

Jane Mitchinson-Schwartz

Ryerson University

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Participatory On-line Cultures: The Formation of Community

Panic in the wake of the post-network era has many theorists sharing alarmist views about the loss of mass audiences and public in viewing television. Multiple channels, narrow-casting, and the rise of the Internet have authors like Sinclair and McChesney concerned about fragmented audiences. But with every new medium that has entered our sphere, older technologies have had to make room and transform their content by genre, transmission, or distribution, as the audience use and consumption practices transform. In radio's early inception, families used to collect in living rooms and gather around to co-listen to radio programs of narrated stories and in-house live music. As TV came along the use of radio transformed and continued to transform over time. Currently, people seem to use the medium as an alarm for waking up in the morning, a comforting murmur of companionship in the background, music to pass the time, quick ticker tape-like rundown of current news, and traffic and weather to coordinate daily routines and driving habits; although a participatory culture endures in the medium through talk shows. Traditional media formats are largely in transition since the Internet arrived on scene. Gumucio Dagron sees media convergence as sharing and informing practice of technological use. "The convergence between radio and Internet is one of the most interesting symbioses that new technologies can offer. Not only does community radio get empowered to reach new latitudes, but also Internet users learn from

a participatory experience that has done much for social change during the past fifty years” (Dagron, 30).

At the turn of this century, Professor Klaus Schoenbach, of the University of Amsterdam wrote, “I am waiting for the day when we hear the first complaints about a decline of watching television because of those new media out there” (Schoenbach). Schoenbach warned against the myth of the “dangerous new medium” as it applies to audiences in the changing media landscape. He needn’t worry about the realization of such a myth in the near future as long as theorists take stock in the numbers coming out of statistics. Studies show that television viewing hasn’t gone down in the wake of the Internet. A 2006 StatsCan report shows there’s very little difference between the number of television hours watched by heavy Internet users and non-users (Veenhof 15). TV viewing habits haven’t changed much. The number of hours Canadians logged watching TV each week was 26.3 in 2005/2006, a marginal increase over the previous year (Statscan 2006). And in the U-K, fewer than 15 percent of Internet users downloaded an entire television program, preferring standard methods of transmission (Allen 2007). In *Myths of Media and Audiences*, Schoenbach recanted his 1982 deduction that the introduction of the VCR would have a negative impact on mass audiences which represented a doom and gloom view of the inception of the new media. At that time, Schoenbach wrote that the introduction of the VCR was sure to impact upon audience by contributing to its fragmentation. That theme is being raised again among some media theorists in the advent of the convergence of new media. Media convergence offers new ways to access and view content in various mediums including television, Internet, mobile phones and hand-held devices and that's allowing viewers to be more active in

their selections of content and use. There's no doubt narrow-casting in the multi-channel era, along with technology that allows individualistic viewing such as TiVo, PVRs, and Internet downloading has modified co-viewing practices. British theorist, John Sinclair takes a technological determinist stance on the effect of media convergence on audiences in blaming the "post-broadcast era" for the continued fragmentation of Western domestic family life.

"If we shift focus from Western modernity and its national cultures to the micro-level of domestic life, a corresponding process of differentiation is taking place within the household, manifested as a fragmentation, or individualization, of domestic viewing...the tendency is intensified with the technologies of convergence...As further convergence makes the television screen, rather than the personal computer, the major means or access to the Internet, that can only broaden and accelerate this trend towards differentiating each household member as an (inter)active individualized consumer" (Sinclair 44).

Theorist Robert McChesney also sounded the alarm bell on the then-new information highway, saying, "it encourages isolation, atomization, and marginalization in society" (145). No doubt the family's co-viewing practices have become fragmented. A 2005 study showed that more than half of teenagers frequently viewed other forms of media while watching television (Mittell 372). This is not to apply blame to a generational gap. Half of the Canadian users of the social media website, Facebook are over 35 years of age (Murray 90).

