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THE CO-PRODUCING EXPERIENCE

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- I contribute to the conversation on this site.
- This site does a good job of getting its visitors to contribute or provide feedback.
- I do quite a bit of socializing on this site.
- I often feel guilty about the amount of time I spend socializing on this site.
- I should probably cut back on the amount of time I spend socializing on this site.

WHERE DO THE MEDIA END AND THE AUDIENCE BEGIN?

When results in Iran started rolling in on June 13, 2009, The Islamic Republic News Agency announced that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the presidential election with 63 percent of the vote. On June 13, *The New York Times* reported that the second-place opponent, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, had issued a statement calling the results, "an amazing incident of lies, hypocrisy and fraud."[1] That same day, a Wikipedia entry for 2009 Iranian election protests was created and then updated 117 times within 24 hours by contributors all over the world. Streams of reports followed via Twitter: "Now more ppl here. Forces are harsher. Tear gas!" By June 21, traffic on

the Wikipedia entry had spiked to 35,700 viewers and about 140 contributors daily. American blogger Andrew Sullivan disseminated tweets on his blog, "The Daily Dish," sponsored by *The Atlantic*.[2]

On July 9, more violence erupted. More tweets came out of Tehran: "Hundreds of Protesters chanting against the regime infron of Ploytechnic University, Near Azadi Sq. (not conf)," then "Heavy Clashes at Karegar Shomali St, (Near Enghlab Sq.) Tear gas, Fire and blockage...," as if by newswire. Blurry video of smoke and fire in a crowd of fleeing protesters was uploaded to YouTube by independent news network iNewsNetwork DE.[3] At Flickr, hundreds of pictures detailed the violence. Iranian Americans offered editorial comment from their extensive experience in the region. Organizations such as CNN picked up cell phone photos taken by protestors. Within hours, hundreds of dispatches circulated worldwide, including first-person accounts, vivid images, and informed opinion. When confronted with this flurry of activity, much of it aimed at producing and distributing reliable information to the public, one is forced to ask: Where do the media end and the audience begin?

Audience participation in the production of news has exploded in the last decade because readers are better able to contribute, and indeed often enjoy creating, what might traditionally be called "news." But the idea that readers contribute content to the news is not a novel one. The first newspaper in the New World, *Publick Occurrences both Forreign and Domestick*, offered a fourth page on which readers could simply write their own news.[4] Letters to the editor were printed in English newspapers as early as 1720, and "citizen journalism" took the form of early reports provided by amateur correspondents in villages near and far.[5] In essence, what we call a newspaper today originated from a conglomeration of reader-supplied materials, including personal letters, advertisements, and public notices. The newspaper was in its origin a co-produced document, one that came to be professionalized only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[6]

Audience contributions have had a rich history in other media as well. Radio call-in shows regularly featured audience content as early as 1945,[7] and public access television existed from the early 1970s until the deregulation of media companies in the 1990s.[8] Contrary to those who hype the newness of "new media," the idea that the audience provides content to the news source is practically built in to the idea of journalism, at least a journalism that serves the public.[9]

So what is "new" about new media? Today, the contribution of the audience to the news is perhaps more pervasive than at any other time in the last 200 years. Readers play a role not only in providing feedback to stories but also in rating and circulating headlines, offering comments to a community of other readers, and even doing reporting of their own. The co-creation can be captured by statements such as, "I contribute to the conversation on this site."

The reasons for this shift from passive to active readership have been widely touted—the weakening of traditional print journalism, the lowering of barriers to entry, and the reduction in costs of data storage and broadband distribution.[10] The real question, however, is not, "Why did this happen?" but rather, "What does this mean for journalism and how can professional journalists incorporate reader contributions in a productive and meaningful way?"

Experiences of co-production may include the many social experiences people have with and through media. After all, when the audience creates content, it is usually for other readers. Readers therefore can also describe it as "I do quite a bit of socializing on the site" and even "I often feel guilty about the amount of time I spend on this site socializing." This chapter focuses on the productive efforts of the audience that contribute value to media rather than the social experiences per se. (Chapter 9's exploration of the Community-Connection experience will detail more specifically the dynamics of social interaction via online communities.)

