USER GENERATED TVS: THE ROLE OF ACTIVE AUDIENCES IN REDEFINING TV AS A CULTURE COMMON

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User generated TVs: the role of active audiences in redefining TV as a culture common

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The new “technological imaginary” of web 2.0 for a cultural common definition

The starting point of this speech is a theoretical overview of the concept of participation and of the new role of users in web 2.0 platforms which allow them to create, select and re-elaborate audiovisual contents.

The final purpose is to analyze the changing role of active audiences in a so-called “user generated tv”, together with users’ possibilities to redefine the public sphere by modifying the agenda setting, newsmaking rules and the imaginary of mainstream media and to create, in this manner, a cultural common value of TV through its social and participated use.

As stated by Benkler:

1 The issue of a “technological imaginary” was focused for the first time by Flichy (1999; 2007) in order to define the social and cultural shaping of technologies and the rule of social discourses, imaginaries and also rhetoric in defining technological and innovation landscape.
2 The term Web 2.0 was coined by publisher Tom O’Reilly to describe Internet technologies summarized as Asynchronous Java and XML (AJAX) and the new services evolving around the use of it (O'Reilly 2005).
3 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines User Generated Contents (UGC) or Content User Created Content as “i) content made publicly available over the Internet, ii) which reflects a 'certain amount of creative effort', and iii) which is 'created outside of professional routines and practices” (OECD paper, 2007), see: OECD, Directorate Science, Technology and Industry, Committee for Information, Computer and Communications Policy: Working Party on the Information Economy. Participative Web, User Created Content, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/57/14/38393115.pdf>.
the newly emerging practices of commons-based peer production hint at the emergence of a new information environment, one in which individuals are free to take a more active role than was possible in the industrial information economy of the twentieth century. This new freedom holds great practical promise: as a dimension of individual freedom; as a platform for better democratic participation; as a medium to foster a more critical and self-reflective culture; and, in an increasingly information-dependent global economy, as a mechanism to achieve improvements in human development everywhere\(^4\) (2006: 2).

The specific case study of Current tv Italia will be analyzed since it is an excellent example of the new modalities of viewer interaction and participation. It allows, in fact, visualization and analysis of numerous debates, dynamics and processes of traditional tv redefinition and assessment.

Through the analysis of this participatory TV case study, challenges and limits of TV as a cultural common, driven by the rising of web 2.0 tools and of a diffused “participatory culture”\(^5\), will be investigated. According to Schäfer (2007), participation issue will be considered as a complex discourse consisting of the following:

1) a rhetoric that advocates social progress through technological advancement
2) a cultural critique demanding the reconfiguration of power relations
3) the specifications of the technology
4) how they are employed for design and user appropriation

\(^4\) More specifically, describing the move from broadcast to network and from the “industrial information economy” to the “networked information economy”, Benkler underlines the network’s increased access availability for a broader range of participants (including “average consumers”) and the related significant changes to production value chains; for further references, see also Lawrence Lessig’s work on intellectual property approaches which underlie such collaborative work (2002) and Eric von Hippel’s examination of the trend of such productive user communities to “democratize Innovation” (2005). Furthermore, some similarity between these newly empowered productive users and Alvin Toffler’s expert consumers or “prosumers” (1971) might be noticed.

\(^5\) The term participatory culture was initially introduced by Henry Jenkins (2006a; 2006b) to distinguish active user participation in online cultural production from an understanding of consumer culture, where audiences consume corporate media texts without actively shaping, altering and distributing them.
5) **the resulting socio-political dynamics.**

In this sense, participatory culture must be considered without bias and technologic determinism:

*as a complex dispositif consisting of discourses, technologies and people. Participatory culture is therefore not limited to the new role of the users, but covers rather the unfolding dynamic connections between the various participants in cultural production. Consequently the romanticized narrative of consumers being promoted to producers and controlling the information age will be abandoned, because it appears rather as a great legend constituted by a popular discourse than by actual events* (ibid)

In Current tv case study the audience participation level, independently from the specific contents and assessments of the debate, will be considered as a first important key-factor in the challenge of overcoming the traditional TV image as a monodirectional, mainstream, medium and, consequently, in the TV definition as a new cultural common.

