Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content

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It’s a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It’s about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people’s network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It’s about the many wrestling power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes. (Time Magazine, 16 December 2006)

When Time designated ‘you’ as Person of the Year 2006, the editors paid tribute to the millions of anonymous web users who dedicate their creative energy to a booming web culture. The cover story heralded the many volunteers filling so-called user-generated content (UGC) platforms. After decades of vilifying the passive coach potato, the press now venerates the active participant in digital culture. But just who is this participant? Who is the ‘you’ in YouTube and what kind of agency can we attribute to this new class of media users? Are users indeed, as Time wants us to believe, the ‘many wrestling power from the few’ – a collective power that will ‘change the way the world changes’?

Traditionally, media scholars have theorized the agency of media recipients in close connection to the type of medium. Whereas the study of film yielded various concepts of spectatorship, television prompted a conceptualization of audience both as viewers and consumers. With the emergence of Web 2.0 applications, most prominently UGC platforms, the qualification of ‘user’ gradually enters the common parlance of media theorists (Livingstone, 2004). Users are generally referred to as active internet contributors, who put in a ‘certain amount of creative effort’ which is ‘created outside of professional routines and platforms’. Since the 1980s, the term ‘prosumer’ has been
deployed by various academics to denote how users’ agency hovers between the bipolar categories of producer versus consumer, and of professional versus consumer. New hybrid terms such as ‘produser’ and ‘co-creator’ have meanwhile entered academic parlance to accentuate users’ increased production prowess (Bruns, 2007). As this article will argue, user agency is a lot more complex than these bipolar terms suggest; we need to account for the multifarious roles of users in a media environment where the boundaries between commerce, content and information are currently being redrawn.

To illustrate the complexity of user agency, the recent development of YouTube serves as a case of inquiry. Started as a video-sharing site in 2005 and run by three students from a Silicon Valley garage, the financially flailing but hugely popular site was bought up by Google in October of 2006 for the unprecedented sum of $1.6 billion. Obviously, Google’s acquisition was not about bringing innovative technology into the home, as its own GoogleVideo was already running on superior software; it was about bringing in communities of users. In less than a year, YouTube became an (independent) subsidiary of a commercial firm whose core interest is not in content per se, but in the vertical integration of search engines with content, social networking and advertising.

YouTube’s case perfectly illustrates the need for a more comprehensive approach to user agency, including perspectives from cultural theory, economics and labour relations. User agency is cast by cultural theorists as participatory engagement, in contrast to the passive recipients of earlier stages of media culture. Economists and business managers phrase user agency in the rhetoric of production rather than consumption. And in terms of labour relations, users are appraised in their new roles as amateurs and volunteers vis-à-vis those in the professional leagues. If we want to understand how socio-economic and technological transformations affect the current shake-up in power relationships between media companies, advertisers and users, it is important to develop a multifarious concept of user agency. Users like ‘you’, as I will argue, have a rather limited potential to ‘wrest power from the few’, let alone to ‘change the way the world changes’.

The cultural perspective: recipients versus participants

With the emergence of Web 2.0 applications, cultural theorist Henry Jenkins (2006) sees a definite paradigm shift in the way media content is produced and circulated: ‘Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture’ (2006: 24). The result is a participatory culture which increasingly demands room for ordinary citizens to wield media technologies – technologies that were once the privilege of capital-intensive industries – to express themselves and distribute those creations as
they seem fit. When ‘old media’ still reigned, media recipients had little direct power to shape media content and faced enormous barriers to enter the marketplace, whereas ‘the new digital environment expands the scope and reach of consumer activities’ (2006: 215). Jenkins, like other media theorists, applauds the technological opportunities seized by grassroots movements and individuals to express their creativity and provide a diverse palette of voices (Deuze, 2007). And even if the explosion of information on the internet tends to result in ‘monitorial citizens’ (Schudson, 1998), Jenkins is convinced that networked technologies offer users sufficient leverage to renegotiate their relationships with media companies.

There are several assumptions implied in the notion of participatory culture that I want to relativize in this section. First, the concept of user is often bolstered by a deceptive opposition between the passive recipient, couched in the rhetoric of ‘old media’, and the active participant cast ideally as someone who is well-versed in the skills of ‘new’ media. Second, participation refers to citizens and community activists as well as to people who deploy their skills and talents towards a common cause. Yet can terms such as ‘communities’ and ‘(cultural) citizenship’ be unequivocally transferred to internet communities? And third, now that citizens have become creators and arbiters of media content, what role do platform providers play in steering the agency of users and communities? Let me elaborate on each of these points.

