CORPORATE APPROPRIATION OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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Introduction

Reportedly, there currently are more than one billion internet users, with two billion users expected by 2011 (out of a projected world population of seven billion around that time).[1] Among the top ten countries in internet usage are the United States, China, India, Germany, Brazil, and Russia, where internet penetration reaches about two-thirds of the population.[2] With businesses – particularly those in the cultural and creative industries – rapidly supplementing or even transferring investments to online, internet has become the foremost frontier over which symbolic, financial and cultural battles are fought. In this chapter, I explore the intersections of commerce and creativity, content and connectivity in terms of a corporate appropriation of the participatory media culture of internet, using social media in general and weblogs in particular as a case study. I will argue that without extending existing definitions of media literacies, and without reinterpreting intellectual property and copyright legislation to extend protections outside of the boundaries of the firm or the state (towards the individual professional or amateur culture creators), the presumably co-creative and collaborative potential of the new digital and networked media ecology will be an exclusive playground for political and commercial institutions rather than a platform for individual cultural entrepreneurs.

The Blog and the Mediapolis

To the omnipresence of internet in global economic life one may add the notion, that internet should not be seen as a medium such as television or magazines, as internet is a communications infrastructure that is increasingly embedded in all other media, as we are web browsing on a cell phone, videoconferencing using a laptop, chatting with friends from all over the world via a game console, and ordering products and services with a television remote control. Indeed, in "overdeveloped" or "advanced" (depending on your vantage point) industrial democracies, internet-enabled media have come to be part of peoples' daily lives, connecting subscribers to a vast global, always-on, digital information and communication network. The whole of the world and our lived experience in it can increasingly be seen as framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous digitally networked media. This world is what Roger Silverstone (2007) considers as our lives currently lived in the "mediapolis": a mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences of everyday life.

One of the most interesting, prominent, and to some extent hotly debated phenomena exemplifying a life increasingly lived *in* (online) media, is the weblog, or blog (generally text-based, yet evolving into videoblogs or vlogs; audioblogs and podcasts). Weblogs first appeared in the mid-1990s, becoming popular as simple and free publishing tools became available. Since anybody with internet access can publish their own weblog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of weblogs. In an April 2007 survey of the so-called blogosphere – the online public sphere that is expressed through interconnected and hyperlinked blogs – American firm Technorati reported tracking over 70 million blogs. On average, a new weblog is created every second of every day, and English, while being the language of the majority of early bloggers, currently represents less than a third of all blog posts. Indexing research shows how the vast majority (70 percent) of weblogs are highly personal vehicles for self-expression and empowerment, written almost exclusively by individuals (Herring et al. 2005). However, this kind of individualism in weblogs can be quite connective, as bloggers to some extent include comment and feedback options with their posts, put up their blogs for free syndication (cf. Really Simple Syndication feeds), reference and link to other blogs when creating posts, and cut and paste all kinds of content–including moving and still images, text, and audiofiles–from all over the web as well as their own original work onto their weblog.

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, one could point to several factors that contribute to explaining the popularity of blogging. First, an important caveat must be made. Blogging is particularly widespread in

Northern/Western European regions, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Considering that blogging ultimately is a networked form of deeply personalized and indeed ever so slightly narcissistic self-expression (Lovink 2006), it perhaps should not come as a surprise that the countries in these regions all rank at the top of the global nexus of nations with the highest level of effective democracy and countries where the highest percentage of its population emphasizes self-expressive values. "This reflects a powerful cross-level linkage, connecting mass values that emphasize free choice and the extent to which societal institutions actually provide free choice" (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, 154). At the same time, contemporary research on the social capital of people in these particular regions consistently suggests an overall decline of trust in public institutions (government, businesses, the church; see Putnam 2004). Such decline in traditional social capital corresponds with an increase in what can be called "networked individualism", especially among younger generations, indicating a gradual change of emphasis in the way people form trust-based relationships from place-to-place connectivity based on the household and the workplace, to person-to-person connectivity based on individuals making and remaking connections in their social and computer networks (Wellman 2002).