Recently, Canadian theorist Amanda Lotz has seen a more positive and productive audience outcome emerging from the culture of media convergence. While it is true that the television audience has become fragmented in the home since the multi-channel era, the Internet is presenting a new opportunity for connection between a wider geographic and diverse scope of participatory members.

“If the lack of interactivity inherent in the one-way transmission of television made it difficult for viewers to recreate viewing communities during much of the multi-channel transition, the web has since created locations for the development of rich fan cultures and communities. As the 'viewsing' [sic] of television and the Internet continue to converge, audience members will be better able to participate in communities of fanship, view virtually together, and share their viewing tastes and pleasures with friends, family, and others” (255).

Media convergence is changing the landscape and that presents some challenges in audience research. Sonia Livingstone outlines a continued need for audience research, “As audiences become less predictable, more fragmented or more variable in their engagement with media, understanding the audience is even more important for theories of social shaping, design markets and diffusion than perhaps was true of older media” (63b). Emerging research on the development of a participatory culture is more relevant than ever, as specialized communities reveal codified consumption practices. Nielsen Media Research is changing its audience metrics to meet the changing technological landscape and client needs. The media ratings company responded to a client meeting with the Coalition for Innovative Media Measurement held in October 2009, at which

senior V-P Tracey Scheppach at SMG Exchange, an offshoot of CIMM member Starcom MediaVest, pointed the finger at Nielsen for the metrics lag. “While audiences have fragmented, Nielsen's panel size has not kept up, (leading to) dumbed down, inaccurate data” (Basil). Two weeks later, the company announced it would finally start using an Internet monitoring box it had been testing out in select areas to go alongside its cable monitoring box (Mandese).

DEFINING THE WEBESPHERE

The emergence of Web 2.0 applications has spawned new participatory communities within the public sphere of the web. Habermas’ exclusive public sphere of bourgeois men holding and conversing about societal and ideological knowledge in the name of culture has no place here, yet ironically early adopters were white, middle age, college educated men.¹ Anyone with a computer, access to a network, and a working knowledge of basic technological skills can participate in this public. I acknowledge that there is a geographic and economic digital divide in the world and that this web public or “webesphere” is exclusive to those linked in. Countries like Africa with poor network infrastructure have restricted entry to this public space, though some are circumventing this with the adoption of satellite service to the Internet on their cell phones (Joubert). As well, some citizens of lower economic status may have less interaction within the webesphere, but can still connect through libraries and schools and thus, are not totally outside this sphere. For those that are linked-in, gender, age, and class do not limit membership, though some of the aesthetics of interface to the net may differ and some passageways within the sphere may be restricted as doors of access swing shut on those who cannot afford a

¹ Henry Jenkins acknowledges this group of men as early adopters in his book, *Convergence Culture* (p23)

monetary subscription. This of course, will limit some spaces in which participants can move within the various communities of the webosphere.

In the post-network era of media convergence, some theorists believe an audience participatory culture has formed in the cyber-world. This participatory culture is not to be confused with “interactive audience theory,” though the two share common ground.

Henry Jenkins explains the distinction.

“Interactivity is a property of the technology, while participation is a property of culture. Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. A focus on expanding access to new technologies carries us only so far if we do not also foster the skills and cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those tools toward our own ends” (Jenkins 10a).

The fact that we may be using the medium in an interactive way has meaning here only in the sense that we are treating the medium as a tool of infrastructure. Engaging in a participatory culture is so much more. It involves the forming of communities; communities that engage participants with content in culturally-codified and contextualized ways.

While television audiences become more and more fragmented, the Internet provides space for the formation of specialized communities. These communities are made up of people from distinct audiences as well as people from purposeful publics.

According to Paul Attallah, there is a key difference between the definition of audience and the definition of public.

“Audiences come together not to do something, but to experience something...audiences [sic] are nonrandom groups of people united around a desire for an experience...Whereas the audience is an entertainment or consumer concept, the public is held to be a political concept. Whereas the audience refers to preferences and enjoyment, the public refers to reason and judgment. Whereas the audience can be fickle and ephemeral, the public is usually held to grow out of principles; which it expresses with constancy” (58-59).