The editorial strategies of this type of participatory TV will be further evaluated, with a special focus on which role viewers are involved in and which are their competencies, expectations, their “cultural bias” (Douglas 1982) in their transformation from passive viewers (the so-called “couch potatoes” in media literature) to active producers and broadcasters of themselves.

From a methodological point of view, the research was carried out through a qualitative analysis of messages posted in Current tv’s web blog, from May to September 2008, and through a desk analysis of the videos uploaded in the web site and selected in the broadcast transmission.

From the constant monitoring of the web site and its forum, it was possible to collect 89 items (e.g. posts, comments, news) specifically regarding audience participation, content developing strategies, filtering, censuring and evaluating criteria for the user-generated contents.

Lastly, in order to understand in-depth the strategies of the producer, the editorial guidelines, officially proposed in the web site and informally emerged from the editorial
messages in the blog and in the forum discussions, were collected and analyzed and several in-depth interviews with Current’s editorial staff were carried out.

From a theoretical point of view, Current tv case study will allow an extension of the theoretical framework towards new practices and modalities of construction of media contents and imaginary in the web 2.0 era.

In this direction, E. Morin’s outlook (1962) on the social construction of cultural imaginary, in which he underlines the importance of media as social agents of meaning and values negotiation, can be compared to the recent contribution of Jenkins (2006a) on the new role of fans, bloggers and 2.0 users in the construction and participation in media and in the cultural scenario.

According to Morin, in mass media society there was a continuous compromise between tendencies towards homologation, deriving from mainstream media (which follow an industrial and “fordistic” logic), and pressures towards innovation and originality, which came from the most active members of the audience.

Thus, the media imaginary was continuously modelled, eroded and settled thanks to such processes of negotiation and dialogue.

Nowadays, when the audience is allowed to dialogue and interact directly with the media industry through web 2.0 and user generated contents, there is, on one hand, an acceleration of users’ feedback and demands and, on the other hand, a deeply transformed power relation between media editors and their public.

In this scenario, how are individual contents, coming from the active audience, accepted in the mainstream media industry? How do these type of contents perform in the continuous process of imaginary erosion and sedimentation previously described in Morin’s analysis? To what extent do they really interact or change the cultural and business models delivered by traditional industrial culture?

Current tv’s example can provide a good overview of the complex system of social, cultural, economic and ideological factors which compose the media imaginary creation and of the struggle that new web 2.0 interfaces are developing in order to transform media participation in a really new cultural common.

However, according to Schäfer (ibid.), the promise of social progress and a reconfiguration of power through participation is embedded in technological development and postulated anew with each ‘media revolution’. See also (Flichy 2007).
Furthermore, it can provide some interpretation keys on how these factors are nowadays deeply intertwined and re-elaborated in the new media context. Starting from the website contents analysis, I will try to demonstrate that the construction and definition of media imaginary is revealing a very contradictory and chaotic process, in which many different actors (media professionals, traditional audiences, new active audiences, global markets) try to negotiate their own role and to impose their supremacy in the imaginary arena.

The energy and enthusiasm that were detected in the forum and web discussions represent another key factor of this analysis: they seem to suggest that people really invest in this new forms of television, developing a considerable amount of media “reflexivity” and considering them as a public sphere in which they can exercise and empower their cultural citizenship.

**Current tv case study**

Current tv is a user generated content tv, created in 2004, chaired by the American vice-president Al Gore\(^7\) and later launched also in the UK and in Australia. Current tv Italia project, launched in May 2008, is the first attempt to open this tv network to non-English speaking countries and, for this reason, it is indeed an ambitious challenge for the editors, also because it was carried out in a not very innovative context as the Italian tv scenario.

Current tv Italia network is mainly implemented with two tools: the website\(^8\), which allows users to deliver their own audiovisual and textual contents and to interact with the community commenting, voting, and discussing the tv topics, and the satellite broadcasting in which the best user generated productions are available, viewable in Italy on Sky channel 130\(^9\).

\(^7\) Al Gore is considered one of the most influencing protagonist of the “techno-utopia” which over the last decades pervaded American culture. See for example the 1991 special edition of the Scientific American entitled “Communications, Computers, Networks,” featuring articles by Al Gore, Nicholas Negroponte, Vint Cerf, Mitch Kapor, and Alan Kay, in which most of the emerging social discourses and optimistic visions about networks and technologies were spreading out. He was also the pioneering promoter of “Information Highway” policies in the Clinton/Gore administration.

