glad that as time went on and things developed, that they at least seemed to understand that and pay attention to it.” As McKellen points out, the result was to “feed the *amazing* appetite that there was out there, for millions of people who were awaiting the films with a sort of concerned desperation that Peter Jackson and I thought was a wonderful thing. There were all these fans of the books who were nervous about the film being made but who were on the side of the film. In advance, why put those people off by not feeding them?”

Together, the officially created and the sanctioned sites soon fostered a sense that fans were glimpsing the making of the film through a virtual keyhole. The production process came across as small in relation to big Hollywood shoots,

as taking place in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, and as happening in a beautiful and remote locale uniquely suited to representing Middle-earth.

Still, as Knowles says, there is never enough information to satisfy fans. Webmasters set out to find out far more and give it to the world. Thus began a lengthy struggle between fans and studio, with concessions made and lessons gradually learned in how to deal with each other. In the wake of *Rings*, a slow shift in the attitude of Hollywood companies has become apparent as they realize the enormous value of the free publicity offered by responsible fan sites. The question is, how does one find the responsible sites and avoid having confidential information leak out into cyberspace?

THE RED BAND: QUASI-SANCTIONED SITES

At the end of the 1990s, fan sites devoted to films were just coming into their own. New Line's August 1998 announcement that it would produce *Rings* was timed perfectly to benefit from this vast new potential for free publicity—yet at that time, like other Hollywood studios, New Line was more suspicious of the motives of the fans than eager to exploit their enthusiasm. Jackson and his team, however, gave two websites privileged cooperation, even allowing their founders to breach—albeit briefly—the taboo against on-set visits by “spies.” New Line slowly worked out relationships with both sites and received a flood of publicity. Like McKellen.com, Ain't It Cool News and TheOneRing.net made readers feel they had direct access to the production. Here, though, it was through the eyes not of a star but of fans like themselves.

Ain't It Cool News

The Internet made webmaster Harry Knowles the most influential film devotee in the world. Knowles's parents were dealers in popular-culture collectibles, based in Austin, Texas. He built up his appreciation of film history by exploring their huge stores of accumulated material. At the age of twenty-four, Knowles was bedridden by an accident that severely injured his back, not knowing whether he would ever walk again. His link to the world became his Packard Bell Pentium 66, on which he began surfing the Internet. Rather than adopting a nom de net, as virtually all fans did, he contributed to chat rooms as Harry Knowles. He aspired to provide real show business news à la *Variety* or the *Hollywood Reporter*. His first scoop came when George Lucas previewed footage from *Star Wars: The Special Edition* at Texas A&M. After Knowles's online description was immediately reposted uncredited by various sites, he started his own.⁴³ “I had a collectibles section, which was a big

part of my life at the time, the discussion about film, and then just stories from my life.”

About two months after Ain't It Cool News (AICN) went online in February 1996, Jackson saw a photo of Knowles there, holding one of eight known surviving *King Kong* one-sheet posters from 1933. Knowles recalls, “Peter, being a *Kong*-phile of the ‘moderate’ level [laughs], contacted me, thinking, ‘Stupid Internet kid, I’ll be able to get this poster cheap.’ I told him I’d rather see my father dead. Then we just began the mutual *King Kong* and Forrest J. Ackerman appreciation society and started exchanging e-mails back and forth.” The two discussed Jackson’s current project, his first attempt to remake *King Kong*. Once it fell through, “Peter kind of disappeared for a while.”

In the meantime, AICN was gaining prominence. Ambulatory again, Knowles covered the first Quentin Tarantino Film Fest, held in Austin in September 1996. He discovered that Tarantino was faxing AICN’s coverage to people like Steven Spielberg. “That was the first clue I had that I was really making any headway beyond my own borders. I was so technically naïve at this point that I knew nothing about counters.” Spy-generated reviews from a test screening of *Titanic*, combined with Knowles’s prediction that it would become the highest-grossing film of all time (something few people then believed) brought him attention. “For better or worse, I earned my own weird species of celebrity in the process.”⁴⁴ Knowles says his Talk Back feature was the first of its type, though lists of reader feedback are now common on websites. To him, “It was one of the closest things you could find to pure democracy on the Internet.”⁴⁵