The implied opposition between passive recipients defined by old media (e.g. television) and active participants inhabiting digital environments, particularly UGC sites, is a historical fallacy. Scholars from the humanities have long emphasized the intrinsic engagement of the viewer with the medium (McLuhan, 1964) either stressing the ‘multi-accentuality of the sign’ (Volosinov, 1973) or noting the role of subject positions in the text’s ideological effect (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978). Television audiences were never solely defined in terms of passive spectatorship, but there is a long tradition in media history to point at the recipient’s active engagement with Hollywood-prefab content (Ang, 1991; Moores, 1990). As Jenkins (1992) rightly points out, recipients of cultural content – whether fiction, music, film or television – have always engaged in activities, such as bands playing cover versions of songs or fan clubs stimulating the recreation of content. Over the past 15 years, viewers have increasingly acted as participants in game shows, quizzes, talk shows and make-over programmes. Particularly the surge of reality television has boosted the participation of ‘ordinary people’ in broadcast productions (Teurlings, 2001). In addition, the popularity of personal and communal media (home movies, home videos, community television) has profoundly affected television culture, particularly since the 1980s. What is different in the digital era is that users have better access to networked media, enabling them to ‘talk back’ in the same multi-modal language that frames cultural products formerly made exclusively in studios. This is partly due to the availability of cheap and easy-to-use digital
technologies, which certainly should stimulate audiovisual production of audiovisual production, but a more important driver is the many internet channels, particularly UGC sites, that allow for do-it-yourself distribution.

However, it’s a great leap to presume that the availability of digital networked technologies turns everyone into active participants. As a Guardian technology reporter observes, an emerging rule of thumb suggests that ‘if you get a group of 100 people online then one will create content, 10 will “interact” with it (commenting or offering improvements) and the other 89 will just view it’ (Arthur, 2006). If it is true that there are relatively few active creators of content, what do we mean when we talk about participation? It may be crucial to distinguish different levels of participation in order to get a more nuanced idea of what participation entails. A recent American survey categorizes user’s behaviour according to six levels on a participation ladder. Of all online users of UGC sites, 13 percent are ‘active creators’ – people actually producing and uploading content such as webblogs, videos or photos. Just under 19 percent qualify as ‘critics’, which means they provide ratings or evaluations. Furthermore, 15 percent of all users are ‘collectors’, a term referring to those who save URLs on a social bookmarking service which can be shared with other users; another 19 percent count as ‘joiners’ – people who join social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook, without necessarily contributing content. The majority of users consist of ‘passive spectators’ (33%) and ‘inactives’ (52%); while the former category perform activities such as reading blogs or watching peer-generated video, the latter category does not engage in any of these activities. Looking at these numbers, it becomes readily apparent that ‘participation’ does not equal ‘active contribution’ to UGC sites; participation is thus a relative term when over 80 percent of all users are in fact passive recipients of content (OECD, 2007).

On a different level, digital participants are ascribed a heightened level of engagement with society, enhancing cultural citizenship. The attribution of citizenship to media users is nothing new. There is a long tradition in scholarship theorizing television audiences as citizens, both in relation to commercial media as well in the context of public television (Dahlgren, 1995; Hartley, 1999). Besides treating television as an audiovisual text, media theorists have always taken into account the socio-cultural experience of interacting with television (for an overview, see Dahlberg, 2007). Building individual and group identity is an integrated element of the self in a democratic culture. Citizenship has to do with belonging and participating in a public sphere inundated with media; at the same time, as sociologist Thompson (1995: 215) already observed, individuals are increasingly dependent ‘on a range of social institutions and systems to provide them the means – both material and symbolic – for the construction of their life-projects’. This double-bind of media dependency was evident long before the emergence of digital networked media. Media use was and still is strongly defined by evolving group identities, as individual viewers tie in their personal taste and lifestyles with shared ‘mediated’ experiences.
Scholars theorizing the current trend of participatory culture emphasize users’ strong preference to share knowledge and culture in communities. Sharing has indeed become the default mode of UGC interfaces like YouTube and MySpace. Yet the term ‘community’, in relation to these sites, appears to cover a range of different meanings. On the face of it, ‘community’ strongly connotes the inclination of users to belong to a (real-life) group and be involved in a common cause. YouTube’s owners promote their site as the home of many such communities; as we can read on the site’s Terms of Use: ‘Remember that this is your community! Each and every user of YouTube makes the site what it is, so don’t be afraid to dig in and get involved.’ Indeed, some YouTubers periodically hold public gatherings to celebrate the video-sharing community, but these real-life happenings remain exceptions. More likely, the term ‘community’ relates to groups with a communal preference in music, movies or books (a so-called ‘taste community’); building taste is an activity that necessarily ties in individuals with social groups (Hennion, 2007). There are plenty of such groups sharing their cultural experiences with anonymous users on YouTube, such as anime-fans or heavy metal adepts. We also find the word ‘community’ applying to people who happen to buy the same brand of toy cars or follow the same diet: ‘brand communities’ is the hybrid name to tout consumer products offered as cultural resources (Arvidsson, 2005). ‘Communities’, in relation to media, thus refers to a large range of user groups, some of which resemble grassroots movements, but the overwhelming majority coincide with consumer groups or entertainment platforms.

