

MEDIA & SOCIETY

Medium, Message and Masses

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participatory culture in mainstream media and audience engagement in content creation

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Abstract

The chapter attempts a conceptual analysis of participatory culture, user generated content and the networked audience. The media landscape is in a continuous state of flux, driven by technological changes. The emergence of digital, converged communication technologies, which has brought together the once-distinct media forms, has opened up the media space. Digital convergence is blurring the lines between media producers and recipients - the audience. The culture of participation has permeated every aspect of human living including the media, which is an integral part of our lives The traditional journalistic practices of news story ideation, gathering, processing and reporting has been disrupted by the involvement of lay persons empowered by technology, the sense of connectedness and engagement on the part of the once-passive audience that use to consumer content. Audience participation in the journalistic

process of content creation depends on the fact that digital media enable the creation of multimedia contents by individuals and also facilitate ease of dissemination.

KEY WORDS: Participatory culture, digital convergence, user generated content and audience.

Introduction

"Evidently, journalism would be different today without digital technologies"-Primo and Zago (2015, p.39).

The media landscape in the 21st century is in a continuous state of change. At the core of this transformation is technological advancement. The emergence of digital, converged communication technologies, which has brought together the once-distinct media forms, has opened up the media space. This advancement in contemporary society has also made available a plethora of digital, interactive and accessible information and communication technology (ICTs) tools. Consequently, members of the public targeted by mass media messages, who were once referred to as the audience in Jay Rosen's view, and were at the receiving end of one-way mass media messages, have been empowered to become active content providers.

The age-long journalistic practices based on established norms and routines are not free from the seeming disruptive tendencies of technology. The prevalence of members of the public participating in journalistic endeavours has challenged journalistic prerogatives of story idea generation, gathering, analyzing, interpreting and disseminating information to the mass audience or receivers. Traditionally, journalists

are regarded as the first gatekeeper in journalism practice as in most cases, they are practically present on the field or at events. They therefore have the opportunity to report both the event and the atmosphere of the event.

However, though media are ubiquitous, permeating the nooks and cranny of the society through newspaper and magazine circulations, the airwaves and the internet, journalists are not omnipresent beings. Budgetary constraints with its attendant reduction in the number of local field reporters, foreign correspondents across the globe and non-subscription to news agencies at all levels; restricted access to cover events especially crisis and the need to provide 'stop gaps' (Brown, 2015, p.44) for news breaks and other contexts, until the trained journalists gather and provide professional contents to corroborate the events compel mainstream media to rely on contents provided by lay persons. These contributions have been termed severally, with citizen journalism, user generated contents and participatory journalism popularly used in academic research.

This chapter, within the theoretical underpinning of technological determinism, discusses the trajectory of participatory culture, user generated content and the audience in a networked environment. The chapter is broken into the following sections: Introduction, conceptual clarifications, the theoretical basis of the study, as well as the relationship between participatory culture, user generated content and the networked audience. Finally, the chapter concludes by looking at what trends participatory culture portends for the audience who are increasingly becoming hyper active through their participation in user content creation and their engagement with media products.

Conceptual clarifications

Participatory Culture: Jenkins defines participatory culture as "with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement with strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others with some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices; where members believe their contributions matter; where members feel some degree of social connection with one another" (2007, 24). Participatory culture is a democratisation of the communication process where everyone is free to contribute and has a sense of value. As Jenkins observes, in participatory culture, it is not mandatory for everyone to contribute, but everyone must believe that they are free to contribute contents whenever they choose to and that contents contributed will be held valuable. The culture of participation has permeated every aspect of human living including the media, which is an integral part of our lives.

Participatory culture is in response to the proliferation of new media technologies which has birthed the possibility of consumers to record, interpret, appropriate, and re-distribute media content in powerful new ways (Jenkins, et al., 2007). The explosion in digital technologies and access to the information superhighway via the Internet, a convergent medium that enables witnesses to package and distribute on-the-minute testimonies themselves as information purveyors. Rather than the traditional model of inviting professional journalists to cover an unfolding event, ordinary citizens are assuming the role of being witnesses all by themselves as citizen witnesses. Citizen witnessing is at the forefront of the debates on the blurring lines of journalistic boundaries. The ongoing

debates on the incursion of the journalistic field by new entrants is centered on pushing the boundaries of professional journalism.

Participatory journalism is an all-encompassing, multifaceted term that has been used synonymously with terms such as grassroots journalism, user generated content, interactive journalism, collaborative journalism, networked journalism. Participation is a continuum ranging from users' comments on news stories to audience members constructing news collaboratively with mainstream media (Helmueller & Li, 2014),

However, rather than being synonymous with the aforementioned terms, Vobic and Dahglen (2013) posit that participatory journalism has emerged as a general rubric to refer to all forms of non-professional activities in journalism provision that capture the ideas of collaborative and collective action as against individualistic action. They identified seven forms of overlapping manifestations of participatory journalism from extant literature based on the extent of participation in the journalistic practices: These forms of participation differ based on the degree of audience engagement or involvement in journalistic activities and also their relationship with mainstream media.