On 30 October 1997, AICN carried a brief story entitled “To Kong or to Hobbit, That Is the Question.” At that point *Rings* was well into preproduction at Miramax, but the trade press wasn’t covering the project. The next month, Knowles carried a brief, excited announcement that Jackson would make *Rings*.⁴⁶ The site pledged itself to support the project. In February 1998, thinking that Miramax was about to terminate the production (and, indeed, Bob Weinstein was by now worried about rising costs), Knowles ran a scathing editorial, “Lord of the Rings!!! Does Miramax Lack Nerve?”⁴⁷ He recalls, “I talked about how each of the films could bring in a billion dollars worldwide. I’m sitting there like some sort of Nostra-Harry, basically stating what wound up happening. The reason is that I just believed it was true.” When Miramax put *Rings* into turnaround that summer, AICN lambasted the firm. “It’s a project [for which] you could create frothing lines of hungry fans panting to be let in. . . . I bet I have a few bazillion fans of the books on my side with this one. Oh, well, I guess Miramax always has *Total Recall 2*.”⁴⁸

AICN deals with popular film culture as a whole rather than specifically with *Rings*. Still, it played a crucial role in blurring the borders between the officially sanctioned sites and those generated by fan enthusiasm. After New Line's 24 August announcement that it had acquired the *Rings* project, Jackson decided to contact fans using AICN. There was, after all, no official *Rings* website yet. He describes it as

something I did on my own, without New Line's input at all. I don't think I even asked permission to do it. What's interesting about Harry's site obviously is that you get all that feedback stuff where people put all their comments on. The feedback just went crazy, and it was mostly of a slightly hysterical nature. It was mostly fans of Tolkien, of the books, who were dubious about the films, who didn't know me. They didn't have a clue about what I was going to do. I hadn't done interviews about it, so nobody had heard from me about my thoughts about it. There was all this hysterical stuff going on where people were saying things like, "Oh, I bet a Hollywood film, there's no way they can have four Hobbits and no female Hobbits. I bet that Sam will become a girl Hobbit."

Jackson wrote to Knowles, proposing that they solicit inquiries from fans, from which Knowles would pick the twenty most interesting or common ones for the director's responses.

On 26 August AICN invited fans to send questions. Knowles boiled the results down, passed them to Jackson, and posted the answers on 30 August. Knowles thinks one reply especially connected with fans. Asked what moment in the novel he was most eager to capture, Jackson poetically described the Helm's Deep battle as if it would be a historical re-creation based on archaeological evidence. For Knowles, "You read and you just get cold chills over it."

The questions and answers were enormously popular: "It was the very first real press on *Lord of the Rings* where it was the director actually stating what he was going to do." Jackson did another session of twenty questions on AICN on 31 December.⁴⁹ This time the questions and answers were edited to form a conversational flow among Knowles, Jackson, and the fans. Questioners were delighted to have such access. Underdog prefaced his question by saying, "Peter, first I want to thank you for being human enough to get down in the mud and play with us." Some fans seemed already to feel themselves as allied with the director against the Hollywood system. One participant asked, "Do you have it in black and white on a contract that the editors aren't going to have a heyday with your film and make some butchered Bakshi-like piece of shit that has a total running time of a little under 3 hours?"

New Line had not been consulted about Jackson's cooperation with AICN and wanted it stopped. The director intended to do more question sessions over the following years and ended the second set with, "Let's do it again!" It was not to be. According to Osborne, doing the sessions "was strictly a Peter decision. Initially New Line was very much against that and squashed it, asked Peter not to do that, and so Peter said, 'Fine,' but over time, Peter won New Line over to the idea that we'd have Harry down here." Nearly two years after the second twenty questions, Knowles reported directly from the set during the last week of principal photography.

Despite the question sessions, considerable fan opposition to Jackson's project lingered. Knowles recalls an incident shortly after the first one. He was participating on a panel at the annual science fiction/fantasy event, Dragon Con (3–6 September 1998), and when he asked the audience of two thousand what they thought of Peter Jackson directing *Rings*, most of them booed. AICN would help to gradually convince the doubters.