Although there is a growing and informed literature on participatory journalism, my goal in this chapter is to outline the concept of co-production in general and to apply it to the media context. In doing so, I hope to open opportunities for seeing the development of media co-production outside the boundaries of traditional media and into business contexts that deftly combine distribution, technology, and content. By delving into the contributive nature of the audience experience, we can better understand how to structure media products in order to cultivate audience contributions, align them with existing products, and increase value for both the reader and the community of readers.

MODES OF CONSUMER PRODUCTION

Audience participation in media production can be better understood as an experience of consumer production or co-production. First noted by Alvin Toffler in 1980, consumer production—also known as co-creation, co-production, or presumption—occurs when consumers provide input into products that they consume.[11] The growing involvement of the audience in the production of media is congruent with this more general shift in consumer goods.[12] As suggested earlier, however, although co-production is not radically new, it does have an increasingly vaunted position in contemporary business strategy and a rising prevalence in the marketplace.

To understand how the Co-Producing experience can be valuable, we have to dig a little deeper. Co-producing is a further step in what marketers call the "value chain."[13] The value chain is the series of transformations per-

formed on a commodity that add value to the final product. These transformations can be done by either the producer or consumer. For example, the value chain for an apple involves several steps: It must first be harvested, then cleaned, packaged, distributed, sold, and then (sometimes) transformed by cooking for consumption. Theoretically, the consumer could intervene in any one of these steps in the value chain. There are orchards where consumers can go out and pick their own apples. What we call "co-production" is when the consumer takes on one or more of these steps in the value chain.[14]

We can use this model to understand the Co-Producing experience of news. The value chain for news runs roughly as follows: Raw data are first observed, then selected and filtered, processed and edited, distributed, and finally interpreted (Figure 8.1).[15] Theoretically, the consumer can intervene at any point in the process. With citizen journalism, for example, the consumer observes a newsworthy occurrence, writes and edits it, and then submits it to the "producer" for distribution. If the citizen journalist owns the means of production, he or she can even publish and distribute the news as well. Understanding consumer interventions at each step of the news value chain allows us to understand the different levels and types of Co-Producing experiences available in the news industry, and to assess the steps that professional news organizations can take to incorporate co-production into current business models.
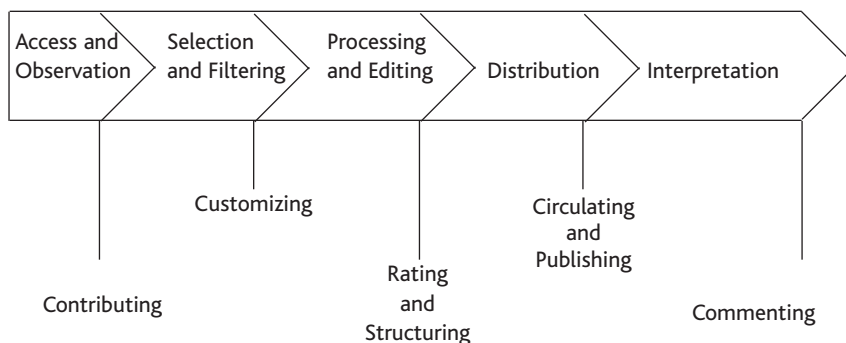

Figure 8.1. Stages of the News Value-Chain and Co-Producing Practices (see also Domingo et al., 2008)

THE ALPHA AND OMEGA OF NEWS: CREATING AND COMMENTING ON CONTENT

One of the most involved types of co-creation is when readers contribute to the content itself. This practice goes by many names—participatory journalism, citizen journalism, produsage—but in general it is defined as the production of content by members of what would traditionally be considered the "audience." In this analysis, I combine the first step in the value chain—creating content—with the last step in the value chain—commenting on content—because both practices amount to the same thing: creating the final product that is the news. If anything, the distinction between creating content and commenting on it is the (increasingly tenuous) distinction between fact and opinion.

Several online publications have pioneered the development of user-supplied news content. The Dutch Web site *Skoeps* (http://www.skoeps.nl), the progeny of major Dutch media entities PCM and Talpa, "asks users to upload their own pictures and videos of newsworthy events."[16] The organization then resells user-generated images to third parties and splits the profit 50:50 with the user who provided the image. This innovative business structure gives something back to contributors. In other words, if consumers are contributing to the value chain of the product, they get some of the profit.

