



Digital Content Creation

Perceptions, Practices & Perspectives

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Introduction

Digital Content Creation: Perceptions, Practices, and Perspectives

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User-generated content, digital content creation, participatory culture, digital creativities (Burn, 2009; Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006): there is no dearth of terms to describe the types of activities propelled in recent years by the rapid worldwide uptake of the Internet and mobile technologies in general and by Web 2.0 in particular. Social media is the shorthand often applied to these applications and tools, which hold the potential for users to shape and share content and socialize across time and space. Among the most widespread social media to generate and communicate content are wikis, social networking sites for “friending” such as Facebook, media sharing sites such as YouTube, and microblogging utilities such as with Twitter. Much has been made of the revolutionary social potential harnessed by users of social media, from educational turnarounds, to new forms of civic engagement and virtual citizenship and the formation of novel business models and markets.

The present volume takes stock of these developments through reasoned and robust studies of innovative uses of these new social media such as weblogs and wikis, online chat clients, digital games, and virtual world applications. From a variety of perspectives—including media and ICT studies (Information and Communications Technologies), education, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies—the volume authors contribute to popular discourses and professional investigations in three capacities: analytical perspective, methodological

approach, and empirical focus.

This analytical perspective is based on situated sociocultural practices and multimodal processes rather than on technological uptake or product distribution of social media (Earnshaw & Vince, 2001). This perspective is chosen to help balance and supplement existing investigations that are chiefly of a policy or a corporate nature. While these investigations often adopt a quantitative approach to large-scale data sets so as to document diversities in terms of age, ethnicity, class, gender, and region, the analytical perspective in the present volume invites more qualitative and explicitly contextualized approaches, allowing authors to unpick textual and social complexities and nuances. Indeed, several of this volume's authors are at pains to adopt a comprehensive approach that includes both textual and social dimensions, an approach that is recommended in the large body of media and ICT research, but not easily practiced.

Many, if not all, of the authors here use the young generation as their empirical focus, which is not surprising given the way in which this particular generation has pioneered the exploration of the Internet and mobile forms of creation and communication. Social media, with options to shape and share content, demonstrate the strongest growth among young Europeans' web uses (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009), and similar trends are documented in the USA (Lenhart & Madden, 2005). More specifically, many chapters in this volume analyze and evaluate these explorations with a view to learning, education, and competence formation. This focus is not only a result of young people being the center of attention—many of them are, after all, involved in one form of educational training or another; the focus is more centrally to do with ways in which digital media and, especially, creative forms of content creation are imbricated with prevailing discourses of wider social significance. Two of these are of particular relevance here, namely the policy discourse and the corporate discourse on digital media.

Policy Issues: Creating Knowledge Societies

The European Commission celebrated 2009 as the “European Year of Creativity and Innovation.” The subtitle of the Commission's website (www.create2009.europa.eu/) is “imagine, create, innovate,” and this phrase is indicative of the rationale governing the Commission's initiative. As a joint enterprise of the Directorate-General for Education and Culture and the Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry, the stated key message of the quoted phrase is that “creativity and innovation contribute to economic prosperity as well as to social and individual wellbeing” (European Commission, 2009a). Creativity is seen as a lever

of Europe's economic competitiveness and as a catalyst of wider social participation and development (see also Sales & Fournier, 2007). The background reports, fueling arguments for the initiative, couple creativity, education, and culture as the joint foundations of economic innovation (e.g., European Commission, 2007; European Council, 2008).

Both here and in related EU strategies, digital technologies and digital media figure as transformative factors in fostering key competences of the twenty-first century. For example, the Learnovation project, 2007–2009, aims to investigate and document the potential of technology-enhanced learning to support innovation in Europe, which is seen as “the core outcome to achieve both competitiveness and social cohesion in Europe” (Learnovation, 2009). A similar link is evident in a European Commission recommendation in 2009 with the telling title, *On media literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society* (European Commission, 2009b, p. 1).

While important policy divergences remain as to the definition of ICT vis-à-vis digital media (Drotner, 2009), the European discourse is mirrored in many parts of the world and across widely different educational and social systems (overviews in e.g., Cheung, 2009; Fedorov, n. d.; Hart & Süss, 2002). In the USA, for example, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills is an advocacy organization that brings together stakeholders in education, business, and politics to help promote competences that are defined as “key to improving our nation's competitiveness a knowledge driven economy” (Partnership 2009: n. p.). Two board members of the Partnership define the core of these skills as learning and innovation, digital literacy, and life and career skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

The recent discourse—coupling creativity, digital literacies, and knowledge economies and societies—clearly positions digital content creation as a means to an end, namely future-oriented competence formation. This position is at odds with established discourses to do with creativity, with learning and with media. Creativity has traditionally been defined as an individual ability with which, for example, gifted individuals such as artists and scientists are endowed. Today, this ability is seen to potentially include everybody, and it is defined as a social demand and a means of economic innovation. From being an inborn gift for the few, creativity has become a collective competence to be nurtured by virtually everybody and with digital content creation as a key lever.

