In the age of media 2.0:
Six questions about media and participation

This article challenges some of the celebratory claims that are often made about the empowering potential of social media. It was published in this form in the Media Magazine, aimed at 16-18-year-old students, in early 2012. It draws on a broader argument contained in my much-reprinted article 'Do we really need media education 2.0? Teaching media in the age of participatory culture', first published in K. Drotner and K. Schroder (eds.) Digital Content Creation (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), and available via Academia.edu.

In the last ten years, we have moved into a new age of participatory media. The advent of online social media – often referred to as 'Web 2.0' – has brought about a much broader media revolution – a move to 'Media 2.0'. The world of Big Media – in which the media were owned and controlled by large commercial corporations – is no more. In the age of Media 2.0, ordinary people are no longer mere consumers of media, but also producers. Vertical, top-down communication has given way to horizontal, networked communication.

Thus, blogs and online forums provide opportunities for ordinary people to have their say, and to speak back to those in power; wikis enable us to collaborate and share knowledge in ways that challenge elites and experts; on social networking sites, we can represent ourselves and connect with other people in new ways; while online sharing sites like YouTube allow people to distribute their own media content to global audiences. All these services appear to be free and open – they don't require lots of money to use, they don't depend on getting past editors or gatekeepers, and they can be accessed at any time, by anyone, anywhere. And these things are leading in turn to fundamental shifts in the operations of 'old' media like television, newspapers and even books: there is much talk of 'user-generated content', 'citizen journalism' and the empowerment of consumers.

This, at least, is the story that's often told about new media. It's an attractively optimistic view, which reflects a broader desire for a fairer, more democratic, more creative society. Yet it's a view that – as students of media – we need to question. We need to look more closely at what is really happening in the world of 'Media 2.0' – at who's involved, what they are doing, and where the power lies. In this article, I want to propose six questions that should help us to get a more critical view of these participatory possibilities.

1. What's new?

The term 'Web 2.0' seems to have been coined by the digital marketing entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly back in 2001. In some ways, it was an attempt to rebrand the internet business after the bursting of the so-called 'dot.com bubble' – the collapse of many internet companies that took place around the millennium. Many people have questioned whether 'Web 2.0' is actually any different from 'Web 1.0' that preceded it. Tim Berners-Lee, widely identified as the inventor of the World Wide Web, has argued

that the basic technological infrastructure and many of the forms of Web 2.0 have been around since the beginning of the internet.

There's a long history of utopian fantasies about new media and technology: the kinds of claims that are now being made about the liberating possibilities of social media echo those that were made in earlier times about the impact of cable TV, portable video, radio and even the printing press. All these things were apparently going to bring 'power to the people' – to undermine the power of political elites and big corporations, create new forms of collaboration, and allow ordinary people to express themselves and have their voices heard. Yet in each case, the ultimate effects of these new technologies were much less revolutionary and much more complicated.

In terms of media theory, there's a danger of a kind of *technological determinism* here – the idea that technology will bring about revolutionary social change, in and of itself. Yet technologies do not come from nowhere: they are created in response to wider social, economic and cultural developments. And their impact is always dependent on how they are used, by whom, and for what purposes.

2. Who's participating?

The history of technology shows that innovations are adopted in uneven and often unequal ways. In the case of Web 2.0, statistics on patterns of use are not wholly reliable. Some – such as those produced by the Pew Foundation in the United States – produce very high estimates of the numbers of young people who 'share content' online. Others – such as those from the market research agency Hitwise – suggest that the number of active participants is very low: less than 0.5% of YouTube users, for example, actually upload material, and very little of that material is originally produced, rather than pirated clips from commercial media.

Research also suggests that there are some striking social inequalities in participation. While there are some gender differences - young women are leading the way in areas like blogging, while young men tend to dominate video-sharing – the most remarkable differences are in terms of social class. At least in the US, it is young people from high income families who are most likely to be posting or sharing online. While people in disadvantaged communities do increasingly have computers at home, they are less likely to have the multimedia capabilities and bandwidth that are needed for more sophisticated content creation and sharing.

'Digital divides' are still apparent here, therefore - and they largely coincide with other differences. Young people from wealthy, middle-class families are also more likely to have books at home, to use the educational dimensions of the internet and to participate in creative or arts-related activities offline. To a large extent, the most active participants in the creative world of Media 2.0 are the 'usual suspects' – people who are already privileged in other areas of their lives.

Before we assume that these opportunities are largely confined to young people, we also need to look at the age profile of online participation. While younger people initially drove the uptake of social networking sites, for example, older people are now the fastest-growing group of subscribers. The same is true of mobile communications; while the micro-blogging service Twitter is largely dominated by middle-aged people. Young people are sometimes the 'early adopters', but the idea that they are a uniquely 'digital generation' – and that there is a kind of technological generation gap – is rapidly becoming outdated.