\(^8\) Viewable on the web site: [http://current.com](http://current.com)

\(^9\) It also develops a blind spot for another shift taking place within cultural production: the transformation of media corporations from content producers to platform
It is useful, in a period characterised by many experimentations in the web tv area, to underline at once the difference between Current tv network and the many other web based platforms for video sharing and community purposes, as for example Youtube or as numerous famous videoblogs.

The main difference between Current tv and other web and user generated content TVs is that the former aims at creating a mixed tv programme scheduling in which user-generated contents, gathered from the audience’s interaction, are blended with professional editorial forms and standardized programmes. 10

Users contribute to the project with short pods (called “VC2” viewer created content) which focus on a variety of topics. The content is filtered by registered users through a voting process on Current’s website and pods are ultimately approved or disapproved by Current’s on-air programming staff.

Therefore, with time “VC2” became a part of the content broadcasted on the channel.

Current tv Italia staff describes the network contents in their web forum in the following way, thus helping to summarize the composite formula of the editorial guidelines:

The videos produced by the community are the 30% of the whole Current production and, more specifically:
- 10% of them are videos uploaded by users on the web site.
- 10% are videos commissioned to filmmakers that have already worked with Current tv or to videomakers met during pitching meetings organized at Universities and at cinema schools by the editorial staff.
- 10% are videos sent directly by videomakers to Current’s editorial office.

Here lies Current tv’s important challenge: its attempt to create and to negotiate with the audience’s public sphere a system of rules, practices and aesthetical criteria and to present, as well, an innovative, democratic and bottom-up tv approach maintaining, at the same time, the qualitative standard necessary to fit in with the media imaginary.
Actually, in this sense, Current seems to be a good analysis frame to observe the different and often contrasting dynamics between, on the one hand, the new participatory models of culture construction and sharing and, on the other hand, the standards, editorial models, stereotypes coming from media and cultural industry.

In fact, people are called to be contemporarily active users within the network project, according to a genuine web 2.0 logic, and at the same time, to be traditional spectators with their strong and crystallized attitudes and expectations towards media fruition.

Evaluating the messages collected in Current web forum, it is possible to explore forces, tensions, expectations typical of 2.0 media, intended not only as a space for the audience production but also as an environment and cultural arena in which people discuss about new aesthetical rules, cultural models of media imaginary and in which, ultimately, they re-define themselves in their role of media audience.

From these dynamics an overcoming and a major shift from both the classical “mainstream media” and from the “alternative media”\textsuperscript{11} concept seems to appear, proposing a mixed production in which producers and users are experimenting a convergence in a mutually balanced effort.

**A cultural common definition between user generated contents and mainstream logics**

Already in the Sixties, Edgar Morin assessed how media imaginary creation in the cultural industry was a dynamic process in which media industry and consumers continuously re-configured their roles, codes and interaction processes.

According to the author, these configuration processes were aimed at creating a standardization and a middle leverage of cultural products, both lowering contents and products expressions of high culture and, at the same time, giving a “middle-class aspect” to popular products, until then considered unsuitable for mass media distribution.

\textsuperscript{11} Atton made reference to “alternative media” as follows: “a model of alternative and radical media must account not only for active audiences in the Fiskean sense of creating <<oppositional readings>> of mainstream media products but also for <<mobilized audiences>> – as well as notions of horizontal linkage, reader-writers and extremely democratic organizational structures” (2002, pp. 24-25).
Following this strategy, the media industry was able to create “average products”, moulding itself to the audience and contemporarily moulding the audience to itself.

Furthermore, standardization processes were functional to the media industry for transferring the extremely efficient mass production system from material goods production to the symbolic sphere of cultural contents and meanings production.

As the author mentioned, in this process (2008: 70),

> it is impossible to outline a simplistic alternative: does the press (or the cinema or the radio etc) create the audience or does the audience create the press?

Mass culture imposes itself to the audience as an external element (and creates pseudoneeds and interests) or else does it reflect the audience’s needs? It is evident that the real issue lies in the dialectics between production system and cultural needs of users.

The imaginary arena was characterized by the research of a common key element, by syncretism, by the transformation of the imaginary into something ordinary, and at the same time, by the mythologization of the ordinary, as essential tools for a continuous dialogical and interactive process between contrasting forces within the cultural system.