Access and Social Bonds

The disclaimer on participatory media culture, internet-enabled collective intelligence, and many-to-many as well as peer-to-peer dialogue is the fact, that access to internet is not grounded in equality, and access is not randomly distributed (Dutton et al. 2004). In other words: not everyone has equal chances of getting access to internet, especially when one understands "access" as the combination of technologies–hardware and software–needed for effective online usage with the skills and competences required to make sense of information found online. To this one might add a necessary shift in media literacy from understanding the "read only" media we consume to the abilities for successfully engaging with contemporary "read/write" multimedia such as internet (Hartley 2007). These concerns are valid, of course, but should not be used to suggest that the billion people online today are all the same, and share similar interests. However, the makeup of the online population does represent a kind of global society that is younger, more affluent, and less likely to experience existential threats – a globally networked population that in itself can be seen as an expression of a shift in people's value priorities to "postmaterialist" (Inglehart 1997) or perhaps "narcissistic" (Lasch 1979) goals, which emphasize self-expression, civic autonomy, and individual liberty.

People's intensifying exchanges and interactions in everyday life online can be seen as an emerging form of "hypersociality" where the social consists of networked individualism "enhancing the capacity of individuals to rebuild structures of sociability from the bottom up" (Castells 2001, 131). Earlier, Pierre Lévy (1997) envisioned how people would produce new social bonds through the ongoing development of sophisticated systems of networked intelligence such as internet. Scott Lash (2002) similarly suggests that in today's world previously long-lasting and proximal social bonds – such as the neighborhood community, the extended family, the employee and his co-workers - are giving way to distanciated "communicational bonds." Instead of social relations mediated by space and time, such bonds must rather be seen as forms of communication that are increasingly short-lived, transient and mediated by new, super-fast technologies. Lash sees this development as inevitable and not necessarily detrimental to new forms of community in an information age. The point here remains that blogging, when seen as an exponent of networked (and mediated) individualism, is a fundamental expression of life in the contemporary mediapolis. This life is socially isolated and connected, individualized and networked at the same time, and the control over our seclusion or inclusion seems to be increasingly in the hands of those who have access to the technology, know-how, and literacies required to successfully navigate digital media in general and internet in particular.

Convergence Culture

Considering the continuing growth of internet use, what people do with their media is beginning to compete with those who used to have a near-monopoly on mediated storytelling: professional media producers and the companies that finance, publish and distribute their work (Deuze 2005). However, it would be a mistake to see the blogosphere and the commercial arena of professional media production as two worlds apart. People who make media have collaborated with those who use media in the past. Newspapers and magazines have letters to the editor, TV uses opinion polls and SMS-formats, radio offers phone-in talk shows, computer and video games include level editors and software development kits so that players can modify ("mod") their game. With the widespread adoption of internet services to the home and the office, such more or less co-creative practices have accelerated. Online, media participation can be seen as the defining characteristic of internet in terms of its hyperlinked, interactive and multiple-way networked infrastructure. Indeed, reports on the early histories of media companies on the web signal its participatory and collaborative character as essential to understanding the

changing role of media in society (Gere 2002; Kelly 2005). However, not all this participation is the same, nor is it equally distributed across user groups or media forms. Also, much of this participatory culture is heavily regulated, constrained or embedded within company processes and practices that strive to "harness" rather than "unleash" participation. It is safe to say, that a collaborative consumer is at the forefront of contemporary media management and policy. Thus, the role participation plays in the media industries' move online can be seen as an expression of the convergence of production and consumption cultures embedded in the code and design of internet, as well as in the corporate appropriation of the technology.

Henry Jenkins (2006) typifies this emerging media ecology in terms of a convergence culture, defining the trend as both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Media industries increasingly cross-franchise, collaborate and merge, while consumers increasingly co-create, network and fragment across multiple media channels. These two processes amplify each other, thus contributing to an overall sense of boundaryblurring flux among producers as well as consumers of media. Jenkins' approach aims to build a bridge between two extremely different but equally important strands of thought regarding the way we respond and give meaning to the role digital media play in everyday life. The first approach suggests that digital media enable people an almost complete retreat into a personal information infrastructure or space, where we exercise an unparalleled degree of control over what we watch and what we hear, what we keep, discard or forward. Media use, including blogging and any other kind of online engagement, effectively (and perhaps paradoxically) becomes an instrument of disconnection on demand. To be sure, the emerging new media ecology does give users increasing control over the flow of media – using devices like the remote control (zipping and zapping), the joystick and the computer mouse, or software like internet portal sites, filtering agents, searchbots, and user recommendation systems.

A second perspective describes the current media environment as one where people actively participate in the making and sharing of collective meaning, where users experience real agency in enacting their "life politics", and where the kind of distributed self-expression one finds in blogs or on social media networks such as *MySpace*, *YouTube* or *Cyworld* can be seen as truly empowering for the millions of individuals involved.

