

The “New” Prosumer:
Collaboration on the Digital and
Material “New Means of
Prosumption”

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- Cyber-Utopians: Internet, especially social networking sites, makes possible dramatic, revolutionary increases, improvements in social collaboration

- Yahoo's (and other companies') shift away from allowing work at home to back into the workplace.
- Instead of working at home on their own or remotely in digital collaboration, Yahoo now wants employees to collaborate more directly in the workplace.
- Believe "face-to-face interaction among employees fosters a *more collaborative culture*."
- Driven by idea that more interaction, collaboration leads to more innovation- very important to a company like Yahoo

- Debate:
- James Surowiecki sees merit of digital collaboration, favors Yahoo move- creativity through “face time” on the job.
- Even Google, doing much to allow for ever-more digital collaboration, investing heavily in face-to-face office environments on corporate campuses; encouraging “old school” collaboration.
- Jennifer Glass argues against Yahoo: “workers who collaborate with others in loose networks generate better ideas” than those isolated in single location.
- This debate leads to questioning cyber-utopian view; privileging, exaggerating the uniqueness of, collaboration on digital spaces.

- Examine debate from the perspective of **prosumption**, interrelated process of production and consumption
- Collaboration a form of prosumption-dialectical process of two or more parties “producing” and “consuming” something of mutual interest and importance.
- DIY also a form of prosumption

- Focus especially on “new prosumer”, “new means of prosumption” (vs. means of production, consumption)
- material (e.g. fast food restaurants) *and* digital (e.g. social networking sites) new means of prosumption; avoid “internet-centrism”
- Digital imbricated in material world, and vice versa; “augmented reality”; e.g. “showrooming”-shopping on smartphones in department stores.

- Conclusion: *mixed relationship* between the “new” means of prosumption and collaboration- the new means of prosumption, on- and off-line, encourage *both* DIY *and* collaboration, **but** more collaboration online than offline
- Unprecedented types and degrees of collaboration *and* much done by people largely DIY

- Increased DIY consistent with Foucault on *individualization* in prison, cells, Panopticon.
- Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody: “the co-creation paradigm rests on the notion of...increasingly *individualized modes of relating*.”
- Prosumption overlaps with “do-it-yourself”; Scholz describes online world as “do-it-yourself economy”.

PROSUMPTION

- Correcting an Historical Error
- **Productivism** (1850-1950): Marx, Weber, Durkheim, even Veblen; Consumer Virtually Absent from 18th Century Discourse
- **“Consumptionism”** (1950-2007): Galbraith, Baudrillard, Bauman, *Journal of Consumer Culture*; Postmodernity
- You are **not** Producers (Workers) or Consumers
- No “Pure” Production or Consumption

- Prosumption as the Primal Act; the Once-And-Future Act
- *All* Production Involves Consumption
- *All* Consumption Involves Production

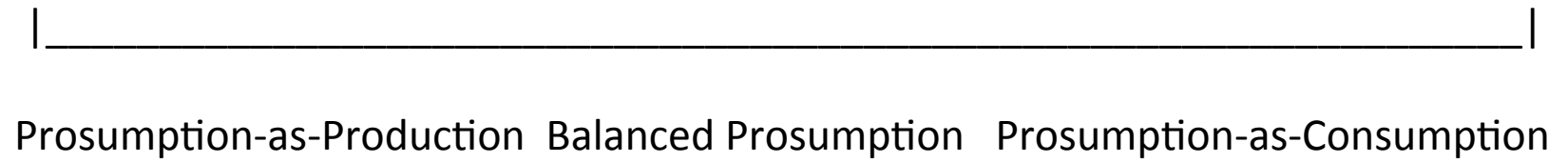


Figure 1
The Prosumption Continuum

- Examples:
- Material:
 - package delivery for Wal-Mart;
 - “work” supermarkets;
 - ATMs;
 - DIY yogurt making;
 - electronic check-in at airports, hotels

- Digital-
 - Facebook;
 - YouTube;
 - Wikipedia;
 - blogs;
 - grading selves on MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses)

- DIY in the Material World:
 - Caring for one's self psychologically, physically;
 - Purchasing materials needed, repairing, building, something;
 - Lining up in fast food restaurants to collect one's food and disposing of one's debris;
 - Washing one's own dog at a dog-washing salon;
 - Building, okay just putting together ("impossible-to-assemble"), IKEA furniture;
 - Buying, using medical technologies (blood pressure and glucose monitors; pregnancy, PSA, HIV, and cholesterol tests)

- DIY in the Digital World:
 - Doing all the work on Internet sites such as Amazon.com (making the appropriate choices for purchases; providing delivery, payment information; various steps needed to complete the process);
 - producing, inadvertently, important information (“traces”) for many websites that use algorithms to trigger ads;
 - buyers, sellers providing information to eBay; ordering, processing, sending, receiving and returning products; writing, voting on eBay “guides”.

- Collaboration in the Digital World:
 - Peer-to-peer lending on Zopa (Zone of Possible Agreement), economic collaboration between investors and those who need money for a project (Kiva similar micro-financing site);
 - Finding lodging on Airbnb with collaboration between parties doing the renting and those who are renting;
 - Collaborating with tourists on Couchsurfing; provide free couches to crash on; crashing with other couchsurfing providers.