More often citizen journalist sites are volunteer-only, and users eagerly contribute their labor. Korean-based OhmyNews (http://english.ohmynews.com/) is one example of a Web site in which all news is citizen journalism. Founded in 1999, the site publishes user-created stories about a variety of international topics from posters around the globe. Its staff consists of CEO/ Publisher Oh Yeon-ho, assisted by one paid newsroom employee and a volunteer staff of four editors. Contributions are largely fueled by a prestige system among users through the awarding of recognition, status designations, and awards. The payment system at OhmyNews was discontinued in 2009 in favor of awarding prizes of 300,000 won (or about $200) to one winning contribution each month.[17]

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, and its media partner, wikinews, are wholly constructed by amateur reporters and editors. On www.wikinews.org, users contribute to practically every step in the news value chain. They select, write, and report stories. They proofread, make editorial decisions about inclusion of content, and collectively fact check articles. According to an early study conducted by *Nature*, Wikipedia entries on scientific topics were almost as accurate as *Encyclopedia Britannica* entries.[18] (*Britannica* disputed the findings.)

Why do people make these contributions? One study of Wikipedians found that fun, an open-source ideology, and ego enhancement were three of the top motivations for contributing. The users surveyed spent an average of 8.27 hours per week contributing content to the site.[19] That's a part-time job! Some have suggested that the amount of time users spend contributing to these kinds of projects may arise due to an intrinsic enjoyment, a state marked by transportation, a loss of time, a sense of "flow" that one undergoes when deeply immersed in a task.[20] It's no wonder, then, that consumers may report spending "too much" time socializing or contributing content or "feeling guilty" about socializing. It's therefore important that the time spent co-creating be given some value—either by making the value of socialization salient to users or by monetizing it for contributors.

The openness to accepting citizen journalism demonstrated by these publications, however, is not common. A survey of 17 leading international news sites found that only 1 of them was "moderately open" to user-created content. Six of those news sites were "slightly open," while the rest—more than half of the sites—were strictly closed to reader-contributed content. Major news organizations have been reluctant to open their gates to amateur journalists, and consequently the distribution of this kind of news content remains institutionally "marginalized" to the blogosphere.

By far, the more common way that users create content is through comments. Commenting occurs at the end of the value chain as readers interpret the news content. On www.huffingtonpost.com, for example, visitors comment on the day's top stories, sometimes providing valuable analysis or insight. The comments become part of the story, part of the product that is The Huffington Post. Importantly, the site is only as good as its commentators, and the company has done a careful job of cultivating content that will attract informed readers and thoughtful essayists. If the media company wants to "co-opt customer competencies,"[21] then the customers must, of course, be competent. Contrast The Huffington Post's savvy commentators to those on a site like YouTube, where comments often digress to common cultural scripts, fights, or trivial "flame wars." (Chapter 9 has some specific suggestions for cultivating users and managing user input.)

There are, of course, a few pitfalls associated with the creation of news content by users. First, amateur reporters may not employ the same fact-checking standards and procedures as trained journalists. Second, large news organizations provide resources for travel, connection to sources, and editorial oversight that can increase the quality and reliability of news. Third, the integration of consumer and producer input into news presents a myriad of profit-sharing quandaries, especially when revenue is generated by advertising. Successful user-produced content can be accomplished if it is fairly compensated, carefully cultivated, and collectively monitored.

THE AUDIENCE AS MARKETER:
CUSTOMIZATION OF CONTENT

"Customization" describes co-production in cases where consumers choose preferences that enable the media product to be personalized, thereby increasing the value of the product for the end-user (Figure 8.1). For example, when users set preferences for news on msnbc.com, they do the work of the company marketers by highlighting what is important to them and then enabling the news provider to distribute relevant information directly. Typically, market research would be conducted to determine the most preferred order of topics for particular segments, but co-production allows for narrowcasting of particular ideas if consumers will only first do the work of selecting their preferences. In some cases, preferences are automatically detected so that readers may not even be aware of their part in product customization. In this kind of co-production, the end value of co-production is retained by the reader rather than distributed to a community of readers. Consumers add value in the value chain by modifying the object to suit their needs.

