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Participation (Un)Limited: Social Media and the Prospects of a Common Culture

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Abstract

In this chapter I critically discuss whether the co-production, collaboration and sharing on social media indicate a shift towards a truly participatory popular culture. I consider both optimistic and pessimistic accounts of the popular and argue that popular culture on social media can neither be adequately understood as purely emancipatory or as necessarily dominative.

Without doubt, developments in computer technology and the rise of social media to a certain extent have called the distinction between cultural producers and cultural consumers into question. At a technical level social media enable an increased number of people to not only express themselves creatively but to make these creative expressions available to others.

However, that does not mean that the locus of power in the cultural sector has shifted from corporations to individual users: Online collaboration, communication and sharing today takes place within a largely corporate controlled social media landscape.

Among the key problems connected to the advertising based social media business model are surveillance, exploitation and the reinforcement of a consumerist culture. After a brief discussion of these problems I consider the perspective of social media enthusiasts, who stress that critics of the advertising based social media business model are overly pessimistic and fail to take popular cultural production online seriously. I challenge this perspective by arguing that in downplaying the problems of the social media business model, social media enthusiasts provide legitimacy for corporate practices that take advantage of user engagement and turn it into a private financial surplus.

I conclude by suggesting Raymond Williams concept of a common culture as a fruitful starting point for thinking about a truly participatory social media culture.

In 1932 Bertolt Brecht (2000: 43) argued that radio technology could open-up access to media production for everybody. Similarly Walter Benjamin (1996: 772) in 1934 stressed that also the press could become a more democratic tool for communication by enabling its readers to become writers and thereby turning the “literary competence” into “public property”. In 1970 Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1982) pointed out that electronic media have the potential to abolish the distinction between receiver and transmitter and with it the “cultural monopoly of the bourgeois intelligentsia” (Enzensberger 1982: 55).

Computer and online technologies seem to have brought their vision to life: ordinary Internet users can not only be writers, editors, choreographers, visual artists or film producers but can also make their creative work available to a potentially global audience. Social media ostensibly enable the flourishing of an inclusive and participatory popular culture.

This chapter discusses to what extent social media have realized the liberating promise of the apparent democratization of popular cultural production. It thereby gives an overview of ongoing debates about popular culture and relates them to questions of domination and ideology on the one hand and emancipation and resistance on the other hand.

1. Popular Culture between Domination and Emancipation

Definitions of popular culture in different ways refer to culture that is produced, consumed and enjoyed by many ordinary people (for an overview of definitions see for example Bennett 1980: 18 cited in McGuigan 1992: 65, Hall 2009: 512-514). Very often debates about what popular culture is and is not evolve around questions of emancipation and resistance on the one hand and domination and ideology on the other hand. While this normative orientation demonstrates the critical intent of many writers on popular culture, it also makes the field prone to dualistic reasoning that describes popular culture either as a pure expression of the dominative forces of commercial culture or as a site of resistance to them.

Probably the most famous example for the former approach is Theodor W. Adorno’s account of popular culture. Against the background of his experience of the rise of mass culture during his exile in the USA after having fled Nazi Germany, Adorno regarded popular culture as an expression of the subjection of culture under “the mechanism of supply and demand” which “acts as a control on behalf of the rulers” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 106). He was particularly critical of popular music, which he considered as the musical equivalent to industrial mass production. The structure of popular music according to Adorno is based on imitation and standardization, reproduces the workings of capitalism and thereby contributes to its legitimacy. Classical music on the contrary would expose the total negativity of capitalist society. Adorno argued that: “In Beethoven, position is important only in a living relation between a concrete totality and its parts. In popular music, position is absolute. Every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine” (Adorno 2009: 64). Because of statements like this Adorno has often been criticised as a cultural elitist who failed to take popular cultural expressions serious (see for example Gountlett 2011: 38). Adorno’s account of popular culture is based on a dualism according to which high culture has the potential for transcending and resisting capitalism while popular culture is bound to capitalist markets and therefore entirely shaped by commercial interests. However, I would argue that his disregard of popular culture and popular music in particular does not only follow from his analysis of culture under capitalism but also stems from his personal taste: Adorno was a fan of serious music. He enjoyed playing as well as listening to classical music and was convinced that it has the potential to expose the irrationality of capitalism: “And that bourgeois society is exploded by its own immanent dynamics – this is imprinted in Beethoven’s music, the sublime music, as a trait of esthetic untruth” (Adorno 1998: 46).