Nowadays, after the transformation of mass media society, described by Morin, into the new media society and into a convergence culture era (Jenkins 2006b), a more central and important role of the audience within the imaginary arena is being defined, thanks to peer to peer environments and web 2.0 participative tools which allow users to elude mainstream media’s distribution bottleneck which strongly limited the spreading of their creation.12

In fact in web 2.0 and interactive network environments, users are requested to participate creatively in the creation, redefinition and enlargement of the imaginary offered by movies, TV and the other media of the culture industry. They participate actively in the constant redefinition of myths, genres and stereotypes through the production of grassroot contents which are available on the net for the benefit of thousands of viewers and fans, often with a larger audience than traditional media.

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12 It is interesting, on this issue, the Bruns’ analysis (2007) of the changes, driven from such tools, in the media value chains.
In such process, new users have to face contradictory strategies of producers and mainstream culture industry, such as the straightforward contrast towards creative fans, to a more bland attitude of dissuasion, up to the attempt to use fan’s activity for marketing purposes.

Additional roles switching and a paradigm shift are also proposed in Current tv example: in this platform, in fact, users, besides re-discussing and re-elaborating media contents produced by mainstream industry, are also invited to become content creators in their own right.

The empowered interactive dimension of this involvement makes users not only powerfully engaged in media production process, but also strongly motivated, as symbolic audience delegates in the metadiscoursive debate on new media governance.

Furthermore, a closer look on Current’s blog discussions and comments, shows how quantitatively important is this reflexivity level (Giddens 1990) by measuring the space dedicated to user participation topic in comparison with more pertinent media topics, and observing with how much intensity, trust and participation users were involved in the production of these type of topics rather than in other ones.

A first cultural common index: participation and reflexivity level

Current tv Italia small initial community was composed of several typologies of actors: users that produced contents (not only video, but also news and contents in the blog) and users that, as simple spectators, judged the contents produced, proposed guidelines, comments, boldly discussed about the content quality, about what Current tv had to be and could have been.

We can consider also a third, more invisible community which watched Current exclusively through broadcast channel modality, and perceived it as a traditional satellite channel tv, without interacting directly in content creation nor comment.

The real innovation of Current can be found in the blending and interaction of these three forms of users and audiences. Such processes define its profile as make it an interesting laboratory and observation space in the new millennium media landscape.
From a first analysis of user discussions we can observe how many tensions, cultural styles, social and cognitive problems participatory media create for the cultural industry on one side and for their audience on the other.

In this sense Current can be considered as a new cultural arena in which television is becoming -from a closed cultural industry, criticised over the last decades for its mono-directional power on the audiences- to a real cultural common in which cultural, editorial and also economic rules and policies are broadly discussed and participated by a wide range of stake-holders.

It is now possible to focus on the above mentioned interesting element emerged in this case study analysis: the considerable amount of “reflexivity” (Giddens 1990) and the processes of self-education or literacy (Livingstone 2007) that characterize these active audiences.

Users often show a huge awareness of their role in media processes and of metadiscoursive reflexion and they are able to link their personal issues to a wider, even theoretical, debate.

Here below, for example, a community member mentions the same issues of classical media theorists (from Pasolini to the Frankfurt School)

In my opinion, who wants to say something should have the right to do so, but he/she should also be able to do it properly.

(...) I’m a little scared of the consequences (in the past and in the future) of this (process). What does “even if not professional” mean? What will happen if every person who owns a camera, who has no technical knowledge nor know-how (nor previous study) on film-making can broadcast in tv or distribute on the web whatever he/she wants ?

Aren’t our awful traditional tvs enough? Aren’t we satisfied by the results obtained with the disappearing of real professionals?

Are we not satisfied of how culture is being lowered to the lowest levels (and not the contrary, as Pasolini docet?)?

(C. , member of Current community)
The Frankfurt School already questioned if the cultural industry had been really producing a culture of the masses, or instead merely a culture for the masses, (Horkheimer, Adorno 1947). In the same fashion, some users seem to re-discuss such matters and ask themselves if these new forms of democratic cultures, embodied by user generated contents, can really represent a valuable alternative in culture consumption and positively renovate fruition experience, expectations and the audience’s imaginary.

The real innovation of web 2.0 participative tools, before the rise of new contents and quality standards, lies specifically in these reflexivity processes and in the meanings and roles negotiation that they have awakened in the public sphere.

