

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

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Submitted: 10 January 2010

Abstract

The information and communication technology system is constantly creating new scenarios, but a tendency in them can still be recognized: the blurring of the limits between consumers and producers and the passage from interactivity to participation (user generated contents, web 2.0, social networks). In this emerging cultural context, constantly redefined and remediated by individual and personalized forms of elaboration, it is important to understand the way in which every single person or group leads his/her own way towards reappropriation of the technological realm. The author aims to explore potential and real capacities of these new technologies to generate a new public sphere by analyzing an exemplary case study: the moblog communities in the megaphone.net project.

Individuals and groups ‘perform’ using social network sites. Their profiles provide these subjects to put their own identity, representations and ‘friends’ to the test. But social network spaces are not simply representational spaces: they are performance spaces. They are constructed social and relational spaces where identity is created, and where, above all, ‘we act’.

With the rapid growth of social spaces on the web (virtual communities, chat, forum, etc.), whose interactivity highlights its key relational nature, the web as interactive space has given way to the web as a relational space. Currently, social network sites have completed this shift from interactivity to ‘relational’ and from ‘relational’ to ‘participation’.

Henry Jenkins [1, 2] defines typologies of ‘participatory culture’ as follows:

- *Affiliations* (Friendster, Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, or MySpace).
- *Expressions* (digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups).
- *Collaborative Problem-solving* (Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, spoiling).
- *Circulations* (podcasting, blogging).

Rheingold [3] anticipated this scenario with the definition of *smart mobs*: they represent a dynamic sociality, nomadic in mobility, a hybrid structure of social interaction - face-to-face and virtual - not only virtual community but social network, not only class but mobs, a dynamic and always changing agglomerate of people made aware through and by the

technologies they use. Social network sites, which are primarily organized around people and not interests, represent both a continuation and an extension of this concept. They have dramatically revealed the close relationship between virtual and real communities. Participants in many of the larger social network sites are not necessarily “networking” or trying to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network [4, 5].

Social network sites have provided online communities with a new organizational framework. Early public online communities (and current websites dedicated to communities of interest) were structured by topic or according to topical hierarchies. Social network sites, however, are structured with the individual at the center of their own community and networks. Some social networks cater to the production and sharing of specific media (youtube, flickr) – we can say they are media-centered; other web spaces are persons-centered or ties-centered (Facebook). The question here is how does the production level (user generated contents) link to the construction of networks and participation level?

A participatory culture is one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). The matter in hand here is the category of media ‘production’ and media ‘participation’. We face a new complex scenario of uses; there is a new order and relationship between the consumption styles/levels, content management and the new interpretations and social uses of the media.

Today the quantity of information produced by the consumers is higher than the one generated by the big networks. This is what we refer to when we talk about a *prosumer* (a neologism coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980). According to the most recent research results on that matter, it turns out that the so-called “active users” are indeed an interesting component; at the same time they represent a minor percentage of the huge mass of media consumers [6]. The Forrester Research survey called “*Social Technographics*” [7] has established a catalogue of six different Web 2.0 application users, according to the type of activity developed on various Internet social media: *creators, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators, inactives*.

These new practices of individuals and groups on the web have reshaped the dimension of producer/consumer and the media product too, and raise a number of questions: Does participation imply producing? What are the new shapes, and the consequences, of this participation-producing? Participatory culture shifts the focus of attention from one of individual expression to that of community involvement.

Web social network spaces are an important field of investigation when analysing the dynamics of collective elaboration of the representation of a group, which goes directly to the heart of production of the image and consciousness: social and collective practice [8]. On the web 2.0 platforms, especially in social network sites, it makes the transition from imaginary to action; we pass from a representational space to a relational and performative one.

This line of thought can also be approached from the theoretical point of view of *performativity* [9, 10]. The term *performativity* comes from the linguistic field of John Langshaw Austin [11] and I use its characteristics to explain the social network models on web 2.0 platforms. These characteristics are: act (an act implies making to exist, so creativity in action; the act creates a step between content and form, it is therefore subversive); satisfaction *versus* truth; and strength *versus* meaning.