- Collaboration in the Material World, declining but...
 - at the counter and drive-through at the fast food restaurant;
 - at remaining checkout counters still staffed by people,
 - at the remaining small book shops

Explaining the Conclusions on Collaboration, DIY on Material, Digital Sites:

Similarities: Explicable in that in both cases looking at collaboration, isolation as involving the *same general process* (prosumption) on the *same kinds of sites* (the new means of prosumption).

- Differences: Due to Objective Affordances:
 - Both material, digital means of prosumption offer objective affordances for collaboration and DIY
 - Digital means of prosumption such as Facebook offer infinitely more affordances for collaboration than a material means such as McDonald's.
 - McDonald's offers more affordances for DIY; especially clear in drive-through window.

- Differences: Due to Subjective Affordances:
 - People have been socialized, and have learned, to expect more affordances from the digital than the material world.
 - Users think Facebook offers nearly infinite possibilities for collaboration; expect few such possibilities in McDonald's, especially, for example, the drive-through.
 - “Thomas Theorem”, if people “define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”
 - Define Facebook as offering more collaborative possibilities; it is likely that there will be more such collaborations.
 - Define McDonald's as a place to get into and out of as quickly as possible. As a result, expect, create, engage in few collaborative relationships.

- A More Dialectical Perspective on Affordances:
 - The “social construction of reality”; people create social realities, once created they constrain people.
 - Structural realities of material and digital means of prosumption, including their affordances, created historically and created anew each time people involved with them.
 - However, ability to create them anew limited by residues of past realities and constructions.
 - There are great limitations on the ability to redefine and recreate those settings, as well as their affordances.
 - Ongoing dialectic between the social construction of affordances and the affordances offered by settings in which the social construction takes place.

- Analysis demonstrates utility of using a more general set of sociological ideas- prosumption, the new means of prosumption, affordances rather than ideas largely specific to the Internet.
- Allows us to better identify what, if anything, is unique about the digital world.
- Allows us to debunk the idea that the Internet is a totally different utopian space characterized by a dramatic and revolutionary increase in social collaboration.

- Marxian perspective: new means of production largely capitalistic enterprises,
- Or in the case of digital sites will be captured by capitalists once show signs of success (MOOCs).
- Are, or will be, structured, top-down systems to increase control, profits
- Another myth- digital world inherently and necessarily decentralized, democratized.
- True must be less disciplinary than that exercised in other capitalist systems.
- Digital control more subtle, more about creating ambiances that lead people to what is desired, but still control.
- Control, punishment of the “soul”.
- With increasing ubiquity of Internet, especially social networking sites, are we immersing ourselves in hierarchical, capitalistic system with unimaginable capacities to punish our souls?

- Close on a slightly more positive note
- Critical theory: new means of prosumption, especially digital, part of the “culture industry”.
- Help to produce mass culture, or a culture that is “administered... nonspontaneous, reified, phony culture rather than the real thing”
- However, from the perspective of prosumption, led to a slightly more positive perspective. Versus passive “consumers” of culture, more active, the more “productive”, prosumer
- Better envision prosumers rebelling against culture industry or at least playing larger role producing a less phony, more real, culture.
- Tends to contradict more pessimistic views of the critical theorists, influenced by Weber and his thinking on the “iron cage; more in line with the optimism of Marx.

MOOCs

- based to a large degree on means of prosumption
- involve a great deal of collaboration among student-prosumers in both the digital and material worlds.
- some websites associated with MOOCs (e.g., Coursera) also function like social networking sites which serves to increase collaboration; students able to collaboratively build profiles, download photos and plan to meet with one another in person, via Skype, etc.

- Course material, especially lectures, typically produced by professors
- However, great emphasis on incorporating feedback from students; students (consumers) play a major role in producing and revising the content; the students and the professors are *both* prosumers of, and collaborators in, education

- Able to collaborate, have global exchanges, with students throughout the world; the extent of educational collaboration greatly increased
- Able to interact with a far greater number of students; the numbers of students involved in educational collaboration is much greater
- An open network of learners is created leading to more open collaboration between instructor and students and especially among students
- Collaboration far more democratic; students more agential; empowered to have more say; at least some of them are more prosumers-as-producers of their own education

- Much more self-regulation by students in MOOCs; more power to create novel forms of collaboration among selves, with instructors
- More informal learning; casual forms of collaboration possible
- Learning that takes place far less structured
- Students collaborate directly in online discussion forums
- Collaborate in the grading process through a peer-to-peer grading systems

- They help determine which students' questions and comments by voting on them; questions, comments with most votes most likely to receive the attention of the instructors.
- Most participate only marginally or not at all (the "lurkers"); collaboration here, and elsewhere, involves a continuum with both active and an inactive ends populated by these lurkers. At the inactive end there is the greatest concern about the quality of education on MOOCs.
- Topics raised, or even potential answers to exam questions, can be discussed with non-students (e.g., spouses) thereby widening the education network; more and different types of collaboration are made possible, even encouraged, by MOOCs.