The collaborative and participatory media trend as exemplified by social media and the individual multitasking media consumption behaviors within personal information spaces are two different but mutually enabling claims. The contemporary media environment indeed seems to be one where consuming media increasingly includes some kind of producing media, and where people's

media behavior seems to involve some level of participation, co-creation and collaboration, depending on the degree of openness or closedness of the media involved.

Yet, as Jenkins reminds us, all this seemingly grassroots-level convergence also occurs across the multinational media industry. The same communication technologies and practices that enable interactivity and participation have been deployed throughout the 1980s and 1990s to foster the entrenchment and growth of a vast corporate-commercial global media system that can be said to be anything but transparent, interactive or participatory. These bottom-up and top-down aspects of convergence culture must be seen as co-existing, mutually enabling, and symbiotic. Convergence culture thus serves both as a mechanism to increase revenue and further the agenda of industry, while it at the same time enables people to enact some kind of agency regarding the omnipresent messages and commodities of this industry.

The suggested blurring of the boundaries between (amateur) users and (professional) producers of media as both a consequence of internet architecture, established fan practices, and of emerging mass media business practices is articulated in the emerging corporate appropriation of convergence culture through corporate blogs (sometimes referred to as "clogs"). Such clogs effectively disintermediate the role of journalists (and, to some extent, PR departments or advertising agencies) in fact-checking or contextualizing the communications from a company to its intended audience, or between customers, clients and corporations. A second element of convergence between production and consumption relates to the possibilities for interaction (leaving comments), exchange (RSS feeds, hyperlinks), and distributed conversation (when cloggers post comments on other blogs and a distributed conversation ensues).

Corporate Communicators

Corporate blogs come in many shapes and sizes, such as blogs of specific company employees (which sometimes are formally endorsed or initiated by the company, but can also just be personal expressions of people who identify themselves as an employee of a certain company); Chief Executive Officer (CEO) blogs by senior managers of a company (or their ghostwriters); product blogs focusing on a particular product or service of a company; and corporate blogs with limited access published on a company intranet (or on an "extranet" maintained exclusively by a network of collaborating companies). According to a survey by *PRWeek* in the United States, about 10% of corporate communicators had a weblog in 2006. Self-described "wiki company" Social

Text indexed that 40 (8%) of the Fortune 500 companies were blogging as of October 2006. A similar survey of 300 companies from 10 countries by UK-based PR company *Lewis* in March 2007 suggests that less than 5 percent of companies worldwide had a corporate blog at the time. Most companies with blogs are said to be located in the U.S. (14 percent), with the Asia-Pacific region ranking second with 5.5 percent, while only 2.5 percent of European companies reportedly have one or more corporate blogs (Van Der Wolf 2007). Yet researchers in a December 2006 study among *Inc. Magazine* top-500 companies[3] concluded "that social media is coming to the business world at a faster rate than many anticipated. It also indicates that corporate familiarity and usage of social media is racing far ahead of what many have predicted" (Mattson and Barnes 2007: 1). The researchers found that the use of social media–bulletin boards, social networking sites, online video, blogs, wikis, podcasts-is in fact widespread throughout these companies, with 19 percent of respondents saying they were in fact using blogging as a marketing or communication tool. The authors of the study signaled how these companies recognize the critical role of social media to a company's future success in today's online world. Their findings showed 26% of respondents felt that social media is very important to their business and marketing strategy.

One perhaps more problematic–in terms of the ideal of promoting participatory and open communication between societal stakeholders as emblematic of digital culture (Deuze 2006)–element in the move of corporate communications and practices online is the sometimes masked nature of such initiatives, for example through "blogola" and "flogs." Blogola is a term based on the well-known recording and music industry practice of payola, where radio stations or individual DJ's are offered financial incentives or other perks if and when they play certain songs or feature particular bands as part of the day's broadcast. Brooks Barnes, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* of 15 May 2007, found similar practices emerging among U.S. broadcast television studios and networks, which "are flooding bloggers with free stuff in hopes the flattered recipients will reward them with positive coverage", in an attempt "to tap into the burgeoning power of blogs as promotional tools and fed up with the jaded attitudes of professional critics and TV feature writers, studios and networks" (Barnes 2007, p.A1). Among the examples the newspaper listed was a free trip that Warner Bros. organized for seven bloggers to a fancy hotel in British Columbia and the set of the show to promote a new teen television drama, or the casting of a blogger by ABC for a small part in one of its comedies. Barnes noted that, although mainstream news outlets have strict limitations regarding such kind of practices, blogs and bloggers are still without rules (and protections).