I use the word “community” or “communities” as all-encompassing to describe a group of people that come together for multiple and diverse purposes; whether a group congregates for pleasure, as in Attallah’s description of audiences, or whether it formulates for action. Political, geographical, social, and marketing parameters around which a community may form...these factors are not meant to be part of a discussion of validity or bias towards a formation of a community, though they may enter discourse through an exploration of the dynamics of a diverse community culture.

Armand Mattelart seems to suggest the Internet has to be regulated by government policies to protect it from creating hollow “consumption communities” served up by free markets (Mattelart 146). I’m not saying those “hollow consumptive communities don’t exist. What I am saying is that there are collaborative and democratic communities forming despite a free market. I would go so far as to suggest that some of those collaborative and democratic communities are even living and breathing within

commercialized sites that have obviously been produced for the purpose of consumption. Media author, Amanda Lotz says online participatory cultures formed around commercialized network content still form meaningful communities.

“Communities of viewers sharing interests, favorites, and self-produced content have emerged to organize post-network viewing in the manner previously provided by the networks. The investment in stories and ideas that lead to the connection people make online provides tools for the beginning of relationships –what he (Chris Anderson) identifies as the creation of ‘tribes of affinity’” (246).

The parameters around the formulation of social interaction and relationship-building within a community do not de-authenticate the building of community. Regardless, discourse and transaction of membership is meaningful. Cultural theorists, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would surely see it otherwise. Adorno and Horkheimer coined the phrase “cultural industries” in 1947 to describe products designed for mass consumption. “The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above...the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object” (Adorno). The participatory nature of Web 2.0 transforms this top-down commercialized use of the net. It is not my intention to take an overly simplistic view by claiming members of a participatory culture have complete sovereignty from market and media industries. The Internet itself is jam-packed with examples of what Adorno and Horkheimer would classify as cultural industries and obviously users do at times submit to the position of “objects” as they are targeted by

capitalist venture on the Internet. Various Web 2.0 and 3.0 applications work to figure out your psychographic and demographic variables to build a tailored market profile around you, the e-consumer. Log into your Google Gmail account and you'll find a column of ads aggregated from your recent search strings on Google's search engine. I discovered this profiling and marketing practice after researching the topic of gay body image for another essay and was greeted by ads on anorexia, weight loss strategies, and gay fitness clubs in Toronto the next time I checked my gmail.

Global Business Network's Andrew Blau had foresight in the development of a grassroots cultural transformation. In the 2005 report for "The Future of Independent Media" :

“The media landscape will be reshaped by the bottom-up energy of media created by amateurs and hobbyists as a matter of course. This bottom up energy will generate enormous creativity, but it will also tear apart some of the categories that organize the lives and work of media makers...A new generation of media-makers and viewers are emerging which could lead to a sea change in how media is made and consumed” (3).

Jenkins echoed that prediction asserting that,

“Convergence does not depend on any specific delivery mechanism. Rather convergence represents a paradigm shift -a move from medium specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, towards multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture” (243b).

Motivation behind participatory involvement in the media landscape comes from expectations of, “a freer flow of ideas and content. Inspired by those ideals, consumers are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture” (Jenkins 18b).

EXPRESSIONS OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Leading this grassroots cultural transformation in media-use are our youth. The generation of digital natives has no strong familiarity with what Copyright lawyer, Larry Lessig calls the “read-only culture” that we as digital immigrants have become accustomed to. Through most of our lives media was produced, selected, and distributed by a small minority of privileged and connected individuals in the media industry. The audience was meant to receive content only as a form of one-way communication. What the youth are engaging in is the production of user-generated content, shared in their participatory communities with friends and others holding similar interests. This is a generation of what Lessig calls “read-write” (Lessig). This is the language of youth. Participation in R/W culture allows for the representation of a diversity of cultural and personal meanings through remixing and reformulating content as youth play with existing genres and works, repurposing content. Jenkins seems to agree with Lessig and finds value in R/W culture.

