

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

The notion that one should receive compensation for the work that one does seems fairly elementary. Yet, in the case of participatory media such as Facebook and YouTube, people constantly perform work without even realizing it. This work essentially forms the backbone of the web 2.0 business model, which is to generate revenue “predominantly from advertising that, thanks to personal information provided in members' profiles, is precisely targeted to selective groups.” (Cohen, 2008, p. 10) What is unfortunate about this business model is that the indigenous forms of knowledge production that might emerge within these web 2.0 environments are, inevitably, cheapened and diluted by top-down, heavy-handed processes of commodification. So, am I suggesting that people should be paid for the time that they spend uploading photos and posting comments on Facebook? Not necessarily. What seems like a more worthwhile and ambitious project would be to develop a form of participatory media that allows for greater communication between the users and the capitalists (i.e. the advertisers). This way, indigenous knowledge groups can exert greater control over how their identities are reified and constituted within the web 2.0 world.

By indigenous, I mean knowledge and thoughts and ideas that are generated, sometimes very spontaneously, by web 2.0 users within the online community itself. It is in this sense that the knowledge is indigenous because it is native to the community, whether that be Facebook or YouTube. Sometimes this indigenous knowledge can also be very marginal in that it subverts the established norms of the community and provokes practices that were not originally anticipated by the developers of the participatory media. An excellent example of this is when YouTube users deployed a variety of tactics for counteracting the blunt anti-drug

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

message delivered in a number of videos posted by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). (Hess, 2009, p. 411) These videos were posted by the ONDCP with comments disabled and, in response, the YouTubers simply reposted the original videos and proceeded to criticize them heavily with stinging comments and parodic videos of their own. (Hess, p. 412) But the anti-establishment discourse that is deployed by YouTubers on matters such as the war on drugs is inevitably cheapened and diluted when their videos begin with car company advertisements. It is in this sense that YouTube commodifies its content and, thus, transforms the content's overall impression upon the viewer. Hess points out that many of the users in his study considered YouTube a kind of online representation of pure democracy, ignoring the fact that YouTube is actually a business owned by a major corporation, Google. This leads to structural limitations on the site such that YouTube's bosses often have to privilege copyright laws over free speech, "which limits YouTubers' ability to conjure a variety of sources, both vernacular and official, to effectively argue back to the ONDCP." (Hess, p. 426)

An ideal form of indigenous knowledge production would be one that opens up a line of communication and negotiation between the YouTubers and the YouTube capitalists. This way, a win-win situation can result in that advertisers receive attention and YouTubers receive a video display environment that isn't so hilariously contradictory and counter to the message that they are trying to convey. In the status quo, advertisers use aggregated data profiling based on a user's video viewing habits to determine what sort of group they fit into. Advertising is then directed toward them, whether it be a car or shampoo commercial displayed before their video starts playing. Even though the user may be interested in buying a car or shampoo,

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

it is when that user fits into the context of an indigenous knowledge group that the advertising, no matter how accurate, becomes damaging. Without an established line of communication between users and capitalists, these advertisements determined by studious marketers will almost always not fit well with, and sometimes even directly contradict, the milieu of an indigenous knowledge group. One can imagine a scenario that is better for both parties with an established line of communication in place. For instance, what if the YouTubers were somehow able to communicate to the advertisers what their group is about? This way, a process of negotiation can take place regarding the types of advertisements that the group would actually be comfortable with. A YouTube group devoted to counteracting the blunt war on drugs message of the ONDCP might, for example, be OK with having ads from a bicycle company rather than a car company associated with its videos. At least the image of a bicycle does not bring to mind thoughts of anti-drug conservative Republicans as easily as the image of a car does. It is in this sense that the bicycle ad would at least not be as overtly contradictory to the message of the YouTubers' videos as the car ad would be.

I like this notion of a greater line of communication between users and capitalists in participatory media because it allows advertisers to actually work productively with indigenous knowledge groups rather than against them, as in the status quo. This is a nuanced idea because it acknowledges the reality that these web 2.0 sites are not ideal democratic forums; rather, they are virtual organizations subject to the same profit-generating requirements as any old-fashioned offline organization. It is nuanced because it does not call heavy-handedly for the abolishment or ignorance of the need to incorporate advertising into participatory media.

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

Rather, it simply calls for a kind of mutual cooperation between users and capitalists that is currently missing. Is this ideal of increased communication unproblematic? No, because advertisers will no doubt cry foul and proclaim that the idea is entirely impractical. But that is because these advertisers are quite comfortable in their offices, performing their detailed data profiling and slotting people into groups from the top-down. This model has worked, it has been profitable, and so why should they change? They should change because 1) there is a social value in sustaining the authentic development of indigenous knowledge groups and 2) the advertisers might actually stand to reap higher profits from enhanced communication. The social value of an indigenous knowledge group is clear, as seen in the case of the critical discourse against the ONDCP. The parodic videos were sometimes very clever and would fit nicely into the public debate about the war on drugs. But such parodic videos do not always fit nicely into the context of YouTube proper, which often presents videos along with contradictory advertising. If, on the other hand, advertisers were to work more closely with YouTubers in negotiating the ads, the work produced by the indigenous knowledge groups might gain greater legitimacy in the traditional media and be brought more into the public eye. Additionally, advertisers might profit financially from increased communication with indigenous groups because the viewers of these videos would likely be more willing to buy products that are in keeping with the overall sensibility of the work.