The twenty-questions sessions gave AICN a higher profile and an aura of reliability. Several months later, it received an even bigger boost. Following the death of film critic Gene Siskel, of *Siskel & Ebert & the Movies*, Roger Ebert sought a replacement. For several months guest reviewers joined him on the program. Most were traditional media reviewers, such as Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times*. Knowles, who appeared on the 24 April and 31 October 1999 episodes, was the only Internet reviewer among the guests. Thus he was anointed "an official critic," as he puts it. To the public, he was not a mere fanboy anymore. Many fellow fans would claim that AICN gradually ceased to be a fan site at all, given the money Knowles eventually made with it and the many Hollywood connections he forged. Looked at another way, however, Knowles and some other webmasters invented the category of professional fan.

Knowles's relationship with New Line also improved. Paddison happened to be from Austin, and the two met during his visits to his parents. By late 2000 dealings were friendly enough that New Line gave Knowles permission for the on-set visit as *Rings*' shooting ended. He paid for his own flight, though Jackson insisted on covering his hotel. As far as New Line was concerned, he was there strictly as a guest, not a reporter.

Jackson was not naive enough to think that Knowles would post nothing during his visit, but he describes how even he was taken aback at the result:

I didn't get into it, because I didn't want to be overly protective. He was coming to visit, and he was sitting on the set, and he had his laptop, and he was

[taps fingertips on table as if typing] on set. I didn't really have a clue what he was actually, really doing, other than I thought he'd obviously write *something* about it. And then the first day he's here, I click onto his site that night, and there's this hugely long report on everything that we'd done that day. And so it was like, "Holy shit! He's doing everything," and the second day I was kind of aware now that everything I was saying and doing was now getting typed in, which was a little more intense than what I'd imagined. But we were in a pretty relaxed state, because it was the end of a long shoot.

New Line seems to have been less philosophical about the series of lengthy reports, which appeared from 22 to 27 December 2000. According to Knowles, "New Line was freaking that I was on-set writing the reports, but once I started, they couldn't stop me." Influential print publications complained about Knowles's preferential treatment, which may have driven home to studio officials how powerful AICN was. The series was allowed to continue.

Quint, a young film-buff friend of Knowles who contributed to AICN, was not so lucky. New Line gave him, too, permission to visit the set, this time in the spring of 2003 during the pickups for *Return*. He wrote nothing then, but when he returned in July, Paddison and New Line's unit publicist for *Rings*, Claire Raskind, agreed to Quint's doing some reports comparable to Knowles's earlier ones. He wrote up a description of Christopher Lee during the filming, which was posted on AICN.⁵⁰ According to Quint, "I got an e-mail from Mark Ordesky the next day, saying that I needed to stop writing and that I was invited as a guest, not as press." Paddison had received messages from magazines and newspapers like *USA Today*, which had held off publishing material on *Rings* at his request. They threatened to publish their stories immediately if Quint's series continued. Although Quint hadn't signed a nondisclosure agreement, he ended his series to avoid causing Jackson trouble. The other reports he wrote during that visit have never been posted. The incident illustrates how exclusive agreements with traditional news outlets can lead to a conflict with fan sites. But as such sites grow and drift into the mainstream, they can compete on a more even footing for scoops that they formerly had to get from spies.

As a sign of how things have changed between studios and fan sites, when Quint returned to visit the *King Kong* set in October 2004, Universal agreed to his posting reports on AICN, providing that studio publicists could vet them first. Knowles attributes this increased access partly to Jackson's new power as a director and partly to the fact that AICN is unusual among fan sites in sending a key staff member to spend a significant stretch of time on

the scene. And as Quint summed it up when describing Knowles's on-set reports, "[The fans] could tell he was being honest about it. That's what really showed through in those reports. It didn't sound like somebody who was bought and paid to go out there."

Like most fan sites, AICN was initially a money-losing endeavor, dependent on the unpaid labor of its owner and contributors. Despite receiving some early donations amounting to slightly over \$10,000, Knowles says, "I sunk ninety thousand of my own money into it, which was my book deal. I used my book deal to get me through the bottom falling out of the Internet. When you have a sinkhole like that that you're sinking money into, you realize, geez, I could've paid off my house." Quint started with AICN as a volunteer. Initially he received funds from Knowles to replace a computer and for travel to events like Comic-Con. After the collapse of the Internet bubble in 2000 and the decline of advertising income, he went back to covering his own expenses.