“Expanding the potentials for participation represents the greatest opportunity for cultural diversity. Throw away the powers of broadcasting and one has only cultural fragmentation. The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it, amending

it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media” (157b).

Transforming existing and mediated culture by way of R/W gives rise to an intertextualized representation of cultural knowledge. By intertextualized, I mean that youth are taking existing cultural knowledge and reappropriating it to communicate, place themselves within it, and express their relationship to the cultural knowledge.

Browse YouTube and you’ll find members of fan communities reappropriating media content to attach their own intertextualized meaning. Youth are re-mixing and creating mash-ups of trailers for TV shows and movies. They are engaged as content producers and they share their work by posting it for friends and other fans to comment on. On-line fan communities that blog about celebrities like Twilight stars Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart will even insert or hyperlink to these mash-ups, weaving an even more complex network of participatory fan communities (robertpattinson.org). Sonia Livingstone says people are actively shaping their media culture and that audiences have been found to differ from researchers in their reception of media content. She says, “Viewers’ interpretations diverge depending on the symbolic resources associated with their socioeconomic position, gender, ethnicity, and so forth” (79a). In other words, while browsing these fan sites, don’t be surprised if you come across a video that shows all flattering shots of Robert Pattinson with matted hearts on the screen, while only the back of Stewart’s head is shown. An intertextualized cultural knowledge is formed based on the preferences and tastes of the R/W-engaged viewer. A transformation of the original text does not show complete deviance from the producer’s original intended message.

Rather, it gives us valuable insight into how audience members relate to that message through creative expression.

Theorist Greg Philo partially rejects Hall's audience reception theories in decoding and encoding messages, cautioning against ideas that the audience can fully self-appropriate the intended messages of the content producer.

“Some people believe and accept the message, others reject it using knowledge from their own experience or can use processes of logic or other rationales to criticise what is being said. But some theorists go beyond this to suggest that audiences create their own meanings from the text — i.e. meaning is in the encounter with the text. The suggestion is that a text will mean completely different things to different audiences” (Philo).

Viewing examples of youth appropriation of texts through mash-ups and re-mix shows that they do not stray entirely from the producer's intended meaning.

AFFILIATIONS IN PARTICIPATORY CULTURE.

The positive outcomes from developing affiliations in online communities through a shared democracy, creativity, forum of expression, knowledge-sharing, and the development of meaningful relationships hold much merit and will be discussed further on. Failing to address the potential drawbacks of the culture would be too cyber-utopian and so I will leave the idealism until further on in my writing.

Participatory culture on the web can cultivate the reinforcement of prejudices of fringe groups. I stress that we are not talking about the majority here, but about smaller groups of people coming together in fringe communities. The very nature of the

"affiliations" component of participatory web culture in that it forms community membership, works to attract like-minded individuals into ideologically-shared spaces. Could that containment and exclusivity of that membership environment reinforce fringe ideological beliefs so far as to cause that group to believe it holds the dominant ideology? Or will its members still be cognizant that they are part of a very specific group holding oppositional readings?" This could lead us back to reviewing Hall's theories of dominant, oppositional and negotiated meaning... a model that may fit better in this new post-network era of masses fragmenting into smaller, more specified communities. We may even have to re-visit unpopular opinions of a theorist who has contributed very little to the public arena surrounding media theory since the publishing of his 1992 essay, *Pointless Populism*. Despite academia's dismissing of Seaman because of his grumpy criticism of ethnographic audience research and taking on respected theorists Fiske and Morley, more than ever, his point about the reinforcement of beliefs in a group taking oppositional readings may apply to Internet communities. Seaman was of course, talking about television audiences, but the concept is easily transferrable to different media audiences. Seaman submitted that audiences could take plural meanings from a text, some of them damaging. He submitted the dominant audience perception of women in *Charlie's Angels* taking active, controlling roles,

“...tells us nothing about the men who may have failed to override ‘the incorporating devices that worked to recuperate the feminist elements back into patriarchy’. Men’s pleasure...may have entirely different implications for the effectiveness of ‘incorporating devices’. While there may be a plurality of readings which ‘subvert’ the sexist elements of a television

program, there is certainly an equally expansive plurality of readings which may engender, affirm, or possibly encourage and amplify sexist attitudes within the general viewing community” (Seaman 8).

