

Online Media as a Framework for Public Creative Engagement with Digital Culture

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century the Internet has turned from being 'just another medium' produced by a small number of professionals to a major communication network which is functioning on various levels from amateur to a professional standard, providing media participation and production opportunities for almost everyone. The shift from media to social media has led to an explosion of user-generated content on the web. Participatory cultural production has become increasingly integrated in everyday life through a growing popularity of social networking tools like Facebook or MySpace which target the modern user's needs for creative expression and social interaction. The rapidly changing role of mass media and online environment causes a lot of debate on this issue. In this paper we are looking at the new media culture and its implications on everyday creative production of 'ordinary' people. Following questions are of a particular interest:

1) What impact does the Internet and New Media technology have on general public's engagement with digital culture? 2) What transformations is the expansion of social media causing in the way people perceive culture, themselves and their participation in cultural production? 3) What role does everyday creativity play in the modern society?

From the early 90's, with the emergence of the World Wide Web a computer has found its way into many households and working places starting a new era of global networking. The expansion of the Internet and development of Web 2.0 Internet user-centred architecture caused a shift from traditional media where a passive audience consumed centrally distributed information to a new media which offers the means for democratic communication to people who were normally excluded from media production. The whole structure of the World Wide Web makes it impossible to keep it centralized and censored. On the contrary, it is organized for a wider social participation and collaborative creativity.

In the past, there have always been attempts to develop conceptual frameworks for alternative or radical media that opposite to the mass media should be made by people for people. For instance, in 1976 Enzensberger has proposed a politically emancipatory use of media that is characterized by: 1) interactivity between audiences and creators, 2) collective production and 3) a concern with everyday life and the ordinary needs of people.

Based on Enzensberger's theory McQuail suggested a 'democratic-participant' model where small-scale media created by people should overthrow dominant large-scale media. The suggested framework rests upon the use of communications media 'for interaction and communication in small-scale settings of community, interest group and subculture' that favour 'horizontal patterns of interaction' where 'participation and interaction are key concepts' (McQuail 1994: 132).

Chris Atton picks up the models proposed in the past and builds a theory of alternative media that goes beyond any political and 'resistant' purposes and has a cultural potential of the media as tools of 'communication practices in social networks'. He focuses on a mundane approach to alternative media which is characterized by "including media production into routines of everyday life; the site of production in a domestic setting; and the depiction of everyday activities in the content of the media itself" (Atton 2001).

Even if the frameworks for a democratic participatory media could appear as ideological concepts twenty years ago; in our digitalized society, today, we will discover that some of the prospects have already become a reality. Currently, small-scale media is experiencing an exponential growth. According to Microsoft research, the Internet will overtake TV as the most consumed form of media in Europe by the middle of 2010 (Microsoft Europe log on 2009). Broadband connections in Europe have grown by 95% in the last five years and the average European now spends about 8.9 hours per week online. Over the last nine years world's online population increased by 362%. Although the number seems very impressive the proportion of Internet users compared to the whole population could easily be overestimated. Europe's Internet user's share is only 50% of the whole population compared to 74% in North America (internetworldstats.com). Although less developed countries have the fastest growth, the share of Internet users is still rather low. This statistical data defines an Internet user as anyone with an Internet access where access implies both physical availability of technology and basic knowledge required to use it. The issue of a physical access to ITC and the Internet has been partly resolved during the last decade as the technology has become cheaper and affordable for more people than before. However, the lack of ability to operate the technology and insufficient new media literacy levels remain the main barriers that prevent many from successful media participation.

NEW MEDIA PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

As the web becomes even more ubiquitous it intrudes into our lives leading to personal and cultural transformations. The development of new technologies is aimed at even easier and faster mobile communication and data exchange. If we do not sleep, we communicate.

Are you on Facebook? – a common question to be heard on meetings, conferences, festivals and other social events. There is no need anymore to exchange any paper-printed information like business cards, flyers, etc. – just tell your online ID on Facebook, MySpace or Ning to create new contacts. The web of social networking is functioning like a smaller model of the World Wide Web. Online personal profiles are interconnected with other profiles, networks, groups and communities building a huge network of a global social communication. The number of people participating in social networks and sharing their content is amazing. By 2009 Facebook has over 200 million active users and more than 1 billion pieces of content (stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) shared each week (Facebook Statistics).