At that time, Knowles was working through an advertising agency that paid him 30 percent of revenues from ads on AICN. He decided to try selling ads directly, approaching Sony and New Line. Paddison accepted a four-year deal for a banner ad on the site's main page at considerably below standard rates. (Knowles is quick to specify that the deal had no effect on how his writers discuss New Line films—as evidenced by an adverse review of *Blade III* in late 2004.) In 2005, New Line renewed its deal, and several other long-term advertisers came on board. As Quint points out, New Line advertises on several major film-fan sites. "Gordon just knows that their demographic, especially for what they were doing during *Lord of the Rings* days, were sites like Ain't It Cool, CHUD, Coming Soon, those kinds of places."

Quint moved from writer to editor in the summer of 2004, still on a volunteer basis, but the site's finances had improved enough that by the end of that summer he was on the payroll. By then Knowles had also arranged a deal with Amazon.com to receive 15 percent on sales generated by traffic from a link on his site. With AICN's links generating nearly half a million dollars in purchases each quarter, AICN's share would be around \$300,000. Together with advertising revenue, the site's finances were finally healthy.

Asked about the overall impact of *Rings* on his website, Knowles replies, "Oh, God! Huge!" For one thing, feeling that he had an actual influence on the production encouraged him to keep the site going. For another, it "created a certain level of trust between me and my audience." Moreover, he credits his close relationship with Jackson as leading to New Line's long-term advertising contract with AICN. Finally, he thinks that the success of the film after Jackson's team cooperated with Knowles "has helped the film industry

to recognize the Internet not as a negative place and not as something that's there to destroy you, but as something that can be a support system."

AICN is not a *Rings*-centric site, and it has moved on. Like many touched by the film, however, Knowles sees it as a high point in his life. "I don't know if I'll ever love somebody else's project as much as I love *Lord of the Rings*, simply because it was such a leap of faith to say it was going to be right. When it got eleven Academy Awards, like many *Lord of the Rings* fans, I was crying, but *unlike* many *Lord of the Rings* fans, it was such a complete cry because I had gotten on board *so* early."

TheOneRing.net

What would become far and away the most successful fan site wholly devoted to *Rings*—both books and films—originated in an unprepossessing little page with no name and a lengthy URL housed on the Geocities domain. Erica Challis (nom de net, Tehanu), a professional French-horn player in Auckland, had recently met Michael Regina (Xoanon), a student in Network Technology at CDI College in Montreal, via the Internet, as a result of their mutual interest in fantasy and science-fiction films. Both were excited at the prospect of *Rings* being made, but the site really grew from Challis's love of her country's natural beauty, over which she had hiked extensively.

I put photos of New Zealand up because I wanted to show people why it was a good place to shoot the movie. I think we might have had one or two reports from TV One. We hardly had anything. So I started writing a series of articles on what is fantasy, why do people need it, why did Tolkien write what he wrote and what influence he had, and Mike started writing a whole series of essays on how you could turn *Lord of the Rings* into a film and what kinds of thing you would have to think about. We were really just speculating a lot.⁵¹

Challis's site was admired by Tolkien fan Chris Pirrotta (Calisuri), a student in digital media at Pennsylvania State University, who brought in Bill Thomas (Corvar), a computer expert in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The two Americans offered to design a more enticing-looking site. The four cofounders' talents meshed: Challis reported from New Zealand, Regina edited the content, Pirrotta designed the look and navigation of the site, and Thomas handled the technical and financial aspects of installing and maintaining the site in its new home (figure 19). The group wanted the domain name TheOneRing.com, but because that had already been taken, the new site became TheOneRing.net (TORN). The owners of the TheOneRing.com domain name had not yet



Figure 19. The four founders of TheOneRing.net on a panel at the One Ring Celebration in early 2005: *from left*: Chris “Calisuri” Pirrotta, still wearing Elf ears from an earlier skit; Michael “Xoanon” Regina; Bill “Corvar” Thomas; and Erica “Tehanu” Challis. (Photograph by the author.)

put their site online, and they grudgingly changed its name to Tolkien Online. (Perhaps due to a copyright or trademark problem, in 2005 the owners reverted to the original name, The One Ring, www.theonering.com.)

