

BLOGS, WIKIPEDIA,
SECOND LIFE, and BEYOND

From Production to Prodigy

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Introduction

This book begins with a simple, yet fundamental proposition: the proposition that to describe the creative, collaborative, and *ad hoc* engagement with content for which user-led spaces such as the *Wikipedia* act as examples, the term ‘production’ is no longer accurate. This, I argue, is true even where we re-imagine the concept of production as ‘user-led production,’ ‘commons-based peer production,’ or more prosaically as the production of ‘customer-made’ products: not the adjectives and qualifiers which we may attach to the term ‘production’ are the problem, but the very noun itself.

Users who participate in the development of open source software, in the collaborative extension and editing of the *Wikipedia*, in the communal world-building of *Second Life*, or processes of massively parallelized and decentralized creativity and innovation in myriads of enthusiast communities do no longer produce content, ideas, and knowledge in a way that resembles traditional, industrial modes of production; the outcomes of their work similarly retain only few of the features of conventional products, even though frequently they are able to substitute for the outputs of commercial production processes. User-led content ‘production’ is instead built on iterative, evolutionary development models in which often very large communities of participants make a number of usually very small, incremental changes to the established knowledge base, thereby enabling a gradual improvement in quality which—under the right conditions—can nonetheless outpace the speed of product development in the conventional, industrial model.

Such modes of content creation—involving large communities of users, who act without an all-controlling, coordinating hierarchy—operate along lines which are fluid, flexible, heterarchical, and organized *ad hoc* as required by the ongoing process of development; they are more closely aligned with the emergent organizational principles in social communities than with the predetermined, supposedly optimized rigid structures of governance in the corporate sphere. User-led content creation in this new model harnesses the collected, collective intelligence of all participants, and manages—though in some cases better than in others—to direct their contributions to where they are best able to make a positive impact.

This style of content creation must be examined, then, without the baggage of ‘common sense’ assumptions and understandings about industrial processes of content production which we have developed over the past century. Industrial modes of production, from this point of view, provide only one possible paradigm for the development of products, and ‘products’ themselves are only one possible configuration of information, knowledge, and creative work—and not necessarily the most appropriate such configuration in the emerging context of the information age.

Terminology itself, then, is part of the problem: the very term ‘product’ necessarily implies a specific form of outcome, a process of reaching that outcome, and a set of likely consumer interactions with that outcome. Microsoft Windows, to pick just one example, is clearly a product (if at its core an informational one), has been developed following an industrial process of production, and is offered to the consumer to use, but not to extend and contribute to; it is less clear, on the other hand, whether the same can truthfully be said about open source software such as the Linux operating system or the Firefox Web browser, even though they can be used as substitutes for comparable closed-source products.

To overcome the terminological dilemma which faces us as we attempt to examine processes of user-led content creation, we must introduce new terms into the debate. The concept of *produsage* is such a term: it highlights that within the communities which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge that we examine in this book, the role of ‘consumer’ and even that of ‘end user’ have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance. In many of the spaces we encounter here, users are always already necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of this role—they have become a new, hybrid, *produser*.

Produsage in Context

Produsage exists within a wider context of new and emerging concepts for describing the social, technological, and economic environment of user-led content creation. In particular, two terms have been used widely (and sometimes all too liberally) to describe the technological and technosocial frameworks for produsage communities: Web 2.0, and social software.

Coates provides a useful definition of social software:

Social software is a particular sub-class of software-prosthesis that concerns itself with the augmentation of human, social and / or collaborative abilities through structured mediation (this mediation may be distributed or centralised, top-down or bottom-up/emergent).¹

Many of the collaborative spaces provided by social software have become environments for produsage, as we see throughout this book; social software alone—understood, in line with Coates, as a prosthesis for human collaboration—cannot in itself guarantee the rise of produsage as an alternative to production, however. What it does offer, then, is a toolkit to support the produsage processes and principles which we encounter in greater detail in the following chapters:

- it removes “the real-world limitations placed on social and / or collaborative behaviour by factors such as language, geography, background, financial status, etc.” by providing the tools for widespread, equitable collaboration across large communities of users;
- it compensates “for human inadequacies in processing, maintaining or developing social and / or collaborative mechanisms,” especially also as they relate to the limitations imposed by geography, by providing tools and mechanisms for the development and maintenance of collaborative networks which can be organized and reconfigured *ad hoc* as required by the task at hand;
- it creates “environments or distributed tool-sets that pull useful end results out of human social and / or collaborative behaviour” by providing the means of filtering and evaluating collaborative processes and outputs and thereby harnessing and harvesting the most successful teams and content contributions.²

These affordances of social software speak directly to the core principles of produsage as we outline them in the following chapter; indeed, the technological characteristics of social software have emerged in parallel to and under mutual feedback with the social, organizational, and intellectual characteristics of produsage as we will soon encounter them.

Closely aligned to this understanding of social software as the technology to support and enable sociality and collaboration is the concept of Web 2.0, which highlights specifically the implications of such socially based content creation for the economic world. The term Web 2.0—which, it should be noted, has also been frequently criticized for its implication of a revolutionary new stage in Internet development, rather than portraying it as a gradual shift as may be more accurate—was introduced by Tim O’Reilly, who provides a useful definition:

Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform.³

Among these rules are the following:

1. Don't treat software as an artifact, but as a process of engagement with your users. ("The perpetual beta")
2. Open your data and services for re-use by others, and re-use the data and services of others whenever possible. ("Small pieces loosely joined")
3. Don't think of applications that reside on either client or server, but build applications that reside in the space between devices. ("Software above the level of a single device")⁴

Although there has been significant debate about the concept of Web 2.0 and the many other derivative '2.0' concepts it has spawned, focusing largely on the fact that many such terms can be seen as a blatant attempt by incumbent corporate players to cash in on the rise of collaborative content creation without embracing the core principles outlined by O'Reilly and others, the buzzword status of Web 2.0 and similar terms also indicates the significant commercial and industrial attention now paid to the new models of community and content development now emerging from the realm of social software. As we see throughout this book, the environments of what we will describe as produsage now often offer credible alternatives to and sustained competition for established industries and their products. For many corporate players who have found it impossible to contain the rise of such alternatives, the question has now shifted from containment to engagement—what models are available for them to harvest the content created by these communities, and to harness the communities themselves for their own purposes; what new business opportunities lie in helping rather than hindering the creation and distribution of content created within such communities? We return to examine such questions throughout this book.

In addition to the technological and commercial recognition of produsage as a major driver of change in these contexts, recent years have also seen an increasing popular attention on produsage environments—especially, perhaps, on some of its most visible proponents, such as blogs, *Wikipedia*, and *YouTube*. *Time Magazine*, for example, broke with tradition to make 'you'—that is, all of us who participate in collaborative content creation environments—its 'Person of the Year' in 2006, while in the same year, *Advertising Age* also named the consumer as 'Advertising Agency of the Year,' recognizing the impact of user-led knowledge sharing on consumption patterns.

In a similar vein, *Trendwatching* (a key observer of new trends in corporate/user engagement) even suggests that an entire new 'Generation C' has emerged, creating "an avalanche of consumer generated 'content' that is building on the Web, adding tera-peta bytes of new text, images, audio and video on an ongoing basis."⁵ Generation C should not be misunderstood as a strictly generationally bounded grouping, of course—it is defined by attitude and aptitude, that is, by the interest and ability to participate in the online communities of produsage, more than by the age or background of participants: *Trendwatching* suggests that "anyone with even a tiny amount of creative talent can (and probably will) be part of this not-so-exclusive trend."⁶