- Citizen-assisted journalism; this is where members of the public or citizens contribute contents to established or mainstream news organizations, who may also solicit for such contents from them. This may take the form of eyewitness media such as visual images or reports. For example, CNN's *iReport,* BBC's *UGC Hub* and *Channels Television*'s eyewitness app. In citizen- assisted journalism, non-professionals contribute to the news-gathering process by sending in pictures, videos and audios they had taken with their digital devices to traditional media outlets.

- Community or grassroots journalism; this is also known as hyper local journalism. It is the 'we media', non-professional citizen initiatives operating online. These online platforms operating on the hyper-local level have emerged as open and non-hierarchical initiatives that might take a central role in developing more cohesive communities by identifying the problems of these communities, as well as proposing suggestions on how to resolve these problems.

- Advocacy journalism; this is a form of participatory journalism that is pursued by interest groups so as to promote particular causes.

- Activist journalism; this form of journalism is undertaken as the news arm of political organisations or social movements struggling for societal change.

- Alternative journalism; this form of journalism portrays the activities of full-blown news organisations that have a strong anchoring in professional norms, but which position themselves differently in relation to prevailing political hegemonies (e.g. Indymedia). As such, alternative journalism poses challenges to, and recontextualises, dominant representational practices of mainstream news,

- Citizen journalism; this is the most popular, diverse and fluid manifestation of individual (micro-) bloggers and other voices in the social media space who offer news, commentary and opinion on varied topics ranging from traffic reports to health and fitness tips to hobby suggestions.

Citizen journalism is individualistic, with the citizen journalist working independently of professional journalists in the gathering, producing and dissemination of information through social media platforms, blogs and other online platforms.

Online journalism; this is a form of journalism where facts are reported via the internet. These include mainstream news sites online, internet-only media organisations for example Sahara reporters, Premium Times with no affiliation to any offline news media organisations. They also include index and category sites as well as meta and comment sites.

Media and participatory culture: An overview

Media does not exist in isolation, but rather, as Jenkins, Purushotma, Robison, Weigel and Clinton (2007) statedm it operates in a given cultural and institutional contexts which determines their usage and the reasons for their use. Participatory culture has permeated the media landscape. It is now commonplace in both traditional news sites and online media, as participatory opportunities offered by online platforms such as social networking sites and blogs facilitate user content generation. Within the purview of professional journalism, legacy media organisations allow some form of participation through the inclusion of user generated contents into professional media products as a way of engaging their audience, albeit, with reluctance. Knaudt, Siebe, Graham and Harbers (2016) explains Canter's (2013) position that though legacy media recognise the need to adopt new, participatory forms of online journalism, their resistance to leave the traditional top- down practice behind is borne out of fear of threatening the authority conferred on them as source of credible

information about the society. For instance, mainstream organisa
adopt various strategies when they allow ordinary persons to partici
in the newsroom practices, such as subjecting user generated conte
to their routine practices of verification, segregating amateur conte
from professional contents and distancing themselves from the conte
attributable to lay persons.

Social media perspective and participatory culture

The rise of social media platforms is transformative, as the world arou
us has been affected by social media. Burns (2017) avers that no offe
technological development in the history of mankind has had such
significant impact on connectivity and communication as social media
Social media has permeated every aspect of human existence and i
use widespread (Umeaku &Shaibu, 2019). Social media are virtua
communities where people interact, create and share contents in
participatory manner. Social media's ubiquity is due to its interactiv
features, on- demand access and its capacity to allow user generate
contents. Participatory culture in contemporary society is demonstrate
through social media platforms. The popularity of social media platform
has facilitated social interaction as well as participation on an unparallele
scale.

Social media are Internet-based platforms that enable users to creat
profiles for sharing user-generated digital content in various forms such
as text, photos, graphics, or videos within a networked community
users who are able to respond to the content (Burns, 2017). Activeness
and passivity also plays out on social media platforms, as Khan (201
observes that engagement with the social media are of varying degrees

that of consumers who passively view contents posted by others without making any contribution; participants who participate in various ways ranging from liking, commenting and sharing contents and of producers who engage in content creation.

Theorising Audience

Audiences are the end users of mass communication products who are the recipient of messages or information from a communication source. McQuail (2010) views audience as a collective term for the receivers of mass communication. In simple words, a sequential linear model of the process of mass communication (source-channel-message-receiver-effects) as postulated by early communication scholars like Wilbur Schramm. As the media landscape evolved, this element in the communication also evolved. Media audiences were once conceived as receptive, attentive yet passive recipients of media messages and Bello (2020) refers to as that of mobility, individualism and diversity of media usage. The audience metamorphosed with the dawn of the era of new media. McQuail (2010) asserts that the rise of new media brought about entirely new forms of behaviours revolving around interactivity and searching, as against previous behaviours of watching or listening to media contents, thereby blurring the lines of distinction between the producers and audiences.