A more profound problem with ascribing participatory involvement and community engagement to users per se, is its neglect of the substantial role a site’s interface plays in manoeuvring individual users and communities. YouTube users are steered towards a particular video by means of coded mechanisms which heavily rely on promotion and ranking tactics, such as the measuring of downloads and the promotion of popular favourites. The site’s users indeed serve as providers and arbiters of content – both unwittingly by means of download counts and consciously by rating and commenting on videos – but rankings and ratings are processed with the help of algorithms, the technical details of which remain undisclosed. YouTube singles out ‘most viewed’ videos; it also lists ‘most discussed’ videos and has rankings for ‘Top favourites’ and ‘Top rated’ – familiar categories deployed by most commercial radio stations. Obviously, rankings and ratings are vulnerable to manipulation, both by users and by the site’s owners.

In the emergent participatory culture, ‘participation’ is thus an ambiguous concept. The presumption that new networked technologies lead to enhanced involvement of recipients as well as to active cultural citizenship is rather generalizing. The historical continuity between participation of ordinary citizens in ‘old media’ like television and participation of users in networked UGC sites defies any definition grounded in binary oppositions. Instead, user agency comprises different levels of participation, varying from ‘creators’ to


‘spectators’ and ‘inactives’. The same can be said with regard to the notion of ‘communities’, a term that applies to very different modes of user involvement. When looking at user-generated content, we also need to take account of a site’s coded abilities to steer and direct users. User agency, in other words, encompasses a range of different uses and agents, and it is extremely relevant to develop a more nuanced model for understanding its cultural complexity.

The economics perspective: users between producers and consumers

Participatory culture finds its economic equivalent in the notion of ‘prosumption’ or ‘wikinomics’, a theory in which user agency is increasingly defined in terms of production and less in terms of consumption (Leadbeater, 2007; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). According to media analysts and business gurus, new digital platforms are giving rise to a profound paradigm shift in the way companies approach their customers and go about business relations:

You can participate in the economy as an equal, co-creating value with your peers and favourite companies to meet your very personal needs, to engage in fulfilling communities, to change the world, or just to have fun! Prosumption comes full circle. (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 150)

In marketing and business discourse, hybrid terms such as ‘co-creation’ and ‘produsage’ are rapidly replacing the terms ‘consumption’ and ‘customization’ (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Of course, notions such as prosumer have permeated theories of media production ever since ‘experience’ became the magic word to tout customer engagement (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Toffler, 1981). But with the full implementation of Web 2.0 technologies, and particularly with the emergence of many UGC sites, business interest has apparently shifted away from consuming activities and gravitated towards producing activities, giving users more power over content because they add business value.

This new status of the people-formerly-known-as-consumers prompts further critical assessment of user agency. How valid is the claim that all users become ‘co-creators’ or ‘produsers’ of content? And where does this leave the consumer? Hybrid concepts appear to disregard users as objects of targeted advertising. But in casting new user agency, it is indispensable to look at the role of advertisers as well as new media platforms in the renegotiation of power relationships.

The presumed opposition between production and consumption in relation to media is misleading because American media function on the triangular basis of producers, consumers and advertisers. American media have always been driven largely by market forces – forces that control production and distribution of audiovisual content through reaching audiences and profitable
markets (Ettema and Whitney, 1994). In these markets, consumers have been targeted as masses, groups and individuals, and they have exerted power over cultural content via their power as consumers (e.g. buying or boycotting products, giving input to consumer panels, etc.). The relation between specific people watching specific content constitutes the basis of targeted advertising; information vital to marketers derives from the connection between content, disposable income and consuming behaviour. With the emergence of every new medium, advertisers and media companies have adjusted their strategies to reach the viewer-as-consumer – from mass audiences targeted by broadcasting in the 1950s to niche audiences reached by narrowcast channels in the 1990s (Smith-Shomade, 2004). The potential for niche marketing has been further enhanced in the internet era; advanced digital technologies facilitate the tracking of individual social behaviour. The already close relationship between content producers, advertisers and consumers has become even more intimate.