Second generation of online media based on Web 2.0 technology is build for user participation and contribution. Today, six out of ten top Internet sites are social (YouTube, live.com, Facebook, hi5, Wikipedia, Orkut); none were on the list in 2005 (Social Media Statistics). According to Alexa data, in April 2009, user-generated encyclopaedia, Wikipedia has ranked as number 7 most visited web site; YouTube was at number 3, Facebook was at 4, and Blogger was at 8 (Alexa Top Sites).

There is an on-going debate initiated through continuous complaints of Facebook users to lift up the limit of 5000 friends allowed for a single personal profile. Who would imagine having such a number of real-life friends? Social networks are modern fan communities which go far beyond the concept of online portals for a circle of friends. If fandom traditionally has been distinguished from ordinary audience by active engagement with popular mass media, modern social online communities consist of users who play double roles of 'prosumers' - media consumers and producers simultaneously. The shift from active audience to active 'prosumers' was caused by democratization of media when the means of production became available to the masses.

Responding to the new turn of media evolution, Jenkins (2004) defines modern relationships of technology, industry, genres and the audience as 'media convergence'. He sees convergence as a process of exponential overall integration of all kinds of technology and media into everyday life. Such changes have a huge impact on the applications of new media consumption. As a result, a new generation of consumers are learning to use new technology to bring the flow of media more fully under their control. They produce and share Terabytes of user-generated content" fighting for

the right to participate more fully in their culture, to control the flow of media in their lives and to talk back to mass market content". Younger people are dominating in the culture of content creation and online self-presentation.

Pew Internet (2009) reports that 65% of all online American youths use online social networking sites like MySpace or Facebook compared to 35% of all online adults.

Similarly, blogging is gaining in popularity among adults, inspiring an increasing number of people to share their personal experiences with the world. According to Pew Internet Survey, in 2009 the American blog community has grown to 11% of all online population. Bloggers are active consumers and creators of online content and normally belong to a group of heavy internet users. Nevertheless, with the expansion of free easy-to use tools like Google Blogger, Twitter and others more and more 'ordinary' people also find their ways into sharing their knowledge and opinions online.

POPULAR CREATIVITY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

In recent years there has been a growth in 'cyberbole' (Woolgar, 2002), which insists that new powerful and accessible technologies of production and sharing enable almost 'everyone' to be a media creator and an active participant of democratic society. However, it is important to remain skeptical of utopian claims about technological determinism and proceed with investigation of how these expectations are shaped and their reference to 'reality'. We are aware of critical perspectives on democratization and availability of technologies like 'exploitation of personal information, loose of authorship, peer surveillance and the fear of increased corporatisation of online social and collaborative spaces' (Zimmer 2008). Web 2.0 critic Andrew Keen (2007) sees the Internet as a refuge for mediocrity and dilettantism. However, one of Keen's central arguments - that the internet, by its all-inclusive nature and easy access, opens the door to amateurism-as-authority while at the same time devaluing professional currency – seems unilateral. This is not a black-and-white issue. Leadbeater and Miller (2004: 22) view the current surge in non-professional creativity as a "new ethic of amateurism" that "could be one of the defining features of developed society". Richard Florida (2002) states that more-or-less ubiquitous creativity (ubiquitous, that is, to the 'developed' world) is central to the present and near future of labour and cultural citizenship. Pickering and Negus suggest viewing creativity as: "the communication of experience, as a process which brings that creative experience into meaning and significance in a way that can be shared between people" (Pickering, Negus 2004: 45).

Jean Burgess (2006) set up a term 'vernacular creativity' to define the engagement of 'ordinary' people into everyday cultural production. He distinguishes 'vernacular' as being opposite to established, 'high', 'proper' creativity. Burgess sees 'vernacular creativity' as "cultural practice outside the symbolic boundaries of official art worlds" and emphasizes the 'ordinary' nature of this concept.

We adopt Burgess' definition of 'ordinary', 'public' creativity, but we see the term 'vernacular' as not very obvious in relation to digital creative production with the means of new media.

Our central argument is that these new means digital culture forms have the potential for active participation of previously marginal and invisible groups in cultural production. With the increased integration of social networking in everyday life we see the urge to draw attention to the "everyday practices in which uses and meanings of technologies are negotiated, appropriated and lived by 'ordinary' people" (Wyatt et al 2005). According to Weigert, everyday is "a taken-for-granted reality which provides the unquestioned background of meaning for each person's life" (Weigert 1981: 36).

The new generation of creative consumers are active participants, creators and consumers of popular culture. The hierarchy is changing from top-down as it was a decade ago to bottom-up, driven by its users.