Challis and Regina’s “green site,” so called because of its dark green background, posted its first news on 10 April 1999. It became TheOneRing.net on 9 May.⁵² The new design, still in use, became instantly recognizable to fans seeking *Rings* news. TORN burgeoned. On 27 June, the cofounders issued a plea: “With all the additions that we are making to the site, we find that the 4 of us are needing another person to lighten the load. So we come right out and ask: ‘wanna work for us?’” On July 3, an announcement named new volunteer staff, including Quickbeam, nom de net of Cliff Broadway, an actor, playwright, and serious Tolkien buff. Xoanon instituted the site’s “Green Books” section, for essays and articles, and Broadway became one of its regular contributors; it has remained a core feature. The Chatroom and the Gaming Havens were also added.

The central focus for many users, however, remained the news items, posted daily on TORN's home page. Challis hiked doggedly over hills and fields near Matamata (soon to be Hobbiton) and around the Queenstown area. Her photos initially showed nothing but New Zealand landscapes perhaps destined to be filming locations. These vistas not only hinted at what might appear in the film but also introduced international fans to the beauties of this remote country. Challis also monitored news leaks and sought glimpses of the preparations for filming. (An early post contained information on the Hobbit holes being built.)⁵³ Activity intensified when principal photography commenced on 11 October.⁵⁴

Fan and reporter espionage was routine in the early months of filming. Then an event now famous in the annals of online *Rings* fandom occurred. On 16 January 2000, Challis, who had done her share of photographing through fences, was served with a trespassing notice. Challis recalls what led up to that moment:

One of the reports described the quarry site where they built Minas Tirith and Helm's Deep. Basically I was describing how you could get to watch them filming. I said, it'd be really difficult because there's a lot of gorse and blackberry. You would probably lose your way, but you could probably steer if you kept track of the power pylons which go overhead at that point. And I did this knowing perfectly well that *I* wasn't going to—I mean, I'm in my late thirties. I'm not going to be crawling around there at night.

The security staff tracked Challis from place to place through her reports, and upon returning home, she was served a notice banning her for two years from the quarry site. E! Online had exclusive on-set coverage, and Forde noted in his January "Force of Hobbit" entry: "Spies from TheOneRing.net have been spotted trying to gain access to the set. But security has been tightened even further in an effort to ensure that no more news or photos leak out."⁵⁵ The reference was to a fashion magazine that had printed photos of Liv Tyler in costume—which perhaps made New Line particularly nervous about spies at that time.

Challis mentioned the notice to some reporters who themselves were being chased away from filming locations. She recalls, "Probably out of boredom and frustration, they decided to turn that into a story, and they sort of blew it up into this big thing: 'This poor little fan is being oppressed by this big film company.'" After the story appeared in the papers, she was interviewed on national television. Challis may have intrigued the media because

she was not a typical teenage male fan (many of whom actually did crawl through the gorse above that quarry), but a slight, intelligent, polite thirty-six-year-old woman.

The publicity drew the attention of the filmmakers. Jackson's account of the incident reflects how the studios and filmmakers were confronting this new phenomenon of fan-site spies:

The One Ring was initially seen as quite a threat in the sense that they were clearly out to spy on us—which was a novelty for us. Never in my life have I ever had an Internet site trying to find out everything that we're doing. It wasn't anything to do with us, but New Line got incensed, and they put a legal trespass notice on her personally. The paranoia about what The One Ring was finding out was growing, and it was making them more determined, and I just felt it was all getting a bit out of control.

A truce was reached about a week after the notice was served. Challis was again in Matamata to show the Hobbiton area to a tourist. She ran into a security guard whom she knew, and he suggested that she talk to Barrie Osborne. Challis left her card at the production office, and Osborne phoned her. He recalls, "I brought her out to Hobbiton, and she got to meet Ian McKellen, and she was overall thrilled with that. Again, [it was] mostly driven by Peter, who said the best tactic is to welcome her instead of driving her away." Jackson confirms this: "I said to Barrie, 'If you like her, if she's actually a decent sort of person, why don't you just give her a surprise and tell her to jump in your car and you'll drive her onto the set?' Barrie went off, and we kept shooting a scene with Ian McKellen on the cart arriving into the village." Challis recalls that during the drive to Matamata, Osborne was on his cell phone with New Line's publicist, reassuring her about allowing a spy onto the set. Jackson says that once he met Challis, "We invite her just to sit down right beside me, and I chat to her, and she meets Ian McKellen, and all this sort of stuff, and we just say, 'Hey, we're sorry about this trespass thing. It was stupid, and let's just all behave in a better way.'" All parties agreed that the filmmakers would try to accommodate TORN without New Line having any editorial control over postings.