As argued in the previous section, only a small percentage of users actually create content whereas the large majority consists of spectators or passive viewers; yet all categories of users actually qualify as potential consumers. The social demographics of UGC platform visitors bespeak an average user who is highly educated, well connected and well paid, with an average household income of almost twice the median income of American families (Li, 2007: 6). In other words, all UCG users – whether active creators or passive spectators – form an attractive demographic to advertisers. Not surprisingly, the marketing people employed by ‘old media’ hail the emergence of these new platforms, while the legal people curse them because of frequent copyright infringement by users. At this moment in history, Hollywood producers hesitate whether to see YouTube-Google as a friend or foe: either they go after them and use their historic prowess to impose their old (content-protection) rules on this newcomer, or they side with them in creating new business and marketing models to create buzz for conventional broadcast products.

However the face-off turns out, it is crucial to understand the new role of users as both content providers and data providers. Besides uploading content, users also willingly and unknowingly provide important information about their profile and behaviour to site owners and metadata aggregators. Before users can actually contribute uploads or comments to a site, they usually have to register with their name, email address and sometimes add more personal details such as gender, age, nationality or income. Their subsequent media behaviour can be minutely traced by means of databots. More importantly, all users of UGC sites unwittingly provide information because IP addresses – the majority of which can be connected to a user’s name and address – can be mined and used without limit by platform owners. Permission to use metadata towards specific purposes are commonly regulated by a site’s service agreements (Terms of Use), which users are required to sign. Metadata can be mined for various purposes, from targeted advertising to interface optimization, but the bottom line is that users have no power over data distribution.
YouTube’s practices are a case in point. When the site first started, YouTube’s business model was quite simple: banner ads were placed next to video uploads to cover the costs of operating the video-sharing site. The site never turned a profit before its takeover by Google. YouTube’s Terms of Use still require that subscribers ‘use YouTube for purely personal purposes and not for any commercial purpose’, ruling out potentially commercial activities in relation to uploads. Yet a first sign towards the accommodation of advertisers came in January 2007, when YouTube’s CEO Chad Hurley announced the introduction of short commercial clips; in the ensuing months, the site has added a large number of entertainment channels with paid commercial content. More importantly, the site’s owners have a licence to exploit any data they gather from their users. Although YouTube’s Terms of Use state that they do not sell email addresses or other personally identifiable information to commercial or marketing messages without consent, at the same time they track both personal information and digital behaviour:

We may record information about your usage, such as when you use YouTube, the channels, groups, and favorites you subscribe to, the contacts you communicate with, and the frequency and size of data transfers, as well as information you display or click on in YouTube (including UI elements, settings, and other information). If you are logged in, we may associate that information with your account. We may use clear GIFs (a.k.a. ‘Web Beacons’) in HTML-based emails sent to our users to track which emails are opened by recipients. (http://youtube.com/t/terms)

Seemingly unimportant technical information, such as anonymous usage data, cookies, IP addresses, browser type, clickstream data, etc. are said to be deployed to ‘improve the quality and design of the site’, but this limitation seems rather dubious in the face of YouTube’s takeover which effectively transferred the right to access all user information to its new owner.

Since Google took over YouTube, the role of users as data providers has increased notably. In principle, YouTube is still an ‘independent’ subsidiary of Google Inc. and the new owners vowed in a press statement to respect YouTube’s distinct identity, but it would be naïve to think that YouTube’s policies will be unaffected by the takeover. Gradually, YouTube’s features are taking the shape of Google’s own GoogleVideo – a site that casts users as targeted consumers as well as content providers. If we look at the Terms of Use regulating GoogleVideo’s UGC traffic, they differ from YouTube’s:

You are directing and authorizing Google to, and granting Google a royalty-free, non-exclusive right and license to, host, cache, route, transmit, store, copy, modify, distribute, perform, display, reformat, excerpt, facilitate the sale or rental of copies of, analyze, and create algorithms based on the Authorized Content in order to (i) host the Authorized Content on Google’s servers; (ii) index the Authorized Content; (iii) display, perform and distribute the Authorized Content, in whole or in part, in the territory(ies) designated in the Metadata Form, in connection with Google products and services now existing or hereafter developed, including without limitation for
syndication on third party sites. (https://upload.video.google.com/video_terms.html, emphases added)