There is no established definition of growing community of Do-It-Yourself, self-taught new media creators who are consumers, artists and the audience at the same time. Therefore, we see more

appropriate and understandable to call this creative drive of general public 'popular creativity' as it is closely bound to the popular culture.

However, it is important not to forget that there is no 'average user' or 'consumer'. All users "are people with all the properties that go with being human: gender, history, politics, and beliefs" (Wright 1995). They perceive and interpret the new media in their individual ways, creating new meanings. Reception Theory, originally concerned with reader's transaction of a text, can be successfully applied to the new media audience. Within the context of reception theory, "audiences are understood to be active rather than passive, to be engaged in a process of making, rather than simply absorbing, meanings". (Jenkins 2002).

The participatory popular culture operates from within: the artists are the audience; creators are consumers. People interact within established cultural boundaries.

Active audience 'recycles' materials appropriated from popular mass-media into own cultural production. Several years ago, Lev Manovich started talking about remix and modular culture. Creative consumers adopt, interpret and remix existing information into new forms of media content. Manovich (2005) describes audience, user, or receiver not as an end-point, but a "temporary station of information path" on the way of information flow through the web of new media.

As a result of a permanent circulation and exchange of information on a peer-to-peer basis, certain interpretations, norms and aesthetics criteria are assimilated within communities of participating audience. Most of the social networking and content sharing portals like Youtube, Flickr, Facebook, and diverse photo sharing websites offer ranking hierarchies of posted content. Ranking usually depends on user-rating and popularity. In this way, the community develops shared criteria, according to which the content is being evaluated and rated.

Fish sees readers, as members of interpretive communities, who share common strategies for making meaning (Fish 1980). In our digital age, the audience involves not only readers, but also new media consumers, technology users.

Interpretative communities can be named any kind of groups where people meet and "share their views on a common topic" (Jenkins 2004). In modern society, the most common examples are online forums, blogs, fans' websites, content-sharing and communications portals like Facebook, Myspace, Flickr, and Youtube.

As Jenkins notices, "over time, the group agrees what kind of posts are appropriate". The community itself decides what is "good" and what is "bad", what can be considered "creative", "interesting" and "entertaining". Content with the highest user rating becomes a temporary celebrity within the community and even on the outside of the community. For example, the popularity of video content of the growing user video-sharing portal Youtube exceeds the range of Internet and is being showed in Television as "The best of Youtube" program.

More accessible new media technologies open up possibilities for amateur producers to become celebrities. However, it remains in the context of 'ordinary celebrity'. Even 15 years ago, the gap between 'ordinary' and 'mainstream' was too broad to overcome for general public; it was highly unlikely for someone from the 'ordinary world' to gain access to the means of representation and production. Jenkins defines participatory culture as "one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another". (Jenkins et al. 2006) Today, 'ordinary' participation is an important part of the new media economy. We encounter democratization of the media; theoretically, everyone who has something to tell can be 'heard'.

BARRIERS TO A SUCCESSFUL MEDIA PARTICIPATION

Technological evolution has brought to the wider public unprecedented opportunities to enjoy digital media and to participate in creation of new media popular culture. Although computer technology and the Internet have become widely accessible, why only a part of society is participating in digital life? Why do a significant part of Internet users remain passive consumers of data posted by others?

Physical availability of technology does not necessarily make it accessible. Even very simple tasks as e-mail communication and browsing require a ground level of media literacy and it is often taken for granted that everyone is capable of doing these 'basic operations'.

Furthermore, modern society demands active participation in cultural production which requires higher levels of new media literacy. If media literacy is about knowing the technology and its capabilities, new media literacy is distinguished through ability not only to consume, but to remix, produce and share own content. This prerequisite advanced knowledge of software tools, media formats and the Internet. These skills are far from being common in our society where some groups of people as youngsters or computer professionals are more successful than the others. The issue of accessibility of online technologies as a matter of new media literacy will remain an essential point that causes digital inequality in society.

With the regard of the importance of cultural participation and creativity in our digitalized society there is a need to think about ways of overcoming barriers that prevent a significant part of society from being media participants and contributors.

The possible ways of approaching the problem is to establish a framework for new media literacy education for adults as well as integrate it into curriculums of educational institutions. Digital culture has become part of our everyday life offering new forms of collaboration and democratic citizenship. Therefore it is of vital importance to offer opportunities of digital inclusion for every citizen of a modern society.

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