As we see, the practice of customization has very different implications from the rating and selection of content. Specifically, the distinction between adding personal value for the end user and adding value for the community of users can be the distinction between putting the audience to work for themselves and putting them to work for the news organization. In some cases, it can be both. A study of photo "tagging" (identifying pictures with keywords for easy search) found that people tagged in order to organize—which they saw as benefiting both themselves and larger social groups. When it came to communicating with others, they said they tagged for their family and friends rather than for a wider public or for themselves.[22]

THE AUDIENCE AS EDITOR:
RATING AND STRUCTURING CONTENT

Another way in which the audience can contribute to the media product is by playing the role of the editor. As Figure 8.1 shows, the audience can intervene in the story-selection process by rating and structuring news content. In this type of co-creation, called "structuring," the audience takes on some editorial role, usually culling good content and weeding out bad content.

Many sites, such as Yahoo! News, compile a list of "Top-rated," "Most e-mailed," and "Most viewed" stories. These lists are based on the idea that

if visitors share, recommend, or view a news story, then it must be important and can be used by other readers to sort out interesting, useful, or "front page" stories from others. Still, a survey of 17 major international newspapers found that online versions often allow users to rate stories but rarely allow them the freedom to create content.[23] The sites surveyed were selected as "slightly," "moderately," or "very" open to letting readers rate and structure the content of the site. Although only three sites were "very" open, the majority were at least "moderately" open to consumer ratings.

Note, however, that these ratings are often only used to determine lists of stories and rarely allow the audience to filter out or remove content. Perhaps one reason for not relying more on them is that customer ratings of stories often produce odd lists: often trivial or quirky stories float to the top at the expense of serious or important stories. This is not, as some commentators have suggested, because the audience is dumb. Rather, the norms that prevail online dictate that one would not email or circulate an average, unsurprising, or depressing story. People are more likely to send a funny, odd, or uplifting story to their friends because communication norms often place a priority on positive information.[24]

To remedy the problems associated with pure user ratings, selection criteria can combine both user and editorial input. At the comedy Web site FunnyorDie.com—begun in 2007 by Will Ferrell, Judd Apatow, Adam McKay, and Chris Henchy—content is chosen only in part by the audience through a rating system that immortalizes or kills a video. The system divides videos into three levels. Editors anoint some videos as "Chosen Ones," which means that they will remain on the site irrespective of viewer ratings (they have "diplomatic immunity"). In the second category, videos are classified as "Immortal" if at least 80 percent of 100,000 viewers rate them as "funny," and they remain on the site indefinitely. Last, videos are sent to "The Crypt" to die if at least 1,000-page views result in a user rating of only 20 percent funny.

Through this system, a combination of editorially sanctioned content and user-rated content is presented on the site. This hybrid model allows editors to draw attention to some content while still empowering the audience to rate their own videos and structure the media experience. With this innovative system, the Web site has garnered media attention,[25] attracted the interest of venture capital investors,[26] and become 1 of the 15 most popular privately owned, U.S.-based video sites on the Internet,[27] reaching more than 1 million people a week worldwide.[28]

Some sites use "featured" videos on the home page as a way of selecting some "front page" content that is editorially controlled rather than user-dictated. The perhaps-ironic pitfall here is that editorial control can often lead to lower perceived authenticity, especially if advertising and promotions are also included in the model. Users are often very savvy about discerning sub

rosa motives for "featuring" content on the front page and will often develop habits of overlooking the choices. Selecting users as editors can be one way to make the process seem more authentic.

THE NEW NEWSIES: CIRCULATING AND PUBLISHING CONTENT

The audience can also publish and circulate news stories. In this sense, the audience co-creates through entrepreneurship, becoming an agent that not only produces but also owns and distributes content (Figure 8.1). Citizen journalism can take this a further step by publishing content on a user-owned blog. This allows the creator to retain the rights to the material, but it comes with the challenges associated with publishing in a sphere that in many cases is not well trafficked. As barriers to entry have been reduced by Internet technology, more and more "journalists" have been born, writing, publishing, and promoting online publications wholly of their own creation.