A flog on the other hand is a fake blog, also known as "Stealth PR blog": a marketing tool designed by a professional company or ad agency to promote certain products or services of that company, without necessarily being transparent about the corporate-sponsored identity of the blog. A much publicized example was the 2006 "Wal-Marting Across America" blog, set up for Wal-Mart by independent PR firm Edelman.[4] This flog was apparently written by two Wal-Mart fans who traveled across America in a RV, visiting Wal-Marts along the way. They turned out to be a freelance writer and a professional photographer employed by the *Washington Post* newspaper. Wal-Mart outfitted the RV and turned it over to them to drive it cross-country. As an interesting sidenote, in Winter 2006 Edelman and weblog tracking firm Technorati published a comprehensive "Guide to the Blogosphere for Marketers and Company Stakeholders" based on a survey of 821 bloggers, concluding that: "online community members welcome involving company representatives into 'the conversation,' as long as their interaction with them is truly participatory and honest—that it benefits both sides" (Edelman and Hirchberg 2006: 22).

Research additionally shows a new type of blog emerging in recent years: spam blogs, or "splogs", defined at Wikipedia as "artificially created weblog sites which the author uses to promote affiliated websites or to increase the search engine rankings of associated sites."[5] An April 2007 Technorati report suggested that between 3,000 and 7,000 new splogs are created each day. Other examples of companies combining spam and social media are "spings" and "spamdexing." Spings –short for "spam pings"– are automated messages from blogs and other online publishing tools to a centralized network service providing notification of newly published posts or content.[6] A ping alerts indexing services that there is new content posted on a blog or website–and spings thus serve to make the original blog seem continually updated and fresh. Spamdexing is a method to manipulate the relevancy or prominence of resources indexed by a search engine. Examples are adding hundreds of keywords, meta tags and searchterms to the description of a website so search engines are more likely to list it, and creating automated messages for discussion forums and comments for other blogs containing one or more links to the company's website in order to drive traffic and get a higher ranking on search engines such as *Google* (whose algorithm treats hyperlinks as user recommendations).

On a more fundamental level the corporate appropriation of social media in general and the blogosphere in particular opens up new opportunities for companies to enlist the "free labor" (Terranova 2000) of media users. This can be illustrated by scrutinizing the terms of service of social networking sites like *MySpace* or *Facebook*, that for example explicitly state: "By posting User

Content to any part of the Site, you automatically grant, and you represent and warrant that you have the right to grant, to the Company an irrevocable, perpetual, non-exclusive, transferable, fully paid, worldwide license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, publicly perform, publicly display, reformat, translate, excerpt (in whole or in part) and distribute such User Content for any purpose […]."[7] Such explicitly stated control over the creativity of consumers can be seen as exemplary of the dual nature of the corporate embrace of convergence culture: it opens up new platforms and services for participatory or collective storytelling and exchange, yet it also closes down the market for intellectual property in walled enclaves patrolled by business watchdogs.

The producing consumer has been co-opted relatively fast in corporate strategies regarding the marketing and creation of content. In journalism, users are invited to comment on news, discuss public information on forums, contribute their own information (in text, images, audio and video) to news sites, or make their own news all together. In advertising and marketing, the audience is asked to participate in playing games online, interact with brands through forums and sweepstakes, or even to submit ideas or entire advertisements directly to corporations. In computer and video games, gamers are requested to contribute comments, bug reports, and other feedback to developer-moderated forums at company websites, and games increasingly come included with level editors and even entire Software Development Kits (SDKs) that allow users to create or "mod" their own versions of existing games. It must be clear, that content creation for the media increasingly takes place both within and outside of the firm, within and outside of professional identities and routines, thus also within and outside of the realm of labor protections, accreditation standards, training environments, or salaried contexts (Deuze, 2007). The preferred corporate strategy to engage convergence culture can be trimmed down to three goals: to intervene directly into participatory digital culture (for example through clogs), to enlist the creative consumer as a cog in the media production machine, and to develop a discourse that enables companies to (ideally, if not practically) harness and tame the unruly masses of consumers-turned-producers.

Transparency and Control

Participatory media production and individualized media "produsage" (Bruns 2005) are two different yet co-constituent trends typifying the contemporary mediapolis–a mediated environment where consuming media increasingly includes some kind of producing media, depending on the degree of openness or closedness of the media involved. The concepts of open and

closed media in this context refer to the extent which a given website (whether corporate, non-profit, or a group blog) shares some or all of its modes of operation with target audiences. In the case of company-operated websites, a media organization could for example increase the level of transparency of how it works, or can opt to give its customers more control over their user experience. Yet research among those corporate communicators that are still hesitant about embracing weblogs and other social media indicates suggests they do so because of a perceived lack of control over communication (with customers, partners, competitor-colleagues, and other stakeholders). Control, in other words, is still very much on the forefront of managers' minds.