Google’s conditions for use shift the power over users’ information to the site’s owners. The metadata Google harvests from UGC traffic and click-streams is much more valuable to advertisers than the content users provide to these sites. Metadata are not merely a by-product of user-generated content: they are a prime resource for profiling real people with real interests. The phrase ‘in connection with Google products and services’ spoofs the spectre of a platform interlocking advertising, content and data. Google already operates the hugely profitable AdSense, a subsidiary coupling advertising to search engine results, and recently acquired online advertising firm DoubleClick – a deal currently under scrutiny by federal anti-trust legislators who will also investigate privacy and competition issues. The vertical integration of Google, combining a near-monopoly search engine with information aggregation sites, advertising companies and UGC platforms renders the question of ‘googlization’ rather pertinent (Batelle, 2005; Caufield, 2005; Vaidyanathan, 2007). Google’s strategy is obviously in the interest of business, but what does it teach us about user agency?

Notwithstanding neologisms touting the user as a ‘produser’ and ‘co-creator’, the user’s role as a data provider is infinitely more important than his role as a content provider. Even if some users receive part of the monetary gains made from their self-made content, the real value added by users – generating metadata on the social behaviour of a profitable consumer segment – remains highly invisible and unaccounted for. The triangular relationship between media producers, advertisers and consumers has become ever more intimate. On the one hand users assert their creative agency by demanding a greater role in content production; on the other hand they lose their grip on their agency as consumers as a result of technological algorithms tracking their behaviour and refining their profile. User agency thus comprises content production, consuming behaviour and data generation; any theory highlighting only the first of these functions effectively downplays the tremendous influence of new media companies in directing users’ agency.

**Labour relations: amateurs versus professionals**

A third approach to user agency draws attention to UGC in terms of labour relations; according to the official OECD definition (see note 2), users contribute creative efforts ‘outside of professional routines and practices’. Terms such as ‘hobbyists’, ‘amateurs’, ‘unpaid labourers’ and ‘volunteers’ often applied to internet contributors, contrast with the words ‘professionals’, ‘stars’, ‘paid experts’ and ‘employees’ commonly attributed to people producing traditional television content. But as the market for user-generated content
further commercializes and is incorporated by new media conglomerates, the sliding scales of voluntarism are inversely proportional to the sliding scales of professionalism, resulting in new mixed models of labour. In order to understand the changes in user agency, it is important to scrutinize ‘human resources’ management of UGC sites such as YouTube. What characterizes the type of effort users put into creating and rating online content if this is not regularly paid labour? Why devote much time and energy to creating content and what to expect in return? The changes YouTube made in its policies towards users are typical of the current trend towards integrating amateur efforts into a capital- and technology-intensive media system.

Since the beginning of the web, thousands of volunteers, hobbyists and idealists have enabled the development of what some observers have described as a ‘gift economy for information exchange’ (Barbrook, 2002). The worldwide web, after all, was envisioned as a new frontier space where grassroots initiatives, communal spirit and ‘free’ amateur culture had a chance to blossom. Labour critics and neo-Marxist scholars noticed early on how the glamorization of the digital domain was a convenient pretense for the mobilization of ‘immaterial labour’ – befitting the familiar logic of capitalist exploitation (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Terranova, 2000). Enterprises like America Online (AOL) boomed on the efforts of thousands of volunteers who developed their skills in the service of companies. In the 1990s, AOL employed thousands of what they called ‘remote staffers’ who monitored electronic bulletin boards, hosted chat-rooms and enforced Terms of Service agreements. These unpaid remote staffers were referred to as ‘online families’ and communities, and AOL even created a sort of kinship system based on mentor–mentee relationships. As Postigo (2003) relates in his detailed study, volunteers were less driven by a spirit of community, as they were stimulated by the novelty of working with new technologies; they needed computer experience to be employable in the emerging tech-economy. When, in 1999, AOL wanted to exert more power over their volunteer remote staffers, they implemented a mixed system of paid and volunteer staff, igniting a huge controversy among its loyal base. AOL remote staffers filed a class-action lawsuit to require retroactive acknowledgement of their work as labour; the case was settled and AOL completely abandoned the system in 2003.

