Chapter 48
The Discourses of Empowerment and Web 2.0: The Dilemmas of User-Generated Content

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ABSTRACT

Consumer content generation in the Web 2.0 environment from a libertarian perspective is about the democratization of mediated knowledge where it creates the possibilities to produce new knowledge and media economies in a postmodern world. This chapter examines the notions of empowerment afforded by multimedia technologies on the Internet where new forms of knowledge, politics, identity, and community can be fostered through the Web 2.0’s architecture of participation, collaboration, and openness. It also discusses how these unlimited possibilities to produce content present new social and ethical dilemmas. They not only challenge conventional ways in which knowledge and expertise have been constructed in modern and postmodern societies but also require more rigorous methods to identity what can constitute expert knowledge. The production of user-led taxonomies and data repositories has raised the need to re-examine user-generated content and its function and coexistence within the existing systems and archives of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The new forms of user-generated content on the Internet have in recent years heralded a plethora of academic writing on the reconfiguration of the role of the audience in the new media landscape (see Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2005; Morris & Ogan, 2005; Deuze, 2006). From a media studies perspective, the audience as prolific producers raises new ways to theorise the interactive audiences who were previously seen as recipients empowered to only interpret messages but not to create their own due to the political economy of the media and knowledge industries. Undeniably, with the Internet the traditional notion of ‘audience’ has been muddied with features of interactivity and the formation of niche communities which enable narrowcasting (Downes, 2002). Additionally with the convergence
of technologies the term becomes inadequate to capture the complexities of the Internet and the range of activities and behaviour it can enable. The possibility of creating unlimited user-generated content undoubtedly circumnavigates many of the ‘gate-keeping’ features of the traditional media without completely diminishing their power. The increasing incorporation of user-generated content into mainstream media portals is evident as news and content generation becomes an open-ended phenomenon in the new media environment.

Jonathan Zittrain (2006) moots the notion of ‘generativity’, where the technical architecture of the web makes it consummately generative and the grid of the PC connected to the Internet has developed such that there is little centralized control. Consequently, it is nearly completely open to the creation and rapid distribution of the innovations of technology-savvy users to a mass audience who can partake in activities without having to know how they work (cf. Naughton, 2006, p.8). This participatory turn in web business models that the business and web design communities refer to as Web 2.0 is characterised by the convergence of social networks, online communities and consumer-created content and is synonymously referred to as ‘social media’ (Burgess et al., 2006).

The proliferation of user-generated content has often been associated in our consciousness with issues of empowerment and discourses of ‘democratization’, where user-generated content is seen as reconfiguring and re-negotiating conventional ways of producing knowledge and in the process it is seen as entering new forms of power arrangements, conventions, and information hierarchies on the Internet.

This chapter examines how the notion of empowerment is entwined with the features of Web 2.0 which stress ‘participation’ and ‘collaboration’ whilst integrating notions of ‘community’, ‘identity,’ and the ‘performatve’ in the online environment thus blurring the lines between private and public as well as truth and fiction. By analysing the theories of empowerment associated with consumer-generated content in the Web 2.0 environment, this chapter explores the emerging social and ethical challenges, whether they be information overload or the issue of trust in the Internet. The audience of consumers and citizens inevitably mediates many areas of human activity including policy making, the formation of public opinion, as well as the fostering of communal and individual identities in the postmodern world. The chapter appraises the problems, the potential and the processes that are unleashed through the proliferation of consumer-generated content in our globalized world.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WEB 2.0

The discourses of empowerment need to be examined against the construction of the term Web 2.0. While its technical features are much more discernible, the social construction provides an insight into issues of empowerment and the ability to capitalise on the libertarian trajectory associated with the Internet and World Wide Web. The term Web 2.0 is a problematic construct for it warrants some measure of acknowledgement that some transition has occurred in the web environment – some seminal moment that has altered or reconfigured the ways in which people use and engage with the Internet. There has been much debate on both the moment that delivered the change as well as the technical features which define this new environment (See Anderson, 2007; Mabillot, 2007; O’Reilly 2005; Maddon & Fox, 2005; Maness, 2006; Beer and Burrows, 2007). Maddon and Fox (2005) aptly point out that it is difficult to precisely pinpoint when the transition into Web 2.0 started but they nevertheless assert that the currency of the term and its appropriation into our popular imagination and discourse validates its currency and usefulness in the present day context. The term then functions