Blogs are one common way that citizen journalists can self-publish, and this once-marginalized space is quickly growing and has gained some legitimacy. Between 2004 and 2008, the number of blogs grew from 4 million-plus to 133 million.[29] Despite this growth, many bloggers quickly tire of producing content and maintaining a fresh page. As *The New York Times* reported, "[according to a 2008 survey by Technorati, which runs a search engine for blogs, only 7.4 million out of the 133 million blogs the company tracks had been updated in the past 120 days. That translates to nearly 95 percent of blogs being left to lie fallow on the Web, where they become public remnants of a dream—or at least an ambition—unfulfilled."[30] The job of citizen journalism, it appears, may be too much for a one-man blog operation. The best models for co-production operate with some combination of organizational resources and user input.

CREATING THE CO-PRODUCING EXPERIENCE

What are some suggestions for the successful creation and implementation of the Co-Producing experience? First, the news organization should consider the type and level of involvement it wants from the audience. What step(s) in the value chain should be given to the readers? This is perhaps the most important decision in creating the Co-Producing experience because it determines the structure of the organization, the type of content produced,

the costs of producing content, and the resources devoted to maintaining and monitoring reader involvement in the future.

The news organization still brings a lot to the table. In a 2009 publicity stunt, celebrity Ashton Kutcher set out to gain more Twitter followers than CNN's breaking-news feed.[31] The celebrity did win (although CNN maintains 45 official Twitter accounts, with more than 1.3 million followers), and the claim, endorsed by some social-media hypesters, was that Twitter could not only provide breaking news but would replace the functions of the traditional news organization. But many of them missed an important fact, hidden behind the tweets of individual people: News is not produced simply by typing on a computer; the value chain runs much deeper than that.

Theoretically, any normal person can do the tasks of a professional journalist, but the very concept of a profession means claiming (or, better yet, earning) jurisdiction over some set of tasks.[32] Here news organizations have three key assets: social and financial resources, a staff of professional journalists cognizant of sound procedures for reporting news, and the ability to edit with authority. In what follows, I discuss three ways in which media organizations can use their resources to create and structure the Co-Producing experience for their audiences.

LEAVING ROOM FOR PLAY

Openness is one key component to attracting an engaged audience in the world of social networking and co-creation. Yet, ironically, one of the hardest things for a medium or company to do is to leave room for the independent development of content without censorship. For example, Wal-Mart attracted negative attention in July 2006 with its foray into social networking, a project called *The Hub*. The site was intended as "an online destination for students to preview the latest back-to-school fashions and merchandise at Wal-Mart while engaging in a creative contest to express their personality and style."[33] But the company's attempt to maintain tight control over the activities of users left the site largely fallow of user interaction and activity. As one blogger, Joseph Weisenthal, reported, *The Hub* did "not allow messaging between users, and will alert parents when their child signs up for the site." This kind of tight control, Weisenthal argued, meant that "the only way teens will ever take to the site is if it becomes a competition to slip subversive images or messages onto a profile."[34] Wal-Mart's policy of strict control over the site in combination with the unclear alignment of the tool with Wal-Mart's overall family-values strategy led *The Hub* to be widely regarded as a failure.[35] In October 2006, the site was shut down without much notice.[36] Organizations wishing to create a Co-Producing experi-

ence must become comfortable with the uncontrolled and uncontrollable nature of co-production. Important tradeoffs between brand identity and company liability, on the one hand, must be considered against the potential gains from encouraging consumer participation, on the other hand.

A sense of play is one of the most important factors in increasing interest, attitude, and involvement in consumer experiences.[37] A few companies have harnessed the capacity of social network play. Firefox and Apple, for example, utilize the spirit of consumer play to generate advertising content[38] and even product development.[39] These companies have harnessed consumer interest and engagement by encouraging participation to build fierce loyalty. Studies show, for example, that people place a higher value on things they create.[40] This kind of participation, therefore, increases involvement in and evaluation of company products.

Applying what we know about play and consumption can improve the construction of participatory media environments. Specifically, environments should be set up so that users can customize their experience and easily connect with others in new ways around objects or information that is valuable to them. Innovative modes of exchange can encourage continual back-and-forth communication, which drives traffic to the community. For example, Facebook has successfully used gifting norms—the idea that a gift should be reciprocated—to encourage users to exchange symbolic objects that, of course, require them to sign onto the site repeatedly, thereby setting up habits of site usage. The "status update" feature was initially panned by users,[41] but the company stuck with it, and it now drives regular traffic to the site as users get updated on "news" of their friends' make-ups, break-ups, and other life events.