With the changing media landscape driven albeit not entirely, by the emergence of new, participatory and interactive digital technologies, the active media audience have been transformed into what Bruns (2006) refers to as 'produsers' participating in 'produsage' (p.2). In this media environment, audience members rather than being at the receiving end of

mass communication products as consumers, are consuming or
content in a collaborative manner. That is, the new media environ
enables audience members to be both recipients and sources of
communication (Napoli, 2008). Media audiences are now interac
and engaging with media, re-defining traditional mass communicat
culture. The active media audience are now 'active, participating audien
members' (Bird, 2011).

According to Bruns (2006) while explaining the notion of media audien
as produsers engaging in produsage, "these produsers do not engage
a traditional form of content production, but are instead involved
produsage – the collaborative and continuous building and extendi
of existing content in pursuit of further improvement" (p.3). Howev
though interactive digital technologies, Web 2.0. has opened the onc
closed journalistic landscape, not all media consumers are produce
Porlezza (2019) suggests that participatory inequalities exist, with few
pro-active and creative users. Skepticism and resistance to open up th
journalistic processes by legacy media inhibits the culture of participatio
within the professional journalism sphere. This view was shared earlie
by Bird (2011), that the majority of the audience are not yet produser
either by choice or as a result of access to time and resources.

User generated content

User generated content (UGC) is a concept associated with participator
culture. UGC signifies all forms of media contents created by media
consumers and are available in public domains. It is regarded as one o
the major features of Web 2.0, UGC may be created collectively, as in
consortium, or individually to be freely distributed via online platforms

The ability of users generating content is not a new phenomenon and is due to the long- established accessibility of production technologies such as the home video cameras, personal computers, typewriters and home recording equipment (Napoli, 2008). The author argues that the new dimension to users generating their own contents is in their ability to share contents using the Web.

Content creation by users is not limited to the digital space but it has found its way into professional media productions because of the inherent motivations in user generated content. Manosevitch and Tenenboim (2016) highlights several motivations for UGC from literature; the need to improve brand loyalty; increase in website traffic that draws advertisers and sponsors tothe site; provision of free contents through free labour. For the traditional media organisations, diverting user generated contents into professional products may improve credibility ratings in the eye of the public and as well restore trust in legacy media and their contents. Citizen journalism's popularity is borne out of the audience's disenchantment with institutionalised media, whose credibility had been on the decline. In addition, audience engagement with mainstream media through participation in content creation results in newsroom budgetary cuts.

Technological determinism

Technology is a driving force of societal change. Proponents of technological determinism see technology as the sole cause of societal change, while anti-technological determinism view technology as one of several factors that brings about societal change. The journalism profession evolved and developed side by side technological developments, from

Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 15th century th
possibility of sending information without wires through the air
in the 19th century to the birth of digital journalism facilitated by
introduction of Web 2.0 and digital communication technologies. Pr
and Zago (2015) argue that technology is inherent to journalism and
just a tool or accessory.

Relationship of participatory culture, networked audienc and user generated content

The culture of participation especially within the circle of mainstre
media is dependent on user generated content. The audience as 'produ
in a networked environment participate in the newsroom culture and
the various stages of the production processes. Nevertheless, the extent
participation depends on the nature of the relationship that exists betwe
the mainstream media and their audience. The roles assigned to ordina
citizens determines the extent of participation; whether as eye-witnes
providing contents to be used by professional journalists, commentato
to finished products of professional journalists or as co-authors who oth
additional efforts and journalistic skills to acquire information like in
of interviewing news sources in foreign events (Hellmueller & Li, 201
Also, participation of the audience depends on the journalistic proce
of content creation where participation is allowed. For instance, use
who comment post hoc on professional contents participate minima
as their input does not in any way influence professional productio
This is only creating the notion of being in a participatory relationsh
with one's audience.

The actively engaged media audience generates contents for distribution via online platforms or collaborating with a legacy media institution in a participatory manner. The participatory culture therefore drives audience connectivity, interactivity and enables them to form collaborative networks within and outside mainstream media.

Future trends

Participatory culture continues to drive audience engagements with various forms of media, as digital media allows the creation of multimedia contents and also facilitates ease of distribution across multiple platforms. The hyper-active audience as media users will find new ways of engaging with media products, even though mainstream media's obduracy in allowing genuine participation still persists. The fear of losing out to citizens encroaching into the journalism profession and thus flooding the media landscape continues to narrow down the possibility of opening the journalistic gates to let in citizen journalists who are at the margins of professional boundaries.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The media landscape is experiencing a churn at the global level. The emergence of new media forms and technologies is challenging the stronghold of legacy media. Technological advancements in the field of Artificial Intelligence, Virtual and Augmented Reality have ensured that user interaction patterns are evolving rapidly. In these dynamic and mystifying times commanded and controlled by the media, this book attempts to demystify and simplify the convoluted lanes of the media landscape in India. The edited book contains relevant and timely chapters on contemporary issues related to advertising, public relation, corporate communication, news reporting, editing, newspaper printing, challenges and opportunities etc. The book is an essential resource for academicians, researchers and students of journalism, mass communication, film studies, advertising and public relations.

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