Challis naturally wanted to post a description of her one day on set, and she was given permission. She recalls the online reaction: "A lot of the major people following *The Lord of the Rings* just wouldn't believe it, they wouldn't post it. They were just either spitting with jealousy or they wouldn't believe it." Once it became clear that TORN had gotten "the scoop of all

scoops,” many fans labored under the impression that Challis had regular on-set access from then on. In fact she went back to the position of peering in with her nose to the fence. When she later visited Wellington, she was invited on-set again, provided that she would not report on what she saw.

The single report gave TORN a powerful reputation as a reliable news source. Challis’s day in Hobbiton was the beginning of a special relationship between the filmmakers and TORN that has not ended even now. Most of the cast and crew read the site regularly. Booth says she sometimes used TORN to keep track of actors’ birthdays so that she could arrange for presents.

Cliff Broadway had worked for McKellen.com for several years, and though he had to keep confidential much of what he learned in that job, occasionally McKellen and Keith Stern would provide special news items for TORN. In November 2000, as a result of his work on both sites, Broadway was allowed to visit the set for a week and wrote five reports—though, unlike Knowles, Broadway delayed posting them for a year until shortly before *Fellowship* appeared, to maximize interest.⁵⁶ Although the reports contained information about *Towers* and *Return* as well, New Line did not protest.

TORN also hosts the quasi-official Jackson fan site, The Bastards Have Landed (<http://tbhl.theonering.net/index.shtml>).

As with AICN, the early period of TORN was rocky financially. With no guarantee of reimbursement, Bill Thomas, the most gainfully employed of the group, paid several thousand dollars for expenses. Eventually TORN began to make money. Where AICN depends on advertising, TORN built up income through merchandising. In December 2001, Sideshow Weta, producer of collectible statues and busts, arranged for a link on the site. Fees on sales provided TORN’s main source of income (and a career opportunity for Chris Pirrotta, who was hired as Sideshow’s webmaster). It also earned income through its links to Amazon.com and other retailers of *Rings* merchandise. Thomas was repaid, and profits go to various charities. The staff still receive no income and usually forgo reimbursement for small expenses.

The site’s relationship with New Line slowly improved. Gordon Paddison provided press releases and other material, as he was doing with a few dozen other sites. On the other hand, he monitored TORN and occasionally asked for items to be removed. In one major incident, an unrendered image of Gollum surfaced and was briefly posted. Pirrotta recalls, “Then we’re like, ‘Wait a second! Didn’t we tell Weta that we weren’t going to put it up? Aw, crap!’ Because this is how One Ring operates. It was just ‘Mike? Take it down! Take it down!’ But by the time *we* had taken it down, it spread out through the Internet.” TORN also posted April Fool’s news items. When, on 1 April 2002,

the site reported that Andrew Lesnie's Best Cinematography Oscar had been rescinded, neither New Line nor Jackson appreciated the humor, and the item was deleted.

TORN played a crucial role in maintaining the *Rings* franchise, through the series and beyond. From that and other sites New Line discovered the virtues of cooperating and negotiating with fans. Says Alyson McRae, the film's first marketing coordinator: "I think [Gordon Paddison] had to develop relationships with them because [New Line] really wanted to control the release of information, and a lot of these fan sites were very effective in cutting across that. It was very important to him to build a relationship so that he could say, 'All right, you've got that, but we'd like you to hold off,' or 'I can give you this, but—.'" If point people like Knowles and Challis could be brought into the inner circle and would pledge to keep some secrets, the fans' experience could be enhanced and their loyalty solidified.

THE BLUE RING: MULTIPLIER NEWS SITES

New Line's first effort at Internet publicity simply gathered material for its own site. The idea was to control all the information, without recourse to fan outlets. Soon, however, Paddison saw that a degree of cooperation with those sites was advantageous. As he put it, "New Line chose to embrace the existing Tolkien 'eco-system.'"⁵⁷ The practice Paddison drew upon was viral marketing, which depends on people who receive news about products passing it along to others, who then pass it along. "The best way to advertise your product," he notes, "is to have your best friend advertise it by sending it to you. That way the message doesn't come from New Line, it comes from someone you trust."⁵⁸ Obviously such a tactic assumes that the first people who receive the news want to share it. *Rings* fans were ideal for viral dissemination of information.