The AOL case is emblematic of the current transformation in labour relations with regard to the commercialization of UGC sites; sites like YouTube are facing the double-bind of courting their volunteer content providers while making a profit on them as targeted consumers. When the popularity of video-sharing sites began to soar in early 2006, the debate on user motivation, status and rewards quickly intensified. The question of what drives users to contribute time and labour to an exploding number of UGC sites is crucial if we want to understand the volatile relationship between media companies and their worker-client base. According to the aforementioned Forrester survey (Li, 2007: 11–12), users can be segmented according to one of three primary
motivations: entertainment, career and family. Entertainment-driven users are much more likely to participate in UGC activities, closely followed by career-driven users. Users are attracted to these sites because of their novelty; as soon as the entertainment value starts to wear off, they will seek a new platform or change habits. The decision of YouTube to mix amateur content with prefab entertainment content is thus meant to boost the site’s perpetual entertainment value. Career-driven users can be characterized as aspiring professionals, both in the technical-creative sphere and in the artistic-entertainment sphere.

Many contributors to UGC sites are enthusiasts who make home videos for a small circle of family and friends – the third most important driver for producing content. Apparently, many amateurs take pride in developing their skills and dream of turning their hobby into a profession. Tinkering with media technologies has been the department of hobbyists since the time of radio hams, and digital labour has acquired the image of being creative play (Douglas, 1999; Gillespie, 2006). Labour volunteered to UGC sites is thus not conceived of as work, but as fun or play. This ‘work as play’ ethos also reigns in many workplaces of the digital creative industries; the workforce of designers, software developers and hardware engineers are attracted to places with an ‘anti-corporate culture’ where young people are ready to work unusual hours for sometimes very little money; it is not unusual in this sector to be paid in stock options of companies that have yet to emerge (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005). Google is well known for its unconventional labour contracts and its ‘geek culture’ that pays bonuses for creative input and provides spare time for employees to spend on non-assigned projects. In a sense, the emergence of UGC sites stipulates a variable scale of labour relations, where many contractual forms can be pinpointed somewhere between the two poles of volunteerism and professionalism.

Striking the balance between the commitment of volunteers and the directing power of paid staffers is a difficult issue, especially now that many UGC sites are transforming from commons-like structures towards commercially driven platforms. Even if content is said to be ‘user generated’ that does not mean that users have full control over what is produced and how it gets displayed. UCG sites are governed by technological and social protocols (Galloway, 2004). Technological protocols are, for instance, the rating and ranking systems explained in the previous section; social protocols govern how uploads are filtered by the site’s staffers, by experts or by peer-users (or a combination thereof), before or after posting. Of course, quality of content and abuse of rating and evaluation systems are a constant source of worry to the site’s owners, as the opportunity for manipulation is very real. Most start-up UGC sites depended completely on volunteer users for their operational activities. In the case of YouTube, users themselves policed the site for profane, racist and explicit sexual content, and the moderation of content was entirely peer-based. Since the takeover by Google, the commercial stakes are rising and YouTube’s paid staffers are taking over an increasing portion of the
site’s moderating tasks. For one thing, YouTube is forced to exert sharper control over its uploaded content, especially with regard to copyright violation, now that lawsuits are pending. More control over operational matters is inevitable if the site wants to turn a profit; whether users will still form the loyal volunteer base they once did remains to be seen.

When UGC sites’ popularity really started to explode, in early 2006, media analysts and industry watchers noticed rapidly changing mores in the treatment of volunteers generating content (Siklos, 2006). Yahoo and Metacafe organized contests, promising rewards of several thousand dollars for the most popular uploads. YouTube originally did not pay any of its volunteers who acted as content providers or who kept the system of peer-reviewing and quality monitoring afloat. Since its takeover by Google, YouTube has been quickly remodelling its reward system, for instance by introducing paid uploads so contributors can opt to charge viewers to see their content. Google Video already has such a system, where revenues are split between the site owners and the maker of content. Labour relations thus shift from a user-controlled platform, run largely by communities of users mediated by social and technological protocols, to a company-steered brokerage system, where platform owners play the role of mediator between aspiring professionals and potential audiences. Companies like Google are not looking to turn every amateur into a professional so much as acknowledging the growing appeal of selling home-made material to audiences and media businesses.

