

Introduction


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Media Prosumers. Participatory Culture of Audiences and Media Responsibility

Prosumidores mediáticos
Cultura participativa de las audiencias y responsabilidad de los medios

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Technology is creating new ways of being, relating, getting around, becoming informed, and interacting. In this context of change that is brought about by ICT, it can be asserted that it is the relationship of people to media and information which has undergone the biggest transformation, specifically with the arrival of media such as the Internet. Digital media allows some recipients to frequently occupy the role of senders, capable of transmitting and sharing content without renouncing the role of media consumer. This process has generated «prosumer» as the concept that occupies the central focus of this issue of this journal.

It is worth noting that this situation –and, indeed, the concept– cannot be generalized to include everyone in developed countries. When speaking of the marriage between the audience and different technologies, one cannot leave out young people as primary users of these technologies and also as the main participants in the content, which is produced and transmitted over the Web for sharing purposes. The so-called «Generation Y», that is to say those who were born in the '80s, has lived through one of the biggest transformations that has taken place in the history of humanity. Thus, Toffler refers to the «Third Wave», with the first being the agricultural revolution, the second the industrial revolution, and this last one the technological revolution. This digital Tsunami has necessarily brought about changes in different aspects of our existence, such as what has happened with the nomenclature of media, itself. Therefore, alongside concepts such as «mass media» the term «social media» has appeared as a permanent addition, even though all mass media is by definition also social media.

Throughout this process of change and adaptation to the new formulas of relating to the new media, three key activities can be seen: composing, sharing/participating, and distributing, which will be closely analyzed in the following. It is worth noting that none of these activities or essential elements in the relationship that is created between users and the particular media has isolated reasons for existing as far as digital natives are concerned.

With respect to the first of these activities, that of content creation, it is abundantly clear that anything from a video-witness to a call for solidarity through pictures or news created by these same young people, the opportunities to create using these new technologies and devices supersede anything that any of the previous generations, whose means/modes of communication were quite limited, could have possibly imagined. Of course, both the creators and consumers of content have a distinct purpose—that of sharing it.

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This is the second of the key activities in the process of the prosumer. It doesn't make sense to create without sharing. Social networks play a fundamental role in this since they are created in a medium where little is rejected. As a matter of fact, problems arise precisely because young people do not comprehend where the boundaries [should] lie insofar as putting content in the public arena as, perhaps, adults do. We can list some positive examples of where sharing content is the essence of sharing. For example, you can begin with Wikipedia, itself, which began in January of 2001 as a free and multilingual encyclopedia specifically founded on collaboration. Or, again, in 2004 when the term Web 2.0 appears in which the Web became a social venue, and the term is created to deal with the three «w's» which seek to increase creativity and exchange of information between users. Or in 2005 when YouTube, the website which allows for the sharing of digital videos, appears.

But sharing is participating. As a matter of fact, people start talking about the participatory culture of audiences. From feedback criticizing how a certain subject matter is dealt with to being a first-person witness of something that has been recorded, digital media has allowed people to feel as though they are being heard. They have found a way to make their words reach out.

We want to make a distinction as to the third element, that of dissemination, to emphasize the opportunities that the new media affords the user as consumer and as producer of content reaching millions of people in a very short amount of time, e.g. space-time compression. Limits of time and space have been done away with; content is on the web and 2.4 billion people use it nearly on a daily basis. If the internet produced important sociological changes, social online networks have not been far behind. Even though Facebook was not the first social network, it can be said that it has achieved a feat insofar as communication is concerned, especially for young people, since it is not just a method to alert people to events but rather events are created by the mere sharing of them on the web.

Thus this world of change and adaptation in which we live is creating an unprecedented participatory culture for the younger audiences. In this context it would seem that it is necessary for the media and related social institutions, themselves, to take on a corresponding role of being the socially-responsible party while at the same time insisting on the need to educate the young with a critical eye for confronting future media challenges. Media literacy is absolutely essential.



The majority of articles dealing with this issue have the common theme of online social networks playing a primary role as the main medium representing the prosumer role of citizens and the participatory or reactive culture of audiences.