Paddison not only ran lordoftherings.net but also cooperated with a group of sites that grew from about 25 early on to 50 by the end. Press releases and images were provided to those, and then other sites either linked to them or reposted the items, spreading the material like ripples on a pond. Paddison has described how he found the "QEIB," or "quantifiable early Internet buzz" in his search for *Rings* multipliers: "It's nice simple science. . . . I look for which Websites index highest for frequent moviegoers in this target demographic: 17 to 24 males who are 220% more likely to attend this movie based on genre."⁵⁹ The point, again, is not to convince them to go—they presumably would anyway—but to convince them to communicate their enthusiasm to others.

One such site was Tolkien Online (now The One Ring, www.theone-ring.com). Founded in April 1999 by two friends, later joined by a third, who were fans of the books, the site was slanted toward the novel but covered the film as well. Like so many webmasters, they contributed a significant part of the salary from their regular jobs to support the site. “Monthly, it costs us the mortgage of a mid-size house to keep it running,” one of them explained, adding, “At night when I check my dozens of emails, there’s usually one that says, ‘I really love the site! I check it every day. Thanks so much for giving me such a great place to share my love of The Lord of the Rings.’ And that’s what keeps us wanting to work on the site every night and weekend.”⁶⁰

Shortly after *Fellowship* opened, longtime Tolkien fans Fatty and Iluvatar set out to create their own *Rings*-based website. After months of layout, design, and gathering of content, on 21 June 2002, War of the Ring (www.warofthering.net) went online and grew rapidly. Initially it had fewer than a thousand daily unique hits, but a year later it was averaging more than 1.6 million hits a day, 35,000 to 40,000 of them first-time visitors.

WOTR’s popularity did not go unnoticed. Although representatives of this site did not visit Wellington to view filmmaking, New Line and its licensees cooperated with them to a considerable extent. Like TORN, WOTR’s index page carries news stories relating to the novel, the film, the video games and other products, the actors’ and crew members’ activities, and anything else remotely related to Tolkien. There is an extensive art gallery, with images by famous Tolkien illustrators and by fans, an archive of interviews, and a separate department for information about the film. As is typical, the webmasters spend an enormous amount of time keeping the site going. Although advertising and commissions on products sold through links bring in some income, they were forced to solicit voluntary subscriptions, which has been a common tactic for some of the large sites.

Paddison’s multiplier effect worked very well. Consider a brief series of postings on another prominent site, the Council of Elrond (www.council-of-elrond.com), on 29 September 2002 (underlining indicates links).

Tolkien Online has gotten hold of four new Two Towers advertising posters. Pretty nice! Check them out! Thanks Mormegil!

Over at The War of the Ring you can find some nice pictures and information about the Universal/Black Label FOTR game. Looks like fun! Thanks Fatty!

The New Zealand Herald interviewed Marton Csokas (Celeborn) about his role as Yorgi, a Russian villain in XXX. (Thanks peta)

Fatty from *War of the Ring* has some *downloads* available of the new LotR games. They also have some *nice pics* from the extended DVD and some pics from *The Two Towers*. Check them out! (Thanks Fatty!)

The large number of *Rings*-oriented websites creates an enormous amount of overlap and repetition. Fans are not likely to miss any significant news.

Grudging though New Line's cooperation with fan sites might occasionally have seemed, it went distinctly beyond what most Hollywood studios and directors did for major sites devoted to other films. Neither George Lucas nor Twentieth Century Fox gave TheForce.net the sort of input that Jackson and New Line did for TheOneRing.net, AICN, and the multipliers. Because the studio and the filmmakers cooperated with so many fan sites, webmasters were willing to police themselves and to remove spoilers or other items if asked to do so. Coproducer Rick Porras points out how remarkably few spoilers got out, considering the size of the production, the number of outdoor locations, and the sending of filmic elements around the globe. "I can only take from that that it wasn't just *our* diligence, but it was also the helpful diligence of those gatekeepers out there on the web."