**Some issues and evaluation rules for considering UGC as cultural commons**

Beyond considering the “simple” audience participation and reflexivity level as a “first degree” of a cultural common creation, in this paragraphs we will analyse the specific rules, values and assessment criteria that active audiences, in Current tv case study, developed, as drafted in the users forum discussion, in order to distinguish and characterize this TV as a real cultural common project.

The main concept which people considered as strategic for a real shift of paradigm was the TV quality issue.

In the opinion of a specific typology of users, quality is, first of all, the capability of overcoming the agenda setting\(^\text{13}\) schemes typical of mainstream media.

An active user describes Current news making approach, with the anger of a deceived boyfriend, as follows:

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13 Empirical studies and theories on agenda setting started in the Seventies (McCombs, Shaw: 1972). The results stressed media’s influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them. The term describes how issues come to the awareness of a broader audience and how the mass media actively drive the process of generating attention and decision-making.
Let’s start from the news. The majority of them, I would say 90% of them, are news already known by everyone because they have been heard in television news or read on online magazines. For this reason, contents appear of no real value.

If you consider social news websites you will find the same logic: this phenomenon is called the “Correspondent’s Play”, or the “The game of the Goose” for applicant journalists. Starting from a chosen source, you copy and paste the news somewhere else. That’s it. There’s no prize involved whatsoever but you are sure to have lost other people’s time as well as yours. If the news were real news, I would agree with such system. The article published by the Indipendent on a Mayor’s regulations is not a piece of news since all papers, tv news, social news, so-called “informative” blogs have already discussed the topic. Moreover, there is no comment whatsoever. It is an example of ordinary traditional news. In the same fashion “Phelps reaches and overcomes Spitz” or “Rowing: Italy wins the silver medal” –and I could mention more- are not news but the outburst of a missed journalist. The matter at hand calls us to understand if such an amount of unique and original news is useful or not for Current and the project Current should carry out. I have no doubts in stating that this is the worst damage that can be inflicted to a project that was interesting at the beginning.

(A ,. member of Current community)

If according to these types of users content originality is the best value for quality evaluation, instead, for a second typology of users which agree to a more intransigent web 2.0 philosophy, “quality” is simply what emerges democratically from preferences and votes of the audience.

Nevertheless, in this sense, Current users seem to be very cunning and they have overtaken the idea that a simple democratic access to the medium can be obtained through mechanical quantitative processes of voting and rating. This web 2.0 era calls for more sophisticated participation and auto-regulation strategies, as this community member explains:
Aren’t we risking to badly imitate television auditel system\textsuperscript{14} if the algorithm augments the rating of news solely in relation to the amount of comments posted (without considering, for example, if they are positive or negative)? At the end, it seems to me that one of the most common critics to traditional tv is specifically that it considers only numbers, statistics, and not the contents.

Secondly, if we want to discuss of an open, free form of television, I believe that if a video producer of Current community doesn’t participate in the blog discussions his/her videos shouldn’t be penalised.

If a news item is good it should be evaluated for its interest. If we don’t do this, we penalise above all the users that will be denied (also partially) access to a piece of information that could be important. Lastly, I would like to add another detail: who decided that “no longer fresh” news are not interesting nor valid? It seems to be that this criteria should be at least widened… we could mention many examples which I prefer not to mention here. Don’t hate me if my tone seems to be polemical, this is a very absorbing topic!

(M., member of Current community)

Within such framework, the editorial guidelines of the staff of Current tv seem to restrain and limit the quantitative strength of the social web. The content quality offered by Current tv, differently from many other “simple” user generated environments as Youtube, is obtained with the contribution and mediation not only of the users, but also of the editorial staff that continuously work for content selection and editorial packaging.

A member of the editorial staff efficiently described media producers’ position:

... when the most popular stories are broadcast in tv, when the broadcast live show starts, we, as members of the staff, have the duty to control that every live news launched is based on interesting contents coming from the community. There are some stories that can’t be used in tv despite their popularity on the web site, not because we dislike them or because we want to censure them, but because sometimes they are

\textsuperscript{14} Auditel (www.auditel.it) is the Italian audit system to measure and monitor tv’s popularity ranking. Nowadays it is strongly criticized as it provides only a quantitative representation of the viewers’ attitudes and doesn’t allow evaluation of dynamics of tv content appropriation, relation and re-elaboration.
already used in other contexts or because they contain copyright protected material that we cannot use (video and images in particular) for broadcast TV.