Despite his questionable analysis of both popular and classical music, Adorno has contributed essential ideas to a critical understanding of culture in modern capitalist societies. One of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s great achievements was to theorize the integration of culture into

the capitalist economy. The concept of the culture industry offers a radical critique of the subsumption of culture under market principles so that it “dutifully admits to being a commodity, abjures its autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumer goods” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 127).

A central question thus is how we can overcome Adorno’s overly dismissive reading of the popular, while maintaining a perspective that is critical of the economic colonization of cultural production and consumption. This questions seems particularly important since today Adorno’s dualism between high culture and popular culture seems to have been largely replaced by another dualism: a dualism between capitalist economy and culture that has resulted in an overly enthusiastic analysis of the popular. And while Adorno as a fan of classical music was convinced of the emancipatory power of Beethoven’s work, today’s fans of social media highlight the progressive character of user participation in the production of culture (see for example Jenkins 2008, Gauntlett 2013).

Arguments that emphasise the progressive character of popular culture by far precede the emergence of social media. For many decades representatives of a certain version of cultural studies have addressed popular culture as a site of resistance where consumers as active subjects critically interpret and challenge the dominant meanings of the offerings of the culture industry (Grossberg 2009, Fiske 2010, Johnson 1999).

John Fiske for example defines popular culture as necessarily progressive. He argues: “there can be no popular dominant culture, for popular culture is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination” (Fiske 2010: 35). This understanding of popular culture has never been uncontested (see for example Garnham 2009). Jim McGuigan criticised Fiske’s work on television as an example of “uncritical populism” (McGuigan 1992: 70), which focuses “on ‘popular readings’ which are applauded with no evident reservations at all” (McGuigan 1992: 72).

The rise of user-generated content on social media – which is the main concern of this chapter - has again fuelled hopes regarding the progressive potential of popular culture.

2. Social Media: Creativity Contra Companies

On social media the involvement of “the people” is no longer limited to active interpretation but includes active cultural production. It has become a commonplace within media studies that so-called social media tend to dissolve the boundaries between cultural producers and consumers. Enthusiasts stress that YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and co enable unprecedented levels of participation in cultural production and democratize self-expression (Hartley 2009: 242).

According to Henry Jenkins, YouTube is the “epicentre of today’s participatory culture” (Jenkins 2009: 110). What makes it so special is that it enables participation at the level of production, selection and distribution on a single platform (Jenkins 2008: 275). According to David Gauntlett participation online “puts ‘ordinary people’ back in the driving seat of storytelling and creativity” (Gauntlett 2013: 81). He emphasizes the emancipatory potential that results from the creative engagement with social media: “creative material and ideas, when shared, discussed and networked via the Internet, can challenge the status quo” (Gauntlett 2013: 87).

These accounts picture YouTube and other social media as sites of counter-power, participation, resistance, cooperation and community building - platforms that enable culture to become truly popular. What tends to be neglected is the fact that most successful social media applications are not only platforms for creative expression, communication, collaboration and sharing but also successful businesses - with Wikipedia being the most prominent exception (Sandoval 2012). YouTube for example is owned by Google, which is one of the most powerful Internet companies and in 2012 generated 50.2 billion USD of revenue (Google 10-k form 2013).

It would be mistaken to argue that social media enthusiasts simply ignore commercial interests and corporate power in the cultural sector. However, they insist in the autonomy of popular culture and in a dualist manner try to establish a separation between economic forces and the workings of popular culture.

Fiske (2010) for example distinguishes between a cultural and a financial economy that operate according to different principles: while the financial economy circulates wealth, the cultural economy circulates meanings and pleasure; while in cultural economy the audience members become producers of meaning and pleasure, in the financial economy audiences are a commodity that is sold to advertisers (Fiske 2010: 21f). Likewise David Gauntlett stresses that the economics and pleasures of social media must be considered separate from each other: “The argument about economics cannot be used to resolve an argument about people’s experiences, or knowledge, or feelings” (Gauntlett 2013: 82)

In their book *Spreadable Media* (2013) Jenkins, Ford and Green argue that when studying social media it is “crucial not to diminish the many noncommercial logics governing the engaged participation of audiences online” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013: 55). One of these non-commercial logics is what they describe as a moral economy that refers to “moral understandings between the participating parties” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013: 48).