Much of Hollywood has been slow to learn how valuable a resource fan websites can be. In June 2004, when *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was about to start principal photography in Auckland, I interviewed its producer, Mark Johnson, and unit publicist, Ernie Malik. Erica Challis had been making tentative inquiries about receiving cooperation to start a *Narnia*-related website or Web page hosted on TORN. I told Johnson and Malik something about TORN and its founders and how they were providing free publicity for *Rings*. They knew about TORN but were surprised to learn that the people running it poured a great deal of their time and money into the site without payment from New Line. After talking with Challis herself, Johnson and Malik agreed to cooperate in a smaller *Narnia* site hosted by TORN, TheOneLion.net (www.theonelion.net). Initially Challis was allowed four set visits, resulting in five articles, but the Buena Vista Pictures marketing department okayed their posting only at increasingly long intervals, with the last one not coming out for more than a year. Challis also posted the usual sorts of spy reports, and marketing requested that some items be removed. Deciding that Disney was treating her as an unpaid employee, Challis stopped working on TheOneLion.net, which became essentially a multiplier site posting studio press releases and other news.

As this incident suggests, Hollywood's acceptance of fan-generated publicity is uneven. Not all studios are willing to cede even a modicum of con-

trol in exchange for free coverage by fans. In 2004, *Variety* queried fan webmasters and found that they considered Sony, New Line, and Warner Bros. to be the most receptive to their sites, while DreamWorks and Universal were the least.⁶¹ As Hollywood discovers the value of such publicity, however, more studios will undoubtedly figure out how to ensure security without quashing fan enthusiasm.

Jackson himself has understood the potential of fan sites better than perhaps any other director. For *King Kong*, he cooperated with TORN to form another hosted site, KongIsKing.net. On the first day of principal photography, Michael Pellerin, producer-director of the *Rings* extended-version DVD supplements, began filming behind-the-scenes footage. Without any involvement from Universal aside from financial support, Jackson and Pellerin sent in a series of eighty-nine short videos to form a production diary, posted frequently on KongIsKing.net.⁶² In effect, Jackson became his own spy. (The contact address on the site, spymaster@kongisking.net, acknowledged that role.) In several episodes, Jackson reads out questions sent in by fans, addressing them by name. This approach gave him not only a closer connection with grateful fans but also more control over what information became public. With access up close and personal, who needed to stand pressed against the chain-link fence? Jackson even staged a comic scene of the crew chasing after a fictional spy (day 36), as if to flaunt the lack of real ones. *Entertainment Weekly* remarked, “Jackson’s determination to turn himself into a kind of reality TV character is in some ways a heroic gesture, more an expression of his love for moviemaking than a commercial stratagem.”⁶³

No doubt, but the diaries could be both. Since fans will pay for promotional material—even material that has previously been available for free—Jackson released fifty-four of the entries on two DVDs, “*King Kong*”—*Peter Jackson’s Production Diaries*, on 13 December 2005, the day before the feature’s theatrical release. In October the production diaries had been removed from KongIsKing.net. (The postproduction diaries, thirty-five of them, appeared on the two-disk release of *Kong*; as of mid-April 2006 they remained on KongIsKing.net.) One fan-magazine writer commented: “As a past contributor to Frederick S. Clarke’s *Cinefantastique*, where in-depth on-set reportage of fantasy film production originated, for better or worse, I find it fascinating that such reportage—the stuff of small circulation fanzines 20–30 years ago—has now vaulted into the upper strata of the DVD mainstream.”⁶⁴ Thus Jackson took a logical step forward in turning fan-friendly publicity material into a revenue-producing stream.

Jackson’s *Kong* diaries may have started a trend. Bryan Singer (who visited

the set of *Kong* and appears in the production diaries) started a video blog on the production of *Superman Returns*. Like Jackson, he chose a fan site, BlueTights.net, rather than the film's official website (which contains a link to BlueTights.net). Having a director like Jackson or Singer pressing the flesh or signing autographs along a red carpet during a premiere offers a few on-lookers a brief brush with fame. The Internet allows fans to read the filmmaker's detailed accounts addressed to them or replies to people like themselves, and this may give them an even greater sense of contact with filmmakers than personal appearances do.