(L., member of the editorial staff)

The intertwining and contradiction of boundaries, roles and expectation between users and producers is also visible in the change of attitude of the active audiences when they interpret their role of traditional TV viewers.

When active users judge the contents coming from the online community, they seem to claim the same qualitative standards of media industry and to approve the presence of a mediation between spontaneity, user’s freedom, and formalization which is a strict content organization typical of mainstream media standards.

A community member’s opinion, in particular, can be very useful to have an overview of such complex situation:

It’s curious to observe how only a few months ago the community rejected the idea of such forms of control, while now it’s seems to me that everyone asks for more filters and further editorial supervision.

As in the majority of cases, the solution can be found in the middle and it’s seems to me that Current is already offering it.

Unfortunately, we can’t really complain about “superficial” nor unwanted news because if these types of news are in the homepage and get a high ranking, it means that the community judges them valid. At the same time, the staff selects the best news, as in the UK and USA Current edition.

Please correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that the “news for the TV” section is a sort of guide for users as it offers the best of Current. Therefore, there is already an editorial guide or it is being created.

(T., member of Current community).

Other participants even hope in a more guided user participation and in a stronger editorial control.

What can say about a man (Al Gore, obviously) that stated:
“We are not obliged to give account of what we do to anybody whatsoever. Just as you do, blogger. Isn’t it a wonderful feeling?”.  
I don’t’ know, I find this statement disturbing!  
Isn’t it better to discuss editorial rules, common objectives, guidelines and sensible policies??  
I would really like a new thread on this.  
(T., member of Current community).

On the other hand, the attitude of some users, who agree with an editorial guide and supervision aimed at adjusting user’s contents to traditional and consolidated media tastes, seems to be often contradicted by other users, which claim full audience supremacy, content and stylistic control on the contents.

As in this interaction between a member of the editorial staff and a community member:

   L. (member of editorial staff): “we have a VC2 Department which is working on video production and constantly keeps in touch with several videomakers in order to offer technical help and support”

   31183 (community member): “we would rather carry out a control/supervision on such VC2 Department!! “

If we try to outline a synthesis of these different emerging positions and problems, a tension seems to appear between user’s desire of freedom and participation, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the strong and legitimate interest, of producers and of the same traditional audiences, to have filtered, modelled contents available, which better fit in with formal structures and meanings belonging to the more established media imaginary.

THE NEW IMAGINARY ARENA
Fig. 1. *Active users interact with producers in standard, genres definition and contents production through web 2.0 tools.*

Producers editorially filter such contributions and deliver them to active users but also to traditional audiences. We should consider as traditional audiences not only people that don’t use participatory tools and watch traditional tv channels passively, but also active users, when they wear their traditional mainstream audience “habitus” (Bordieu 1980) and acquire expectations, fruition models, imaginaries inherited from their mass media consumption. Traditional audiences indeed pressure Current to shape its contents according to mainstream media standards and expectations.

The most interesting element in this model is that it’s impossible to give users and producers a defined role and a specific, compact position: they seem both overwhelmed by innovative and chaotic forces that redefine, negotiate, and replace their role and their attitudes on a daily basis.

Despite their determination to accept the participatory\textsuperscript{15} culture challenge and to compete in this new battlefield for media power, users haven’t yet clarified the

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\textsuperscript{15} The term participatory culture was initially introduced by Henry Jenkins (1991, 2006a, 2006b, Jenkins et al. 2006) to distinguish active user participation in online cultural production from an understanding of consumer culture, where audiences consume corporate media texts without actively shaping, altering and distributing them. For a discussion
usefulness, the objectives and benefits of their participation, nevertheless they have surely defined the whole set of formal rules and the aesthetical conventions to be adopted. On the other hand, the in-depth analysis of producers’ strategies shows that their attempt to identify business models from User Generated Contents are only at the beginning and there aren’t, at the moment, clear directions in order to use feedbacks from UGC as innovative marketing tools for the audience audit (as, for example, data warehousing and one-to one marketing techniques).  