In more than one way, YouTube and Google Video are mediating platforms between the masses of aspiring amateurs and the ‘old’ Hollywood media moguls. Video-sharing sites have quickly become the global rodeo for talent scouts: they provide a new link in the upward mobility chain of the commercially driven star-system. Originally, YouTube’s intentions were to ‘democratize the entertainment process’ by giving ordinary people the opportunity to perform for potentially large audiences. In interviews, CEO Chad Hurley (quoted in McGrath, 2006) effectively downplayed the influence of YouTube’s employees in moderation systems that promote the popularity of certain uploads and thus favour particular claims to fame. By nominating ‘noteworthy videos’ on their homepage and all the strategic ‘listing’ systems mentioned before, YouTube is now definitely a partner in the entertainment brokerage business. The site even imitates the Hollywood star system by establishing yearly YouTube Awards. However, the erosion of YouTube’s democratic ideal is not simply the result of unilateral popularity promotion, but also of overtly ambitious users inventing numerous strategies to thwart YouTube’s system of popularity measuring and peer-based evaluation. Notorious examples such as LonelyGirl15 and Lamo1234 illustrate the weakness of an open system driven by volunteer users: the ‘lonely girl’ turned out to be the creation of professional film-makers represented by Hollywood’s Creative Artists Agency, and Lamo1234 was a 23-year-old student who downloaded his own recorded guitar solos 10,000 times to boost his view counts. Although YouTube and many other video-sharing sites
carefully nurture the concept of amateur home-made content, the actual myth driving this concept is the popular belief in ‘rags to riches’ stories.

The UGC market increasingly relates to the professional Hollywood market as stock options relate to shares and bonds – a trade market in potential talents and hopeful pre-professionals. YouTube’s role as an Internet trader in the options market for fame is unthinkable without a merger between old and new media. Ironically, YouTube fame only counts as fame after it is picked up by traditional mass media – television, movies, newspapers and so on. The case of Dutch vocalist and songwriter Esmee Denters typifies the site’s function in paving the way to recognized celebrity status. In September 2006, the 18-year-old high school student posted a video of herself singing on YouTube and then mobilized her friends via Hyves.nl and other social networking sites to view her recording and up her ratings. But Denters’ popularity only soared after she appeared on several Dutch television shows. In April 2007, she signed a contract with Justin Timberlake’s record company. The growing role of UGC platforms as intermediaries between amateurs and professionals, volunteers and employees, anonymous users and stars, can hardly be conceived apart from ‘old’ media conglomerates’ power to select, promote and remunerate artistic content. UGC is firmly locked into the commercial dynamics of the mediascape.

The contention that UGC platforms stimulate a democratic culture dominated by creative amateurs and providing free culture (Lessig, 2004) has been countered by vehement criticism. Former entrepreneur Andrew Keen (2007) lashed out at the ‘cult of the amateur’ which, in his view, has destroyed the system of paid content and paid professionals. Before the advent of UGC platforms, companies responsible for content could at least be held accountable for the mistakes they made; but the ‘wisdom of crowds’, according to Keen, causes the demise of the professional system. The overwhelming supply of amateur digital content has created a market in which cultural products are created at no cost and given away for free. Keen is thus convinced that amateurs and professionals, unpaid and paid labourers, cannot cohabit within the same system of cultural production. But, as the example of YouTube shows, the sliding scales of voluntarism and professionalism result in a variety of labour relationships, as well as in a recalibrated system of financial rewards, risks and benefits in an emerging ‘options’ market. Instead of bringing down the reigning professional leagues, UGC actually boosts the power of media moguls, enhancing their system of star ratings and upward mobility.

If anything, Keen’s critique shows the fallacy of defining user agency in bipolar terms of labour relations. UGC is neither exclusively produced by amateurs nor by professionals. The development of media content and media technologies has always attracted a mix of workers, due to its appeal as entertainment as well as work. The blending of work and play reverberates in the labour conditions adapted by many internet-based companies and new media industries. It is also manifest in the intermediary function of UGC sites, brokering between aspiring amateurs and commercial content firms. In this
emerging combination of job markets and trade markets, it is a myth to expect that amateurs or volunteers will gain more control over the monetization (or moderation) of their immaterial labour. By the same token, it is unlikely that professional markets will give way to a powerful base structure consisting of volunteers with enhanced claims to creative autonomy and financial independence. On the contrary, user agency is defined more than ever by the capital-intensive and technology-driven economies of global, vertically integrated markets.

Conclusion

When *Time* hailed You as the ‘Person of the Year’, the magazine paid tribute to the millions of anonymous, productive contributors to the web – a tribute akin to the badge of honour bestowed upon the unknown soldier. This powerful but contrived metaphor has come to define the concept of user agency as it dissipated into academic and professional discourses. Notions of ‘participatory culture’ tend to accentuate the emancipation of the engaged citizen, who unleashes her need for self-expression and creativity onto the digital spaces created expressly for this purpose. Economists and business managers applaud the rise of ‘wikinomics’, hailing the surge of produsers and co-creators whose contributions add substantial economic value. And notions such as ‘playful work’ and ‘professional voluntarism’ enter the digital industry’s parlance of work ethos and employment. Despite lingering images of self-effacing, engaged and productive cybernauts – echoing early internet frontierism – the ‘You’ lauded by *Time* has meanwhile entered the era of commercialized user-generated content, where user activity is heavily mediated by high-tech algorithms and data-mining firms. Exemplifying this transformation is the changing position of YouTube, a UGC site that evolved from a small start-up site driven by user communities into a commercial platform that is now an important node in an evolving ecosystem of media conglomerates dominated by Google.

