

## Chapter 6

# Participatory Culture

## Understanding participation

*Das Wissen muß ein Können werden (Carl von Clausewitz).*

As I have described extensively in previous chapters, the recently emerged media practices that have been labelled participatory culture must be understood as built up from three interrelated components: a) narratives and rhetoric developed and distributed in popular and scholar discourses, b) specific technological qualities, and c) media practices. This book has argued that the emerging media practice and the discourse on information technologies harbour a promise for social progress. In fact, the affordances to fulfil such a promise can be inscribed into technological design, which in return can also stimulate participation. In many aspects, the participatory culture constitutes new formations of cultural production. The intertwined dynamics of design and appropriation in the cultural industries are one of them. It mingles users and producers in processes of producing, modifying and distributing artefacts. While traditional distinctions such as those of user-producer and audience-sender begin to blur, the increasing participation of users in the production of media texts and the appropriation of consumer goods and technology need to be analysed in a way that differentiates the various ways in which what has come to be known as participatory culture takes shape.

The popular discourses and the representation of technology in media have been recognized as crucial for shaping public understanding of participatory culture and labelling new media as enabling technologies. References to past 'media revolutions', as well as employing commonly shared images and associations created awareness and shaped an imagination of possible uses for new technologies. Those discourses often have been overly optimistic regarding social progress through technological advancement, and a revolutionary change in power structures between consumers and producers was hastily announced. However, the framing of these new media was crucial for creating awareness and market capitalization as well as for political agenda setting. Tracing the constituents of participatory culture revealed that dynamic actor networks are transforming the meaning of technologies, affecting discourses, and shaping media practice. As I pointed out earlier in this book, technology matters, and many media practices are directly related to specific technological qualities of computer, software, and the Internet. Furthermore, laying bare these actor networks through various case studies resulted in suggesting the need for a shift in understanding participatory culture.

Understanding user participation as a dynamic unfolding in the shape of an

extension of cultural industries adds a critical notion to the concept of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; Jenkins et al. 2006; Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008). Using a term such as 'extended culture industry' deliberately recalls the Frankfurt School notion of cultural production as a capitalist imperative (Adorno, Horkheimer 1947). It refuses hasty enthusiasm about user participation, and thus questions the power structures unfolding in an interdependence of business and politics. More importantly, a concept of extended cultural industries does not posit the emerging media practice as a radically alternative production, as Bruns and Benkler describe it, but recognizes its mode of productions and media practice as ambiguously useful. Therefore, participation in the extended culture industry has been described without a generalizing positive connotation. This concept emphasizes the ability of the media industry enterprises to employ user activities in a way that clearly questions the acclaimed status of users as producers.

While Jenkins defines participatory culture as a community-driven appropriation of commercial media texts, my approach of extended cultural industries acknowledges production beyond the established channels of corporate product development as well as the ability to incorporate user activities into commercial media production. It furthermore emphasizes potential and actual interrelations between corporate designers and appropriating users, and it points out the overlaps between different areas of accumulation, archiving, and construction. Products that have been developed by users beyond established industries can in turn be implemented into those industries' business models. Further, modified products may be re-implemented by their original vendors as new or further developed design. Other products may remain completely outside the conventional structures, or be released into a public domain in order to be reused and employed for new creations, which in turn can re-enter the sphere of the cultural industries. And the most recent development of the Web 2.0 shows clearly that media enterprises were successfully able to implement user activities into new business models.