The current trends in the commodification of user-generated content, then, do not actually have to threaten the ideal of increased communication in participatory media. The trends merely have to be revised to support some kind of dialogue between the users and the

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

capitalists. There is, no doubt, a tension between the capitalist project to commodify and sell and that people don't particularly like to be commodified. But perhaps this tension could actually be alleviated by negotiating with people about how their work is commodified – in this regard, they might be much more willing to accept the capitalist project. When *Time* declared “you” as Person of the Year in 2006, it was sending the message that people are no longer passive couch potatoes – they are now “active participants in digital culture.” (van Dijck, 2009, p. 41) But this is really just an illusion. In the status quo, users are just as passive as ever and largely unaware of how advertisers are taking advantage of their immaterial labour to extract huge profits. But, of course, users never see any of these profits because they are working without pay. Smythe writes about television,

“In 1976, Canadian audience members paid \$2.188 billion as the direct cost of owning and operating their television receivers, whereas advertisers spent a mere \$417 million. In other words, for every dollar spent by advertisers to buy media-produced television audiences, Canadian householders spent five.” (1981, p. 262)

It seems reasonable to presume that this inequality hasn't simply disappeared with the rise of participatory media. Facebookers and YouTubers must regularly pay in order to maintain their computers and Internet connections. Meanwhile, the advertisers – in comparison – likely only have to spend a fraction of that total cost in order to market to web 2.0 users. But participatory media is different from Smythe's TV audience commodity in that users actually produce the content and actively develop links and relationships that fuel the capitalists' data profiling algorithms. Participation is undoubtedly going on between the users of these web 2.0 platforms, then, but it seems that the truly important, potentially transformative form of participation has been lost in the fray of excitement over participatory media. This, of course, is

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

the all-too-often neglected form of participation between the users and the capitalists. And, unfortunately, this form of participation will never come into being unless the users of these web 2.0 platforms insist upon it and even fight for it. This sort of activism will only come about once users finally realize that they are, indeed, working without compensation when they do literally anything on Facebook or YouTube or any other form of participatory media. The participatory abilities that these forms of media create should be fully realized by participating not only with fellow users but with the capitalists, advertisers and site owners. By insisting that a negotiation takes place between users and advertisers rather than a top-down determination, ultimately, both users and capitalists stand to benefit. Only then will users truly move away from passive acceptance and toward the active participation that *Time* championed in 2006.

So, what can we do? How can we intervene to support this ideal of enhanced communication between users and capitalists in participatory media? I think users will only begin to insist upon this model of enhanced communication once they realize that the work they are doing in participatory media has value. Even though they may not be in a position of importance as the capitalists are, when entire groups of people come to realize that their work has great value, then they also come to realize that they have power that could, potentially, be wielded. In the offline world, unions exemplify this point. Should there be participatory media unions? Perhaps, but then all the necessary checks and balances will have to be applied to these virtual unions because, just like in the offline world, they could begin to get too powerful for their own good. But in the offline world, at least the unionists know that they are, in fact, working. There is no ambiguity over that. Workers in the offline world, on the other hand, still

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

need to realize that what they are doing is, in fact, work. It may be work blurred with leisure, but it is work nonetheless. Now once these users begin to acknowledge that what they are doing is work, then perhaps they will also come to realize that the advertising they are subject to within these communities is not something that is necessarily impenetrable. Rather, the advertising is merely a product of how the advertisers came to value a user's work. The advertisers imposed a particular interpretation, a particular meaning upon that user's work and grouped that user into one of many potential target groups. But perhaps that user feels their work should be valued and interpreted in another way. Users, then, need a tool for determining what their work is worth. Meta-Markets, a non-profit stock market for social web content, is one such tool. Meta-Markets addresses the problem that users are not aware of the value that they create while using participatory media. ("METAMARKETS," n.d.) Users, for instance, can commodify their own Facebook profiles and offer them for sale on the virtual stock market as a means of determining the value of their immaterial labour.

The indigenous knowledge groups that are born in the web 2.0 world do not necessarily need to receive financial compensation for their work. But it is only reasonable to believe that they should receive *some form* of compensation, and mere entertainment value is not enough. By opening up a dialogue between users and advertisers, this compensation could be a form of reinforcement, rather than contradiction. The advertising could potentially strengthen, or at least not work against, the delivered message. The ideal of aware and involved users championed by *Time* in 2006 sounds nice. But in order for it to ever be realized, participation must be established between the users and the capitalists in the web 2.0 world.

WORKING WITHOUT PAY: TOWARD PARTICIPATORY MEDIA UNIONS

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