However, more than for business objectives, their entrance in UGC sphere appears as an effort to take advantage of user contents as a cooler source of inputs and ideas, necessary for modelling, renovating and narrating social imaginary.

Since the beginning of the media industry, and in particular in the advertising field, brand identity concepts were created and focused on values, emotions and contents belonging to the same users.

As stated by Lombardi (2003: 4) we can consider a “primary” cultural industry (e. g the school or other influent groups, as the editorial and show business industries), that often has an ideological influence on the public and advertising and a “secondary” cultural industry which has always a rhetorical strengthening effect. The advertising system listens to and studies what the “primary” cultural industry has produced in the audience and it lets them go on with the talking. It brings together audience values, it links them, often with a brilliant creativity, to the brand values and then re-transmits them to the people: in such way it reinforces the people’s original values transforming, at the same time, brand values in something acquired by same audience.

of concepts of participation in culture studies, see Chapter 2.

16 In November 2009 I took 4 in depth interviews with Current editorial staff, in order to discuss with them my previous analysis and to obtain a feedback and a confrontation. From these interviews my initial suppositions of a strong business strategy and marketing strategy about the UGC exploitation were strongly re-sized. In the producer’s opinions there wasn’t, at that moment, a real business strategy in order to economically exploit UGC: beyond traditional advertisement-based models there weren’t, for example, other revenue models as well as tools or shared methodologies that allow editors to massively analyse user’s information, coming from UGC, and to use it for innovating marketing profiling or editorial positioning.
Web 2.0 users are thus called to provide a strong individualization and personalization of media products, useful to moderate standardization tendencies typical, as already Morin highlighted, of mass media culture.

Nevertheless, they are not invited to subverts and reinvent “ex novo” structures and themes of media imaginary, but only to expand and renovate the latter participating in its reinforcement without denying its rules and protocols.

In this sense Current Italia’s launch of the VCAM (Viewer Created Ad-vertising Messages) project is highly interesting and explicit: the editorial staff asks users to remake cinematographic contents in order to renovate a Warner Bros institutional ad.

The initiative was promoted in Current’s web site as follows:

*Let your creativity free and show it in tv! Create the ad for Warner Bros’ 85th year celebration: choose your favourite scene from 60 legendary movies. Upload your remake in this page. If your VCAM will be chosen for broadcast transmission, you will receive 1750 euro!*

**Instructions:**

- Read the films list and choose your favourite
- The VCAM must last 60 minutes
- There are no limits to your creativity: you can choose traditional movies, computer graphic or animation
- Use the graphic templates listed below

On one hand users are driven to set their creativity free, on the other one, they are provided with specific requirements and templates in order to address their creativity towards professional productions format and packaging.

With reference to Lombardi’s theory, and to those of other sociologists of consumption, we can clearly understand that user’s role here is further “moved forward”: users become, in fact, from an indirect source of inspiration for “secondary” cultural industry and subjects studied for marketing strategies, direct representatives, through their video production, of a personal appropriation\(^{17}\) of the media world.

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\(^{17}\) User appropriation describes how consumers use, change and adapt products. This process often
From active users’ point of view, this call for participation seems inviting: despite this, they outline with considerable critical insight the possible tricks, drifts and banalizations of such opportunity.

Some users do not fail to interpret Current’s opportunistic call for participation and they judge this proposal for a “domesticated creativity” simply as a more advanced marketing enticement.

Nevertheless, other users admit that in user generated contents production, the so often desired anarchy of rules, structures and value hierarchies can be a key for a central innovation for users-producers, but it cannot be considered automatically as an advantage for “traditional” users which often have to face a complex melting pot in which it rather difficult to find one’s way.

Lastly, at the end of this path, it is indeed useful to return to Morin’s contribution: nowadays as yesterday, the creation of new cultural commons is made through an ongoing osmosis between individuality, creativity and industrial standardization, in a unceasing process that erodes and feeds their bounds.

References


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involves uses unintended by the original vendors, and can also include modifications of the technical design. Appropriation has been perceived as a second stage of design, or “completing design in use” (Carrol 2004). Different levels of appropriation have been recognized according to the degree of modification and use (Akrich 1998) and has been considered a crucial aspect in innovation and improvement of design (e.g. Hippel 1988, 2005; Ciborra 2002)


presentation to the conference *Transforming Audiences: Identity/Creativity/Everyday Life*. Westminster: September.