The concept of extended cultural industries covers the various user activities (accumulation, archiving, construction) and traces potential collisions with traditional practices as well as possible inclusions in the established channels of production. Instead of homogeneous user communities, collective production seems to be very heterogeneous, as do the participant's motives, their social contexts, technical skills, and individual dedication. Within the various categories of user activities, participation can unfold explicitly or implicitly. Especially the implicit participation became a crucial aspect in employing 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly 2005) in popular Web 2.0 applications. Participatory culture therefore has to be understood as an extension of the traditional cultural industries into the realm of users. In contrast to the romanticized narratives spread in popular discourses, participatory culture is very heterogeneous and characterized by a plurality of different configurations that are affected by many, often contradictory, interests. It is also not helpful to glorify the 'Davids' battling the industrial 'Goliaths', or to pre-

maturely embrace a pseudo-participation of users on corporate Web 2.0 platforms. Despite the many examples for active user participation in design processes, the MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other Web 2.0 applications instead bear witness to the emergence of a new form of media consumption and the constitution of audiences, as well as the rise of powerful corporations shaping and controlling cultural production and its preconditions. Here the 'culture industry' proved to successfully implement user activities into new services and business models. Critical to our perception of participatory culture is the ability of the media industry to effectively seize control over processes of cultural production and to establish major platforms of consumer culture that are placed in the very centre of the culture industry.

While diffusion of information technology in general, and the personal computer, software, and the Internet in particular, have resulted in the far-reaching availability of technological knowledge in society, the implications of technological choices for the functioning of participation are hardly brought to the fore in discourses on participatory culture. On the fringes of the cultural industries, users are taking the initiative and creating specific practices of media use. While these practices stand in stark contrast to established business models, modes of perception, and traditions, they simultaneously create the conditions for innovative business opportunities, open new perspectives, and shape new habits. In this very process, users recognize the need for social acceptance and legal protection, the objective being to encourage new forms of social action and interaction through legal means. It has been argued that the blurring of the users and producers has led to a new alignment of consumers and citizens (Uricchio 2004). But where is this going? Was 'Empowering of the Internet Generation' just another empty promise, or will the revolution spread through the BitTorrent networks as decisive instruments in the digital class struggle? Probably neither one of these scenarios is absolutely correct, but what is unfolding in response to user participation is a sociopolitical process by means of mediating technology.

### *Shaping society*

*First of all, we think the world must be changed (l'International Lettriste, 1957).*

The main forms of digital technologies – computer, software, and the Internet – have led to the emergence of widespread technological knowledge and competences, as well as the availability of resources and various communities to develop and master this knowledge. What has been termed participatory culture, however, is to a great extent characterized by emerging new media corporations which conceived ways to provide platforms for user activities embedded in new business models. In addition, there also is the emergence of a socio-political concern for user activities, and the attempts to constitute a collectively shared understanding of the

new technologies. This transformation from knowledge about technology to a socio-political regulation of technologies and their related practice is visible in the dynamics that have been described in this book as strategies of confrontation, implementation, and integration.

Legal conflicts are the effect of controversial practices such as unauthorized file downloads, and socio-political debates are unfolding in view of attempts to regulate those and other practices. They develop in society-wide debates, affecting decision-making processes and legal solutions. In 2005, software patents were on the agenda of the European Parliament, which rejected an earlier directive of the European Council of Ministers on copyrights and software patents. In 2008, the International Organization of Standardization (ISO) caused disturbance among its members because Microsoft obviously compromised the process in order to have their format Open XML accepted as the international standard. More recently, the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) has been causing concern among various actors, including companies that are afraid too much regulation of intellectual resources might stifle innovation. Eagerly, politicians respond to the growing concerns of those many people unfamiliar with, and often scared of, Internet culture and propose inappropriate measures, such as censorship, to deal with phenomena that are explicitly visible in, but not inherently constituted through, digital culture, such as violence, pornography, crime, and racism. Organizations concerned with issues of privacy and citizens' rights object to the measures that are proposed to enforce copyright laws, regulate Internet traffic, monitor and filter media content, control user activities and limit their certified civil rights. They criticize that many political decisions concerning the use of Internet technology are severely influenced by companies and lobbyists. Monetary issues as well as the repressive politician's hope for effective and cheaper control seem to govern many decisions rather than a concern for a truly technologically aware society where new media practices are integrated into innovative means of social interaction and cultural production. The cases in this book show how media practice is accompanied by an increasing concern for public policies and questions of governance. They also demonstrate a public interest in questions of technology regulation, and the definition of technological leitmotifs.

Organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), the Internet Society (ISOC), and the Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure (FFII) represent on a wide and international level civil society's interest in co-shaping the legal integration of information technology and its use into society. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a platform for the process of global implementation, use, and legal regulation on the national and the international levels of information technologies. Those platforms and countless other citizen initiatives, activist groups, corporate lobby groups, and public administration institutions are part of a transformation process that eventually will further constitute the information society. What appears on the macro level – presented in chapter 4

as the emergence of a new media practice with regard to the development and diffusion of technological knowledge – is transformed into a socio-political debate and law proposals on a society-wide level (e.g. Lessig 2000, 2006; Biegel 2003). The challenge is to question to what extent a participatory democracy (Bachrach 1967; Pateman 1970) will enable the people who are actually using these technologies to actively take part in this transformation process and affect the decision-making processes that will eventually result in laws. But as yet we understand little of the dynamic and complex interactions unfolding between the many actors involved, not to mention the ways in which this ‘participatory practice’ could be connected with formalized processes of democratic decision-making.

What can be seen in the dynamics of confrontation, implementation, and integration is that software is indeed politically charged. That has been very visible in the copyright wars and the attempts of old media industries to preserve laws and rules for cultural production dating back to the age of mechanical reproduction. But it is unfolding on a more fundamental level in the dynamics I have labelled as implementation and integration. Here, the interactions of users and producers are fundamentally political. Platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, Google Maps and also virtual worlds such as *Second Life* or the popular game *World of Warcraft* force companies to transform their interaction with their clients from the traditional product and customer support to a sort of ‘user and software governance’. It turns companies and users in something more similar to a ‘society’, where through various processes of interaction both sides try to balance their various interests in a sort of ‘agreement’. It requires process-oriented strategies that involve ‘public policies’, law-like texts that are very much recognizable in ‘end user license agreements’ and ‘terms of use’. It also requires a different way of communicating with users or even integrating them actively in the development process. Another crucial aspect is that some of the mentioned platforms are much more than just simply services or products, they are constituents of public ‘space’ (Münker 2009). User are therefore less like traditional consumers and become more like citizens. The disturbing aspect about this shift is that it would turn companies into something more similar to governments and public administration without the traditional democratic legitimation.

There clearly is a participatory aspect in the way users seek to transform their knowledge of technology into culturally accepted norms and habits. Extending participation from tinkering with products to socio-political actions is important in view of the challenges facing the emerging information society: copyright enforcement, software patents, surveillance technologies, data retention, privacy, as well as network neutrality are but a few of the urgent issues whose regulation will affect the use and development of information technologies substantially. The ongoing attempts by the copyright industries, in concert with the aim of politicians to control access to information and citizens’ communication, seriously threatens the recently developed media practices (Lessig 2001, 2004; Vaidhanathan 2001).

An increasing interest of politicians in surveillance technologies, and the ever-growing need of copyright industries to lock down cultural resources and technologies, could lead to a regulation of Internet technologies and computer use that would immediately abolish user anonymity, free information, and access to resources (Walker 2003). By requesting civil enforcement of copyrights, these corporations ultimately constitute a serious danger to civil rights. Recently, Jonathan Zittrain launched an urgent call for change, to escape from the anticipated restrictions on technology and freedom (2008). These voices are not necessarily a dystopian backlash to the formulated utopia of participation, but again show the social scope of technology use. All this constitutes a reconfiguration of established business models, modes of production, and power structures. As Armand Mattelart has warned, the debates on media practice are not settled yet, and more than a decade after the World Wide Web became a massively used application, users' freedom to communicate is by no means guaranteed (2007).