Examining fringe forums on the Internet can unveil polysemic interpretations by audience members, but my predominant purpose here is to show dynamics of participatory cultures, not to make individual value judgments.

The affiliations component of participatory web culture in bringing together community members who share like-minded interests can also promote a kind of democratized knowledge-base. The virtual town hall in which citizens ask politicians questions, record them and post them on sites such as MoveOn.org and YouTube for discussion employs a participatory political activism. Campaign posting appeared in the Social Interaction site, Second Life during the last U-S presidential election. A new democratic participation in developing knowledge emerges in varying web spaces. Wikipedia is the most classic example of the creation of a democratized knowledge base. Data entry is performed by multiple participants making a collaborative effort to pull information from encyclopedias, academia, and specific information to subgroups. Because of the nature of the entry of information, there are some members of the public who turn their noses up at Wikipedia, not trusting the information to be correct. Wikipedia monitors do their best to evaluate the information, giving warnings about the validity of a page if it does not include appropriate citations and links. But the general public using Wikipedia is what keeps a good amount of the information current and accurate. Participants are always ready to jump in and make corrections. That’s not to say

that there aren't any flaws in the participatory accumulation of such a knowledge-base. Some of these participants can act in self-interest and modify and skew the information. In 2006, I contributed to the page on Media Literacy by adding the Canadian, Australian, and British content. American content and sources had only appeared on the page before I got to it. In an effort not to overemphasize any country's participation in the field of media literacy, I alphabetized the countries with Australia appearing at the top. The very next day my page was modified and the U-S information was moved to the top, ahead of all the other countries.

Jenkins acknowledges the quest for information can bring together participatory cultures from the world of "fandom". He references a whole knowledge community that formed around the show *Survivor*. The popular TV show is "designed for the Internet age –designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted and critiqued. The hard-core fans are known as "spoilers," as they take satellite images to locate the base camp and skim frame by frame looking for clues in an effort to discover who gets booted off before the show reveals this information (25-26b). Participation in the accumulation and appropriation of collective information is one big challenge, serving a purpose similar to unscrambling a puzzle.

Controversy around the formation of a study group on the social networking site Facebook nearly led to an 18-year old Engineering student being expelled from Ryerson in March of 2008. Supporters of Chris Avenir argued the online study group was no different from any kind of homework help or tutoring circle. Ryerson officials "accused him of going too far with an exhortation to 'input solutions' to assignment problems" (Brown; Canadian Press). Luckily for Chris, the school decided not to expel him. The

story reveals an unfortunate resistance in academia to the forming of knowledge communities in cyberspace. Value in the collective knowledge has been dismissed because of the technological properties that brought it into the public sphere. Davin Carey, a student at San Diego State responded in one post, “Is it our fault that schools are so antiquated they don’t understand that Facebook is like a virtual study hall or dorm room or any other place we would all normally study?” The friction between academia and the digital native generation extends beyond the educational sphere and raises issues pertaining to laws of copyright and plagiarism as a participatory culture of sharing content thrives. What we have is a generation of youth so used to breaking the law on a daily basis, who illegally download content and akin it to driving 10 kilometres over the speed limit. A whole industry of artists and producers whose survival has traditionally been based on consumer consumption practices waits unsteadily for a glimpse of the future; to find a place in culture after the fallout from a technologically-changed media landscape. It seems that during the period of transition, making knowledge common through a linked-in participatory culture leaves some victims in its wake. Rather than throwing our hands up in the air, Jenkins encourages studying the participatory culture.

“Knowledge forms around mutual intellectual interests; their members work together to forge new knowledge often in realms where no professional expertise exists; the pursuit of and assessment of knowledge is at once communal and adversarial. Mapping how these knowledge communities work can help us better understand the social nature of contemporary media consumption. They can also give us insight into how knowledge becomes power in the age of media convergence” (20b).

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