According to Jenkins, Ford and Green the moral economy might lead users to resist if they perceive the practices of platform owners to be morally inappropriate or unfair. Elsewhere Green and Jenkins argue that the social media landscape is characterized by a “a constant pull and tug between top-down corporate and bottom-up consumer power with the process of media convergence shaped by decisions made in teenagers’ bedrooms and in corporate boardrooms” (Green and Jenkins 2009: 214). This quote suggests that power is equally located in corporate boardrooms and teenager’s bedrooms. Such a dualism mystifies actual power relationships: Corporate owners can set the rules of the game, they can decide whether or not to charge access fees, whether or not to display (personalized) advertising, or whether or not to sell a teenager’s email address to an advertising client. It is true that collectively the users of social media might be able to resist corporate practices but organising an effective collective resistance of millions of users takes a much bigger effort of mobilization and coordination than a management decision in a corporate boardroom.

3. Social Media and Corporate Power

Critics have warned against an overly enthusiastic understanding of social media and stressed the need to look at how actual power structures shape online participation (for example Fuchs 2013, Miller 2009, Scholz 2008). Christian Fuchs (2013: 99; 102) for example argues that the corporate social media world is characterized by asymmetries of visibility and attention. Toby Miller (2009: 432) highlights that increased user participation is not necessarily emancipatory but also needs to be understood within the context of neoliberal outsourcing of work tasks from paid employees to unpaid consumers.

These critical accounts remind us that understanding popular culture on social media requires taking a differentiated look at the actual dynamics of social media. Rather than separating economic and cultural aspects of popular culture this means examining the complex interrelation between active user engagement and the corporate power structures that characterize today’s social media landscape. Such an approach allows understanding popular culture as dynamic, complex and contradictory. Taking popular culture seriously means considering actual social media usages as well as business imperatives behind most social media offerings. This is what Jim McGuigan has described as critical populism, “which can account for both ordinary people’s everyday culture and its material construction by powerful forces beyond the immediate comprehension and control of ordinary people” (McGuigan 1992: 5).

Without doubt, developments in computer technology and the rise of social media to a certain extent have called the distinction between cultural producers and cultural consumers into question and on a technical level enable an increased number of people to not only express themselves creatively but to make these creative expressions available to others. However that does not mean that the locus of power in the cultural sector has shifted from corporations to individual users: Online collaboration, communication and sharing today takes place within a largely corporate controlled social media landscape. The owners of commercial social media platforms have an economic interest in generating profits based on social media services and accordingly define the terms under which users can access them. The dominant business model of commercial social media platforms is based on advertising. Users receive access for free and profit is generated by selling user attention as well as data to advertising clients. Critical scholars have stressed that this advertising based business model is problematic as it fosters surveillance and exploitation of users and reinforces a consumer culture:

- *Surveillance*: The problem of user surveillance is intrinsically connected to the advertising based business model (Miller 2009: 429; Fuchs 2013, 108, Scholz 2008, Andrejevic 2009, 2012, Allmer 2012). Advertising has always been a major source of income for companies in the cultural sector. However in the Internet era the amount and variety of available information about consumers has increased substantially as users while using social media platforms are simultaneously producing data about themselves. These data are then stored in large searchable databases and used to create targeted advertisements that are presented to those consumers groups that are perceived as particularly susceptible to buying certain products.
- *Exploitation*: Another issue related to the social media business model is the exploitation of the free labour of social media users (Andrejevic 2009: 417; Fuchs 2010, 2013, Wasko and Erickson 2009: 383). Exploitation as Karl Marx has described it takes place when surplus, i.e., profit is generated by selling the products of work for more than the cost of the work and the material needed for producing it (Marx 1990: 270). Social media platforms could not exist without users who actively produce content and connect with other users. Already in 1977 Dallas Smythe (1997: 440) showed that in the case of the advertising media business model the commodity that is sold by the media is their audience. Christian Fuchs (2010, 2013) applied Smythe's concept of the audience commodity to social media. He argues that on social media sites, prosumers are productive workers because they create media content and usage data that is sold in order to generate profit (Fuchs 2010: 147; 2013: 110). Janet Wasko and Mary Erickson stress that the commodification of labour is "one of the most worrisome aspects of YouTube's monetization strategies" (Wasko and Erickson 2009: 383).
- *Consumer Culture*: A third implication of the advertising based social media business model is the reinforcement of consumer culture. The users of social media are not only surveilled and exploited but constantly exposed to advertisements for consumer products. Toby Miller argues that YouTube's business model "obfuscates distinctions in viewers' minds between commercials and programs via participatory video ads" (Miller 2009: 432). Likewise Mark Andrejevic stresses that after being captured user data is "returned to its producers in the form of an external influence: the congealed result of their own activity is used to channel their behaviour and induce their desires" (Andrejevic 2009: 421).

