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Participatory Culture and Media Usage: exploring Participatory Media's potential as a platform for Young People's Civic Engagement

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Abstract

New interactive technologies put the user in the centre of Media content production and force the development of new theoretical models that relate these patterns of use with associated social and consumption contexts. Research in this area should investigate further on the relation between participation online and participation in the organic world, specifically questioning if Participatory Media can be used as a platform for Civic Engagement.

1. Media and Participation

The history of the 20th century reveals a disintegration of traditional communities, which on the one hand are declining in size caused by individualization and on the other hand are extending as they become more diffused (Couldry, 2006). A discussion on the internet's potential to reinforce social participation (Deuze, 2006) or generate new forms of social organization a.k.a "virtual communities" (van Dijk, 2006) accompanies this shift from organic to virtual communities. Participation then involves not only the actual production and distribution of content by the user but also the possibility of the user controlling the communication channel and assume both the role of the sender and the receiver.

Participatory Media are not exclusive to these "new media" and we can see it everywhere from local "ethnic" newspapers to regional TV (Deuze, 2006). People using and making their own individual, local and communal Media is the structural condition of Media, culture and society relationships, whereas the notion of national Mass-Media telling an invisible audience what they need to know is an anomalous trend (Couldry, 2006). Though, studying this new form of relation between people and Media entails concerns both about the Media itself, but also about its social contexts, the level of social participation it promotes and the type of communities it creates and helps to sustain.

The emergence of New Media involves a new consumption environment where some of the old principles no longer apply (Livingstone, 2006). Our objects of study should include acts of Collaborative and Participatory Media making and

the consequences these acts have upon the communities and individuals that conduct them, though relating Media, society and participation with the reconceptualization of audience's studies.

2. Participatory Culture: the Portuguese context

In order to further explore and understand the relation between New Media and societal change, Universidade Lusófona of Humanidades e Tecnologias (ULHT) is currently conducting two research projects POCI/COM/61049/2004, POCI/COM/61029/2004). More specifically, the last project - entitled "User modeling and viewing clusters: television and new media" (MAU-TV MEDIA) – aims to define specific audience clusters, based on the existing body of knowledge regarding Television and Internet consumption in Portugal and, more significantly, based on a small scale ethnographical study and a large scale quantitative inquiry focused on Media usage and everyday life, both organized and implemented by this university. Finally, this research project will also benefit from the feed-back provided by a small sample of users of a Participatory Media format pilot called "Total Explorer" currently under development.

The clustering criteria will go beyond the traditional audience segmentation items, such as age and gender, and it will include specific cultural markers (Design, Language, Thematic interests, Behavioural patterns and Participation).

The definition of these cultural variables and the importance they have on measuring the target audience level of engagement with the media and through the media with society, constitutes the main goal of this Project.

The research project is focused on children and young people (6-18 years-old). During the first semester of 2007 a large scale quantitative inquiry is under way to determine these general patterns of behavior, a qualitative study of Ethnographical basis is also being developed, and a Participatory Media format pilot is being produced along with its evaluation study. More details on the format are next, as well as how it can serve as an exploration tool to inform about the scope and particularities of Participatory Culture in Portugal.

3. Participatory Media as an exploration tool

“Total Explorer – discovering Portugal’s hidden treasures” is a Participatory Media format which aims to actively engage and build a community passionate for Portugal’s natural and cultural Heritage, targeting young people aged 12 to 18 years-old, as well as younger children. Target audience was defined based on two criteria’s: level of media awareness and specific socio and psychological traces that make the target group more sensible both to group experiences and media use.

The Participatory Media format will include:

- a linear TV documentary (25 minutes) with three independent stories;
- a synchronized Interactive TV application;
- on-demand videos available on a Web Site, that will include other media assets for download (podcasts, music, photos) and for participation (voting, commenting, sharing);
- a mobile application for mobile phones and PDAs;
- digital content production workshops in several cities and organized visits to local sites.

Each show will bring into the public light relevant and engaging scientific research about each local, but also local characters and local curiosities. Each story will have the view of at least a scientific expert, as well as the view of local experts. The subject areas can cover History, Geography, Biology, Ethnography, Archaeology, etc.

The Interactive TV version will enable the viewers to choose between three different stories right after the finish of story one: in total, each program will have five independent stories. This process of choice can be individual (personalization of content) or social (the story broadcasted would be the most voted of the three stories).

The Web Site will enable full access to the video stories of the Linear TV and Interactive TV program, as well as the full interviews with scientific experts and local experts. Each video story has attached a rich multimedia portfolio – which includes video, audio files, photo portfolios and enhanced maps. Also the users will have their own personal space, where they can upload their videos, audio files, photos and points of interest related to maps. Other participatory functionalities will be included such as voting and commenting.

A TV pilot and Web prototype is being developed since October 2006 and it is expected to be finished in April 2007. During May and June 2007, the research team will conduct the evaluation of the format using a sample of children and young people, with participation patterns taken in account, and cultural markers being isolated in order to validate the original hypotheses that cultural markers allow for a transposition between the virtual and the organic when one refers to communitarian life.

4. Participatory Media and Civic Education

Authors such as Putnam (2000) consider Media as responsible for the decline in civic engagement and sociability. Yet, recently the USC-Annenberg School Centre for the Digital Future (2006) found that involvement in online communities leads to offline actions, claiming that online communities are a catalyst for connection and activism offline. For instance, more than one-fifth of online community members take actions offline at least once a year that are related to their online community. Also significantly, the USC-Annenberg School Centre found that 64,9% of online community members who participate in social causes through the Internet say they are involved in causes that were new to them when they began participating on the Internet and 43,7% of online community members claim to participate more in social activism since they started participating in online communities.

So, can Participatory Media be the civic education for the XXI century, as Howard Rheingold (2006) claims? During 2007 we expect to enrich this discussion with some specific data concerning the Portuguese context.

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