It is important that the media provider cultivate space for play. Not all user-created content will be directly relevant to the news, and it often may not contribute to value in any obvious way. A survey of Wikipedia users found that a sense of "fun" was one of the only factors associated with a high level of contribution. When people are intrinsically motivated to contribute, they contribute more and for longer than if they were motivated by ideology, values, or social esteem.[42] Very often, these incidental uses may simply provide an autotelic experience,[43] one in which the reader enjoys contributing for its own sake, not because of some further value. Where play is intuitive for users, it is important for the media provider to cultivate a space for it.

MAKING A STRUCTURE

Although user creativity is at the heart of what makes co-production valuable, it is useless if the content consumers produce is not valuable, clear, and

cleanly presented. Customization should not give way to a chaotic structure or destabilize the perceived legitimacy of the organization. Chapter 9 elaborates more specifically on the importance of structure—setting up a clear purpose for the site and rules for user interaction—for facilitating a clearly defined and harmonious social community. Here I briefly detail the ways in which aesthetic structure may help or hinder co-production.

MySpace, for example, is known for its innovation of the ability to incorporate HTML code into user pages. However, this has left room for user-created content that is hard to read, hard to access, and generally nonsensical. Many users are turned off by the cluttered and incongruent content of member pages, preferring the clean interface of sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn.[44] Site structure led to segmentation by social class, income, and age.[45] Younger users and users in lower socio-economic classes network on MySpace, whereas their college-educated comrades flock to Facebook[46] partly because a clean minimalist structure tends to be preferred by individuals with more cultural capital.[47]

Coherent and consistent site architecture can be an important component for achieving legitimacy. Audience members trust information that is presented in a clear, direct way. For news, this kind of trust is perhaps more important than anywhere else on the Internet. Trust is paramount not only for producers of "hard news" but for opinion pages as well. Writers of opinion pages make arguments that they want readers to believe, so they too are likely to benefit from the legitimacy conferred by a clean and clear structure. Sites such as the Drudge Report, for example, have an idiosyncratic style that may confer authenticity, but this presentation often falls prey to suspicion that the contributors are not professional. Some have suggested that the Drudge Report, despite its initial success, might now be giving way to competitors who present information using a more up-to-date interface.[48]

GETTING DEEP

Last, deep area-specific expertise and cultural knowledge are imperative when trying to understand why people co-produce. Attaching a community like The Hub to the Wal-Mart megabrand clearly struck cultural discord with many Internet users. Although some social networks have built success around the idea that people like listing desired goods,[49] an explicitly branded attempt at doing this failed because it seemed too instrumental to company interests. (Chapter 9 has some suggestions for applying an understanding of cultural and social dynamics in order to provide relevant content.)

One of the most valuable things a news organization must know about its users is what they *do not* want to do. The organization should thus con-

sider what steps in the value chain would be a hassle for users and what steps can inspire passion and involvement. Co-production is not merely a way of getting "free content"; it must engage consumers on a deeper level, not simply take ideas. To be viable, consumer participation must contribute value to the media product as well. Ultimately, both parties can benefit from co-production—if equal and fair exchange occurs.

CONCLUSION

The Co-Producing experience gives media properties value that cannot be gained in other ways. Users enjoy participating in the production of news content, and luckily they also like consuming the products of others. Although attracting and retaining a group of dedicated participants can be costly and difficult, bringing consumers into the value chain—inviting them into the production of media by reporting, rating, editing, or commenting on news—enhances memory and instills loyalty and engagement beyond traditional boundaries of passive readership. Providers of Co-Producing experiences should be aware that opportunities exist to create or enhance other experiences through co-production, such as "Makes Me Smarter" or "Allows Me to Socialize." As Chapter 9 shows, building a framework for co-creating experiences is intricately related to community building with the media. The ultimate goal is to create a fulfilling experience for the audience while maintaining the legitimacy, trust, and authenticity that journalism requires.

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