It is important to include the perspectives from cultural theory, consumer sociology and political economy when trying to understand the essence of new user agency. Although older cultural theories of media use may still prove to be helpful in defining the conceptual boundaries at stake in this discussion, it seems obvious that we need more than singular disciplinary theories to help us understand the intricate relationships between social and technological agents. Cultural production can no longer be theorized exclusively in terms of industry or social stratification of consumers, as the amplified efficacy of media technologies is closely intertwined with the rise of global media constellations (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Increasingly, we find studies by cultural sociologists who scrutinize user-generated media in close connection to their technological design, but without further reference to their economic or political impact (Lai, 2007). Political economists have addressed issues of governance and power in
relation to technologically mediated interaction, but rarely relate these issues to cultural content and actual users (Mansell, 2004). A multidisciplinary approach to user agency should yield a model that accounts for users’ multiple roles, while concurrently accounting for technologies and site operators—owners as actors who steer user agency.

David Croteau (2006) rightly observed that we still know very little about the effect of user-generated content on the new media landscape. Conceptually and methodologically, media scholars will need to devise new ways to assess content trends across these new production platforms. In this article, I have argued for the articulation of user agency as a complex concept involving not only his cultural role as a facilitator of civic engagement and participation, but also his economic meaning as a producer, consumer and data provider, as well as the user’s volatile position in the labour market. Such a multifaceted concept needs to be met with proposals for multi-levelled methodologies that combine empirical research of users’ activities, motivations, status and intentions with contextual analyses charting techno-economic aspects of media use. User agency in the age of digital media can no longer be assessed from one exclusive disciplinary angle as the social, cultural, economic, technological and legal aspects of UGC sites are inextricably intertwined. Theories from cultural theory, empirical sociology, political economy and technology design need to be integrated to yield a nuanced model for assessing user agency. Indeed, composite companies like Google should be met with equally multifaceted models for understanding ‘users like you’.

Notes

1. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), based in Paris, issued a report titled Participative Web: User-generated Content (12 April 2007). The report was compiled by the OECD Committee for Information, Computer and Communications Policy. Citation on page 4. URL: http://www.oecd.org/home/0,3305,en_2649_201185_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

2. In fact, so-called personal media products have increasingly become part of televised everyday life, as illustrated by immensely popular formats such as America’s Funniest Home Videos. For more information on the development of home movies and videos, see Moran (2002) and van Dijck (2007).

3. A recent Social Technographics Survey, executed by Forrester Research Inc. (a private survey company), interviewed close to 10,000 American users and was conducted by Charlene Li in December of 2006. The Forrester report, Mapping Participation in Activities Forms the Foundation of a Social Strategy (19 April 2007), can be accessed for a charge at: www.forrester.com/go?docid=42057. The statistics in this list do not add up to 100 percent because users can be active in various roles, and, for instance, if they are ‘joiners’ they do not necessarily contribute content.

4. If we look at YouTube, which in the summer of 2006 covered almost 60 percent of the video-sharing market, these numbers are about right: on 100 million downloads there are 65,000 uploads each day, bringing the active–passive ratio on YouTube to just under 0.5 percent of all users. The Forrester survey in December 2006 (Li, 2007: 12)
sets the number of ‘active users’ on YouTube at 25 percent. The difference between these statistics, besides a time gap of six months in measuring, lies in the fact that ‘active creators’, according to the Forrester survey, do not necessarily contribute content to YouTube; they may have created content elsewhere (e.g. blogs).

5. GoogleVideo states in its Terms of Use:

Yo may designate a purchase and/or rental price in the Metadata Form that end users must pay in order to download Your Authorized Content. If you do not designate a price for Your Authorized Content, the price will automatically be set at zero. Except as otherwise set forth herein, In the event of any download of Your Authorized Content, by end users, We will pay to You seventy percent (70%) of the gross revenues, if any, recognized by Google and attributable to such video playback of Your Authorized Content based upon the price you designate. (https://upload.video.google.com/video_terms.html)

References


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