Considering the gradual shift towards co-creative media work and a corresponding industry-wide framing of the audience as collaborators or otherwise "active" publics, the key issues moderating such corporate appropriation of participatory culture are notions of transparency (of all parties involved) and control (over all communications). With the emergence of blogging as a popular part of corporate communications strategy several companies, bloggers and authors are publishing rules, best practices, testimonials and other self-referential directions for B2C ("business-to-consumer") social media. Among several of those rules available online[8], the key recurring issue is what tends to be described as "credibility", "accountability", "authenticity", "engagement" and "transparency". As Eric Webber for instance writes in *Advertising Age* (of April 10, 2007): "These days you can't read an article or a blog post about the PR business without it containing some variation of the word "transparency." And it seems to be de rigueur for PR agency websites to claim transparency as a company principle [...] it seems to me that all this talk of being "totally transparent" is overrated and takes things entirely too far. What's worse, it's just not honest" (Webber 2007). Indeed, as one respondent commented on a 2006 conference survey among corporate communicators about the value of blogging for their companies: "isn't the word 'Corporate Blogging' an oxmoron? Corporate means limiting or confining while blogging means the free flow of ideas & information."[9]

What all this well-intended advice and sincere lamentation omits, is a deeper level of transparency: that of stating explicitly what the role of the user/consumer/produser is in the participatory world of cyberspace. As Jean Baudrillard (1996) writes: "We are no longer alienated and passive spectators but interactive extras." This notion of us playing a small yet not insignificant, and networked yet completely individualized role in the virtual reality machine that is internet is taken up in an essay (of May 19, 2007) by PR consultant Elizabeth Albrycht: "Online, we perform many roles as we construct our digital identities, one of our primary online activities. Sometimes we are advisors,

sometimes complainers, sometimes mothers, sometimes liars, storytellers, consumers, businesspeople, etc. Sometimes we lend one of our constructed identities, or the reputation attached to it, to others. Sometimes we ask others to lend an identity to us. All of the meanings of "figurant" contain a relation with others, and all contain a fluidity of role that together are apt characterizations for the multiple, contingent identities we perform online."[10] Instead of critiquing the construction of the online user/consumer as active yet knowable, Albrycht maintains that by studying people's communications activities, PR practitioners can find "authentic communications" and thus model their work accordingly – effectively taming the unruly masses. Even through embracing the discourse of participation and transparency, ultimately the construction of online users and their activities by corporate communicators within the context of social media seems still framed almost exclusively as part of a doctrine of control.

Multimedia Literacy and Recoding Rights

With the gradual development of industrial standards and best practices for corporate blogs by professionals in the fields of public relations, marketing and advertising a glimpse is offered on the possible outcomes of the suggested convergence between sender and receiver in corporate communication from the perspective of the industry. Considering the corporate enclosure of what has been called the "information commons", one has to note the triangular tactics of increasingly enforced restrictive regulation of copyright as a form of property, disintermediatory practices of solititing users' free labor in the creative process, and opaque uses of social media to establish new ways of "taming" or controlling the otherwise unpredictable behavior of consumers. This is not to say that internet users step blindly into such traps, nor that when they do, companies are necessarily successful in harnessing their creativity. Indeed, the strategic or tactical opposition among certain individual or groups of users to some extent feeds into the deliberate construction of consumers as "unpredictable masses" by the contemporary mainstream in marketing and corporate communication. Such a view allows companies to both aim at taming the consumer mass into controllable segments, lifestyle groups or subcultures, as well as to interact with consumers as active agents (Turow 2005). Corporate appropriation of participatory culture thus can be understood as contributing to a key function of advertising and marketing: reducing the advertisers' anxieties, lack of knowledge and imagination regarding the consumer. In this context I consider the framing of authenticity and conversational claims regarding corporate blogs in terms of additional ways to shape and thus control the corporate message as a concrete example of this strategy.

The engagement of participatory media culture by corporate communicators raises several important concerns. For one, we have to ask to what extent people – as citizens and consumers - are contributing to increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for corporate co-optation, and under which conditions one can truly speak of empowerment and co-creation. I would argue that without explicitizing a read/write multimedia literacy (Hartley 2007), and lacking a clear framework of legal rights and protections for the producing consumer-Aoki (1993) describes these aptly as audience "recoding" rights-the creative and at times necessarily critical voice of the commons runs the danger to get co-opted, controlled, and thus: silenced.

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