Nowadays we talk about performative technologies and performative identity to stress the process and relationship involved. The performative activities are fundamentally *processual*, a part of them will always remain subject to transformation and will be absolutely impossible to define [12]. A performance is, in fact, a thought in action. It is idea and action simultaneously. It is processuality open to improvisation and experimentation. It is interdisciplinarity and concrete multimediality. A performance is in unstable balance between structure and event, necessity and contingency, interiority and exteriority.

megafone.net

The project megafone.net by the Catalan artist Antoni Abad is an important example of ‘architecture’ of participation and socializing of spaces and tools. Started in 2003, the project explores the creative possibilities of web communication networks supported by mobile technologies, focusing on the creation of digital communities by using mobile telephones equipped with built-in camera.

From 2003 to 2008 the open platform megafone.net has been used to create specific projects with the following communities: Madrid prostitutes, Sao Paulo motoboy and motogirls (city pony express), Mexico city drivers, persons with limited mobility in Barcelona and Geneva, and many other local communities. These new 'broadcasters' have sent over 30.000 contents (photo, video, texts) via MMS on <www.megafone.net>.

The platform is based on web 2.0 features: user generated content, tags to describe, to organize and to search contents in a real time database built by users.

The key point of the project is the strong connection between real and virtual communities: digital community originates from the local community that has specific and localized values, problems, identity. The online database makes it possible to establish a connection between individuals' multimedia devices and proposes an alternative view of the space (city, area) based on the specific group's problems and expectations.

Tags allow for linking the individual mobile production of content with the collective elaboration of the same content. Thus, we have the individualization of the creation of content on the one hand and the social re-shaping and redefining of the same content on the other. Local and individual points of view establish ties with their local, real, communities by means of the digital space.

megafone.net develops a network of "citizen ethnographers" [13], which means that users become critical investigators of their own community. Taxi drivers in Mexico City, prostitutes in Madrid, motoboy and motogirls in Sao Paulo are narrators of their experiences and broadcasters of their own stories. At the same time they aren't mere annotators of their reality, they aren't purely 'ethnographers'. A very important consequence of this project is the modification of representations and the transformation of the common conception diffused in real communities.

In that sense megafone.net represents a very useful tool to form a new active public sphere [14]; it's a space for social criticism that starts from individuals and settles down in the real communities. This project works through mechanisms of representation – video, audio, images, texts – but the result is not merely to give a visibility to specific socio-cultural groups and specific communities that usually are excluded from the traditional mainstream media. In megafone.net individuals and groups develop strategies of

sociability and subjectivity; the digital 'place' generates unpredictable social interactions. It is a space for unexpected and reconfigured social relationships; it represents a discursive place more than a 'representational' space.

The core of the project in megafone.net is not the creation of a representation of a group but rather the activation of the agency and production of social relationships. That is why the project has strong 'political' consequences and a strong value of 'criticism' (the act of dissenting). We assist to a redefinition of the collective identity through individual actions that correspond to a criticism of the rules assumed by the community (values, social roles, etc.).

In the terminology of John Thompson [15], megafone.net is a form of reinvention of public sphere: a place/space being independent from any institution; a form of public life, or civil society that performs its constitutive function of criticism; a form of open public sphere that corresponds to a creative space in which new symbols, new images and new shapes of social and collective identity appear. For example, one of the channels in megafone.net - *canal*GITANO* (gypsy community of Lleida) - has created many conflicting situations inside gypsy culture, like the redefinition of the man-woman role and a criticism of the *de facto* authority of patriarchs. An other channel, *canal*CENTRAL*, created for and with the members of the large community of Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica, had to face political and technological constraints, finding temporary solutions in which the established rules were 'suspended'. For example, there were legal problems with the mobile phones because they had been imported illegally from Miami and their software was not compatible with systems in Costa Rica; it was very hard to obtain phone contracts for 22 illegal immigrants, when proving legal residency in the country is an unavoidable requirement for accessing mobile telephone services. In addition, the participants of *canal*ACCESSIBLE* (persons with limited mobility) in Barcelona created a map of architectural obstacles that was reproduced by local media, and city hall responded by distributing a map of "Accessible Barcelona".

The strength of megafone.net, structured as a video-mobile-blog 2.0, comes from its taking root in real communities with their tensions and potentialities. The goal is to generate real life itself through interaction with the environment.

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