3. What are they doing?

In these discussions, it's often assumed that participation is necessarily a Good Thing in itself. But there is a real problem in defining what *counts* as participation, or as 'creating content'. There's a big difference between posting an occasional comment on an online forum or a social networking profile and filming, editing and posting a video, for example – although in surveys all these things tend to be seen as evidence of high levels of participation. In fact, only a very small proportion of users are generating original content: most are simply 'consuming' it as they always have done.

Enthusiasts for participatory media tend to celebrate the more artistic or innovative 'cool stuff' that can be found online – fan-produced mashups, videos about political activism, or experimental digital poetry. They tend to ignore the relatively banal domestic practices of the majority of people – such as the funny videos of pets and children and domestic accidents that tend to achieve the highest hit rates on sites like YouTube.

Our research on amateur video-making found that it continues to be dominated by home movies of family life, children's birthday parties or holidays on the beach. This material is rarely edited or shared, and is kept as a record that people imagine will be watched at some time in the future, even if it rarely is. This is not to say that it is trivial or worthless: on the contrary, home video (like the family photo album) can play a very important role in terms of memory and family relationships. However, people rarely see it as having anything to do with what they watch in the mainstream media – let alone as a challenge to the power of Big Media.

4. Who's making money?

Here's one celebratory view of the democratic possibilities of Media 2.0: 'Technology is shifting power away from the editors, the publishers, the establishment, the media élite… now it's the people who are taking control.' This quote comes not from a radical media activist but from a 2006 interview with the notorious media magnate Rupert Murdoch; and it should alert us to the fact that there are large commercial interests at stake in these developments.

The two richest and most profitable global media corporations are now Google and Facebook. Both are increasingly diversifying from their initial business – as a search engine and a social networking site – into a whole range of other media and branded products and services. Indeed, the apparent explosion of democratic participation in the media could also be seen as matter of the growing concentration of power in the hands of a small number of global companies.

Of course, this is a very uncertain business. For example, YouTube (now owned by Google) took five years from its launch before it finally came into profit, despite being the second most frequently visited site online. Many well-known services – not least Twitter and Facebook – have struggled to find ways of 'monetizing' what they do. Others, such as Murdoch's own MySpace, have undergone a rapid rise and fall.

Even so, it's clear that the internet is an exceptionally efficient medium for niche marketing and for targeting individual consumers: as we surf around, detailed information about our preferences and buying habits is being gathered, often without us knowing it (by means of 'cookies' that are planted on the hard drive of our computers). This information is used to ensure that advertising and marketing are targeted only at those people who are most likely to be interested in it; and through a practice known as 'data mining', the data can be aggregated and then sold on to other companies.

5. Who's doing the work?

Much of this marketing is itself 'user-generated' and 'interactive'. This is most obvious in the case of viral marketing, where consumers are effectively recruited to distribute commercial messages on behalf of companies. Other companies (such as the mobile phone provider Orange) have picked up on the idea of 'user-generated content' by running competitions for consumers to create videos to promote their products.

This results in what the media critic Soren Peterson has called 'loser-generated content'. A great deal of unpaid labour goes into the production of blogs, for example, while most of the income remains with the big corporations. In the case of social networking, participants often spend enormous amounts of time working on their profiles and building networks which they are unable to take with them if they want to migrate to another site. What they produce effectively becomes proprietary information, owned by the company: Mark Zuckerberg owns the copyright of all the content posted on Facebook, and can do what he likes with it.

This is also an issue with fan websites, which have been very much celebrated by enthusiasts for Media 2.0. Some argue that fan websites are about consumers taking back control of the media, making their own meanings from existing media texts, and leading towards a more democratic media environment. There have been some instances where copyright owners – like J.K. Rowling and Warner Brothers, who own the Harry Potter franchise - have taken legal action against fans who have used and reworked their materials in making fan fiction, video mashups, and so on. Yet one could argue that, in the end, these fans are just promoting the brand – they may be using

Harry Potter to express their own ideas, but they are doing so in a way that contributes to the success and the continuing profitability of the big companies. They may be active participants, but they are also the ultimate consumers.

6. Will Media 2.0 save democracy?

So there is a debate to be had about the wider social and political implications of Media 2.0. While some of these developments may have been exaggerated, and some may be much less exciting and innovative than people have claimed, it's clear that we are in a period of significant change. But does this amount to a democratic revolution in communications? Is it really liberating or empowering ordinary people to take control of the media?

I think there are good reasons to doubt this. Despite the claims of some of the enthusiasts, digital media are not likely to result in a society of creative media producers, any more than the printing press resulted in a society of published authors. Just like 'old' media, these new media are driven by commercial imperatives – and that means that some people are bound to benefit from these developments much more than others. While there is certainly a democratic promise here, the realisation of that promise will require more than technology alone.

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