In this sense the article by Rosa García Ruiz, Antonia Ramírez, and María Mar Rodríguez Rosell, which opens this particular journal issue, is very interesting since it points out that although access to technology and the internet have had a positive effect in all aspects of our lives –personal, familial, professional, and social– media literacy hasn't kept up. Development of media competency among the citizenry, especially youth and children so that they can approach media critically and actively is absolutely necessary in this society of media prosumers.

As a matter of fact, several articles attempt to emphasize the role that the internet and, more specifically, online social networks play in the development of social and civic participation among young people. The first of these, one written by Carmen García Galera, Mercedes del Hoyo, and Cristóbal Fernández, mentions that young people utilize social networks in order to participate in collective social action. Cristian Cabalín's article highlights this with a case study in which he shows how young people in Chile turned to Facebook to mobilize student protests in contrast to what was being covered by official news outlets.

Flavia Gomes Franco e Silva and José Carlos Sendin Gutiérrez reiterate the need for literacy in their article about the negative effect the internet can have on teenagers. Given that this section of the population, or at least a grand percentage of them, feels the need to be constantly connected, these scholars investigate other variables, such as family relationships, that influence their use or abuse of the internet, turning them into prosumers without a critical perspective of their time investment in and their general use of the web.

Francisco Javier Ruíz del Olmo and Ana María Belmonte Jiménez focus on mobile devices as tools, which beyond their obvious usefulness of allowing people to search for new information, products, and services or commercial promotions, also have an important added social value – that of creation of virtual communities, shared social and cultural practices, and a sense of belonging and identifying with the values of a brand, something essential for groups of young people – that being its main contribution with respect to prosumers. The youngest users of intelligent mobile devices are turning out to be pioneers in new social, communication, and cultural uses of this technological tool. Such tools influence the vital experience of the user and the creation of communities around values, lifestyles, and brand idiosyncrasies. For corporations (and this is a subject that deserves further research) virtual communities are very useful as they strive to foment client loyalty.

Carmen Fuente Cobo, Juan María Martínez Otero, and Rogelio del Prado Flores foreground issues of social responsibility of the media, which is part of the title of this journal issue. Their article takes up the main disciplinary positions regarding the dichotomy between citizens and consumers and suggests that the different concepts of audience have a deep connection to the way in which the control of the media and the accountability of its operators is thought of in the public sphere. The additional interesting point of the article is the comparative analysis it makes between the situation in Spain and Mexico. Salomé Berrocal, Eva Campos, and Marta Redondo deal with an area that has barely been touched on in studies, either at a national or international level: they analyze the prosumer of political «infotainment» on the Internet. This research explores «politainment» on Web 2.0 and the role of the prosumer in this new communication sphere. The presumption of «politainment» on the internet is characterized by massive consumption by users but high passivity in terms of its production. The prosumer establishes his consumption and production on collaborative action, but s/he is not the hegemonic producer of this content. The media prosumer of «politainment» is characterized by exercising a very limited presumption insofar as the creation of messages and major consumption but also very polarized and limited in thematic variety in that s/he tends to reproduce the same message repeatedly –the same content in various versions– without even having a participatory role as prosumer.

Natalia Quintas and Ana González discuss the relationship between traditional media, such as television, and new formulas of communication, such as social networks. This convergence, which has brought about the so-called social audience, is analyzed in their work with the purpose of establishing the elements which contribute to the success or failure of programs with the same format in relation to

this social audience. As the authors, themselves, mention, the conclusions derived from their analysis of the Spanish experience can serve as a model for other countries where the development of a social media audience is not quite as extensive.

Finally, María Sánchez y María Bella Palomo bring to light another possibility that participation of internet and social network audiences offer: crowdfunding. This formula grants the public the power, through its contributions, to decide what projects will be carried out and has already allowed for start-ups of micromedia and other innovative initiatives in Spain especially with the emergence, particularly in the last five years, of virtual platforms specialized in launching campaigns and the so-called «social media» which facilitate its dissemination. The article written by Rayén Condeza, Ingrid Bachmann, and Constanza Mujica show once again how social networks are also an information medium. This research explores how Chileans between the ages of 13 and 17 consume news in a media context with multiple inputs, convergence, and mobile culture. The results show that the young people surveyed become informed mostly through social networks such as Facebook while their use of conventional media is in decline. What least interests them is traditional politics, which, according to them, is the subject most covered in the news. Their motivation in consuming information is related to the desire to defend their own points of view and to deliver information to others.