Critics of the advertising based social media business model have been accused of not taking popular cultural production online seriously. In the following I will discuss three objections that are commonly held against this criticism of commercial social media.

4. It is fun so it can't be exploitation?

A first objection against critics is that the concept of exploitation does not adequately describe the experience of people who share their work online. David Gauntlett for example argues that users enjoy the work they voluntarily perform on platforms like YouTube: “the ‘free labour’ which is ‘harvested’ is happily and voluntarily given by users who want to share their creative work [...]. So making them sound like slaves in a workhouse is a rhetorical device which doesn’t, I think, line up with most people’s own experience” (Gauntlett 2011: 188). Similarly Jenkins, Ford and Green stress non-economic incentives for creative production online: “the millions of individuals producing videos for YouTube take pride in their accomplishments, quite apart from their production of value for a company“ (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013: 59). They therefore suggest describing the free labour of social media users as “engaged“ instead of “exploited“ (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013: 60). Bank and Deuze (2009: 436) argue that exploitation like other “categories of capitalism (such as value-added, monetary gain, market size and audience) perhaps are not the most useful concepts” for understanding the phenomena of user generated content and creative co-creation online. These authors argue that social media users are not expecting economic rewards when engaging in creative production online. They rather enjoy to create, to share, to communicate and to collaborate and therefore do not feel exploited. This may well be the case for many social media users but that does not mean that they are not exploited. Exploitation does not describe a subjective feeling. It rather is an objective category that helps to understand structures of domination and injustice that characterize capitalist societies. In very basic sense it describes how some actors can generate profit based on the work of others: On YouTube for example users work for free when they create and upload their own videos or comment on other’s videos. Without this work YouTube would not exist and could not generate any profit since it would not be able to attract advertising clients. Social media users can and are likely to enjoy creative engagement online but can at the same time be exploited in the sense described in the previous section.

Fuchs and Sevignani speak of an “inverse fetish character of the social media commodity” that hides the commodity form of social media behind their use-value “i.e. the social relations and functions enabled by platform use“ (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013: 261). This means that the experience of pleasure and fun mystifies the commodification of work that takes place on social media platforms. This insight does not mean to characterize users as stupid or “cultural dupes“ that are not aware of their own exploitation but rather to recognize the contradictions that shape the commercial social media landscape today. Taking user generated popular culture serious means acknowledging both the experiences of pleasure and the structures of exploitation that shape online production and examining how they relate in any particular context. It is exactly by paying attention to the tension between the pleasurable experience of using social media and the structures of exploitation that accompany it, that criticism can emerge.

One dangerous implication of arguments against describing free prosumer labour on social media as exploited is that it implies that what it is pleasurable can’t be exploitative and does not even need to be paid for. In fact work in the cultural sector, which is often experienced as rewarding in many non-economic regards very often is precarious and low paid (Ross 2009; Gill 2011). Arguments that stress that the users of for example YouTube want to actively be creative, contribute and share and do neither look for financial rewards nor care whether their work is used to generate corporate profits creative content creators play directly into the hands of corporations that profit from harnessing the creativity of people at low cost or for free. The claim that we should focus on the “engagement“ rather than the “exploitation“ of users sounds like an extension of YouTube’s business rhetoric. YouTube recommends its advertising clients to focus on the “engaged“ users as they are the ones who are most likely going to serve as a multiplier for advertisements: “Engage your fans not just viewers. Viewers sit back. Fans lean forward. Viewers consume. Fans contribute. Viewers move on to the next thing. Fans