This transformation must be seen in tandem with the way in which long-established discourses on education over the last decade have increasingly turned into a discourse on learning, putting pupils and processes at the core of discussion and empirical exploration. Many policy documents, including the EU documents

quoted above, define digital technologies as catalysts of this development, by allowing for virtual and mobile forms of collaboration and interaction in problem solving, thus potentially changing teacher-pupil relations, the locations of learning and, some argue, even learning itself (Drotner, Jensen & Schrøder, 2008; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006; Salmon, 2004). The interlacing of digital media and pedagogical practices are routinely viewed through a lens of optimism, defining changes in terms of improvement and competence advancement.

Likewise, digital media is rapidly challenging established discourses of concern with media uses, particularly when it comes to children and teenagers. The recent worldwide upsurge of digital participation and creation is viewed as indication that users operate as active and engaged citizens and consumers, freely voicing their own concerns and shaping their own futures (Buckingham 2000, Ito et al., 2009). Such views easily resonate with deep-seated notions on individual freedom of expression; several major private foundations, not least in the USA, build on such notions in their formation of youth empowerment programs. For example, the Adobe Foundation's Adobe Youth Voices as of 2009 operates in 31 countries, offering training, grants, software, and employee volunteers from Adobe Systems Incorporated, all with a view to support "young people in and out of school and [encourage] the use of cutting-edge multimedia tools to communicate and share their ideas, demonstrate their potential, and take action where they live" (Adobe, 2009: n. p.).

The transforming discourses on creativity, education, and media serve to highlight persisting issues of power and purpose. Who are in a position to define what digital technologies are for and in what contexts? What should be the aims and outcomes of digital uses? What are the enablers and barriers of digital content creation in terms of textual modes, contextual framings, and institutional organization? Several chapters in this volume address these key questions and provide answers based on in-depth empirical studies.

Corporate Issues: Capitalizing on Knowledge Economies

Social media is a growth area of marketing, just as the sociocultural processes of content creation and communication offer new challenges and chances facing the corporate sector. The upsurge of wikis and blogs, podcasts, online gaming, and networking sites for friending has not only added to the already vast popularity of short message services (SMS) or multimedia messages (MMS) and web-based instant messaging (IM), these utilities and tools have equally fueled new corporate strategies for addressing existing customers and widen corporate markets for poten-

tial consumers. The barrage of bestselling manuals on e-marketing, social media marketing, and digital marketing, for example, testifies to the way in which the corporate trend latches onto existing discourses through which ICTs and mobile devices are hailed as innovative and personalized push media. These discourses are ultimately propelled by active users who are a far cry from the old-time groups of couch potatoes addressed by the push media of mass communication. While such easy oppositions are an equally far cry from the sobering nuances found in audience studies, they do serve as effective rhetorical correlations of social media, creativity, and innovation.

As noted, new alliances and partnerships are being formed between industry, policy-makers, and public stakeholders involved in the area of digital development. In overall terms, such partnerships are based on visions that digital technologies are formative for corporate economic gain. Knowledge economies, rather than knowledge societies, are at the core of interest. Based on this shared vision, two types of discourses are in operation when it comes to user digital content creation, depending on the definition of users as employees or consumers.

In work-related contexts, users participate in virtual dialogs and upload and share text and images as ways of solving problems or handling work-related tasks; for example, in on-the-job training. Many private companies have explicit procedures for accessing social software on the job such as online games, social networks sites, and text messaging. While comparative research evidence is still sparse, studies suggest that stricter corporate rules exist in North America than in, for example, Northern Europe (Mante, 2002).

Conversely, the leisure market for social software and user-generated content, a market that is almost entirely of a commercial nature, poses few restrictions for adults; and, when it comes to children and teenagers, self-regulation by the industry is generally proposed. These corporate views are lodged within discourses on children as being socially adept, media-savvy, and with little need for adult guidance, be it by parents, teachers, or professional counselors. Such notions easily pick up on and are nurtured by policy issues of democratic participation and advocacy for children's self-expression.

The co-articulation of these discourses speaks to particular tensions regarding user privacy and protection, not least young users; with institutional conditions to secure rights of expression, cultural experimentation, and social critique; and with boundaries of trust and loyalty on virtual markets where the user-consumer easily turns into co-producer and co-worker (van Dijk, 2009). Several chapters in the volume offer discussions of these dilemmas with insights gained through careful analysis and interpretation.