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Birth of Prosumerism

Since the pre-industrial society, the economy of developed countries was largely driven by production. However, after the industrial revolution, Arora contends that the concept of labor has "undergone a shift, blurring the boundaries between leisure and labor" (2012, p. 103). This led to growing consumer interest and demand, and soon after, society began to see a shift in emphasis from production to consumption. Coupled with an age of affluence and growth in credit, this shift gave birth to a 'consumer culture', focused on the norms, values, and meanings associated with a society dominated by consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

More recently, there has been increasing interest in the idea of the 'prosumer', a term first coined by Alvin Toffler (1980), which serves to explain the converging roles of production and consumption. This reintegration of the prosumerism in recent times was brought on by the decline in importance of production, coupled with changing consumer demands and advancements in technology which decreased the need for material production (Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson, 2012). As a result, we have seen a proliferation of platforms built on the value of co-creation and the idea of relying on consumers to produce, often times also called the 'wikinomic' model, or crowdsourcing (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

Changing business landscape: Crowdsourcing

This relatively new model of peer production has dramatically changed the game for organizations in the way they communicate with users, ushering in a new era of participation, transparency, democracy, and empowerment (Dijck, Nieborg, 2009). Moreover, advancements in the Web 2.0 sphere have further spurred the acceptance of such platforms by users because of their capabilities for networking, self-production, and sharing (Bianco, 2009).

Organizations, too, are beginning to jump into the crowdsourcing bandwagon upon hearing about the myriad of associated benefits. Antorini and Muniz (2013) highlight several of these benefits, such as highly relevant and innovative output, high user acceptance of final product, and access to skills and competencies outside of the firm.

However, it notable that most, if not all organizations are not fully utilizing crowdsourcing mediums as tools of production, as well as Web 2.0 tools for means of engagement and relationship building. Therefore, it is crucial in this age of the prosumer, that

By Alvin Lee H. E. (@onemanatatime)

organizations re-evaluate their strategies, namely in terms of operational effectiveness and strategic positioning (Porter, 2001). Furthermore, Vaynerchuk (2011) very aptly points out how changing customer demands for "authenticity, originality, creativity, honesty, and good intent" (p. cover) are making it imperative for organizations to rethink their communication strategies, and understand user motivations for participation.

Digital labor — Peer production or exploitation?

It is without doubt that networked technologies have transformed communication, business, and the nature of community or culture (Varnelis, 2008). However, the idea of digital labor and crowdsourcing has also faced its fair share of criticism, especially in the context of the 'McDonalization' of society by organizations (Ritzer, 2008).

A good example is Facebook, where although the work done by users is indispensable to their success, users are not paid for their work. On the other hand, with the assumption that Facebook's product is a content creation and sharing tool, users can be argued to be purely consumers of the product, and generated content should not be considered work done. After all, should a company selling delicious tacos be paying a customer who ate lots of their tacos, enjoyed them, eagerly told his friends, and which in turn brought more profit for the company? Can we really say that prosumers are being exploited in this sense?

To argue that consumers are being exploited would indicate that they are not receiving adequate value as compensation for their work done. This may be true in an economic sense, as monetary gains are rarely shared with contributors of collaborative labor production. However, we cannot disregard the fact that such work brings value to users through empowerment and individual gains (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), and enhances their "social capital" (McCorkindale, 2010).

In fact, most people seem to enjoy prosuming. On the premise that "calling it exploitation goes too far" (Tapscott, Williams, 2006), there needs to be more investigation done on the willingness of prosumers to be McDonalized by organizations. In addition, I believe that understanding user motivations behind prosuming may be pivotal to incorporating customer participation throughout various levels of the value chain, such as creation, production, distribution, marketing, consumption, and evaluation.

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Understanding User Motivation

Exploring motivation for social network use is important in understanding how businesses can better use new media channels as effective two-way relationship building tools to reach out to a wide range of stakeholders (McCorkindale, 2010). Spiliotopoulos and Oakley (2013) take a design and planning perspective to explain how user "motives are able to provide useful insights for features to incorporate into future system designs" (p. 3295). They go on to highlight benefits such as improved user experience through the integration of analysis and data such as personality, relationships, and privacy perception.

Moreover, understanding user motivations for going online can also be helpful in perceiving the willingness of prosumers to be McDonalized by organizations. Arora (2012) argues, against contrary belief, that "users in Third World countries are inherently and intrinsically" (p. 95) similar to those in developed countries. This is within the context of, their motivation for going online, and passion for leisure in spite of having barely fulfilled their physiological needs as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Furthermore, she attributes the passion for leisure of the said users, in part, to the innate yearning to exercise one's individuality. Studies have also found a significant positive correlation of fulfilment of self-actualization needs and fulfilment of social needs to the continued use of social network services (Cao et al., 2013, p. 182).

This leads to my assumption that, the innate yearning of users to exercise one's individuality and search for identity is a significant contributor to their willingness to be McDonaldized by organizations in the Web 2.0 sphere. These organizations, in turn, create a value-proposition for users by helping to fulfil their ultimate need for self-actualization.

Research Question

Does the willingness of prosumers to be McDonalized by organizations lie in non-material value-propositions created by the very organizations who McDonalize them? If so, can these value-propositions alone be considered adequate compensation for their work done?

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By Alvin Lee H. E. ([@onemanatatime](#))