It is therefore necessary to take a step beyond understanding participatory culture as merely appropriating consumer goods; instead, it can be seen as the constitution of a technologically aware society where new media practices transform many aspects of everyday life, including politics, the economy, and public discourse. The emerging participatory culture describes a profound transformation of cultural production. On many levels it provides exciting opportunities to actively participate in political discussion, collective production, and to interact and communicate in global networks. It is not only changing what it means to be a consumer through the possibilities of participation, it is also changing citizenship. The transformation of citizenship becomes very much explicit in the dynamics of confrontation, implementation, and integration. While confrontation tries to stifle any media practice that threatens old business models, implementation tends to turn users into subjects of corporate platforms. The dynamic of integration shows how consensus and stability – even if they are temporary – can be achieved for communities and technologies. On the level of social interaction, integration provides examples of mutual respect and cooperation; furthermore, it shows extraordinary examples of organization of distributed participants. Although it would be quite inappropriate to label these examples from Wikipedia to Google Maps as 'provisional microsocieties' (Debord 1957), they provide inspiration for ways of integrating new media practices into society. The process of advocating the emerging media practice has already resulted in many requests for constituents of an effective participation in the information society, such as transparency of technologies, free access to information infrastructures, a neutral regulation of web traffic, and the right for private and anonymous communication. Furthermore, policies can formulate a technological leitmotif embracing the innovative value of shared resources.

Participating in this process is possible on several levels. Within scholarly debate, it is important to revisit the affection for active users, and to analyse user activities with regard to the actual socio-political implications they may have for a

reconfiguration of power structures. I argued extensively against the rosy picture of user participation, not only because it describes the phenomenon of participation insufficiently, but also because it's illusionary rhetoric neglects the problems at hand and serves 'a self-incurred immaturity'. Providing an analysis of the actor networks involved in shaping our cultural reality through patent laws, regulations, and technological design can contribute significantly to making socio-political dynamics public and comprehensible to a broader audience. In that way, scholars can contribute to an interdisciplinary effort of reflecting the constituents of a participatory culture, and provide insights that can influence the integration of new media practices into society. The humanities must not blindly justify technological development (nor adopt the conservative stance of the techno-pessimists) but instead must become critically involved in the debate and provide the necessary insight and analysis for reflection and decision-making. Instead of letting the humanities become a mere appendix of marketing departments, critical theory has to participate in the process of policy-making. Its aim should be to unveil hidden networks, to 'make things public' and map assemblages and detect alliances to provide arguments in the ongoing and forthcoming debates on our cultural values, our freedom, and our civil rights (Latour 2005a).

Defending the cultural freedom and values of a participatory culture also unfolds on the level of design. The open-source community explicitly discusses socio-political aspects of design. Wikipedia and Google Maps are two other examples of technological design and knowledge creation accompanied by a discourse and decision-making processes that resemble a democratic approach to cultural practice and design, founded on constitutional guidelines. Already a lively discussion is taking place in the domain of open source, as well as in the many grassroots movements, about free information, citizen journalism, and the free culture movement, aiming to amend copyright laws.

An interdisciplinary effort is necessary to bridge the divide between cultural analysis and technical design. Participants from both domains need to develop a shared understanding of technology and socio-political implications. Both sides need to develop a certain form of sensibility: scholars need to comprehend, as students of culture, to what extent design solutions are related to materials, tools, and prior definitions of objectives, while designers can develop a sensibility for the discursive aspects of technology. In some developing communities this is already the practice.

We must not sit on our hands while cultural resources are exploited and chances for enhancing education and civil liberties are at stake. The current debates on copyright, software patents, privacy, and net neutrality are actually affecting questions of principle. Our civil rights and our cultural freedom are more important than monetary revenues or a shallow promise of cost-effective safety. The media practice that emerged in the past two decades consists of many aspects that improve and

promote our society. It would be grossly negligent to risk these values by aligning the cultural practice to dubious business objectives and populist politics.