share, comment, create. YouTube wasn't built for fans. It was built BY fans. Share in fans' passions and be an active part of the communities that matter most to your audience" (YouTube 2013b: 2). This quote illustrates that YouTube is taking particular advantage of creative, "engaged" users, which it describes as a unique demographic, the so-called "GenC" (the creative generation) (YouTube 2013b: 3). GenC is not only particularly creative, networked and engaged but also particularly interesting to advertisers: "GenC sets the trends and determines what's going to be popular next, with an influence that accounts for \$500bn of spending a year in the US alone" (YouTube 2013a: 6). As this statement demonstrates, YouTube does think about its creative and engaged users in economic terms. Arguing that economic categories of exploitation, profit and money making do no longer matter on social media means to mystify the realities and power relations of a corporate controlled media system.

5. Advertising is Ok - If you Don't Like it, Don't Use It?

According to David Gauntlett (2011: 187) advertising is not unproblematic, but an acceptable prize to pay for free access to social media platforms. He argues that if users felt exploited or disturbed by a company's advertising practices they would stop using commercial social media platforms "After all, if they felt that they were being punished or exploited, they would simply do something else" (Gauntlett 2011: 188).

However the decision to just stop using social media is a difficult one and has widespread implications for an individual's cultural engagement as well as social networks. As there are hardly any non-commercial alternatives available, Internet users have the choice to either use commercial platforms at terms and conditions that are determined by platform owners or to disengage from the social media world.

In fact, data shows that most Internet users actually don't think that advertising is "ok". A survey conducted by the market research company Mintel based on 1,764 UK Internet users shows that of 68% of Internet users agree that online advertising are annoying, while only 7% disagree. 61% agree that online advertising is intrusive, while only 7% disagree. 59% agree that advertisements that are based on their browsing history make them feel uncomfortable, while only 9% disagree (Mintel 2013). These data confirm that a majority of Internet users find online advertising annoying, intrusive and feel uncomfortable when they are shown ads based on their browsing history.

Christian Fuchs (2009: 99) in a survey among Austrian students found that they consider surveillance related to advertising as problematic but are willing to take the risk because they nevertheless appreciate the opportunities for communication and collaboration these platforms are offering. Users perceive commercial social media platforms a beneficial and problematic at the same time. Due to this contradictory experience they might chose to continue using a certain platform service even they disagree with the business practices of the company that is operating it.

Users dislike online advertisements. At the same time Mintel's survey showed that only 9% of Internet users are wiling to pay for add-free online services (Mintel 2013). However, instead of legitimizing advertising based business models it is necessary to think about alterative ways of funding and providing social media platforms.

6. Social Media's Critics Don't Take Online Participation Serious?

Scholars that highlight the dark side of commercial social media, shaped by exploitation, surveillance and consumer culture, have been criticised for not taking ordinary people and their creative practices serious. Gauntlett writes that critics take "an especially dim view of ordinary people, who are assumed to have little creative capacity of their own and are liable to fall for whatever trick the media barons might push at them" (Gauntlett 2011: 193). Similarly John Banks and Mark Deuze (2009: 424) argue that critics treat consumers as manipulated

cultural dupes. According to these objections questioning the immediate user experience and criticising the power structures that shape the commercial media landscape means taking an elitist perspective that dismisses the creative practices of social media users as a manipulated activity.

This argument is unsatisfactory because it does not take into account that it is possible to criticise surveillance and exploitation on social media while at the same time acknowledging that using social media can be a genuinely pleasurable activity. It fails to grasp the contradictory character of commercial social media platforms as at the same time platforms for creative engagement and collaboration and sites of prosumer exploitation and surveillance. An account that overemphasises the liberating aspects of user-generated content and downplays how new and hip media companies like Google and Facebook exploit and surveil their users contributes to the ideology of what Jim McGuigan (2009) has called cool capitalism: “‘Cool’ is actually the dominant tone of capitalism today. Corporations have incorporated counter-cultural traditions and deployed signs of ‘resistance’ in order to market their ware” (McGuigan 2009: 124). It seems that in times when the boundaries between producers and consumers have become blurred and every Internet user can in principle produce her own media channel, talk about exploitation has become quite uncool. By not taking the downsides of the social media business model serious, social media enthusiasts provide legitimacy for corporate practices that take advantage of user engagement and turn it into a private financial surplus.

7. Envisioning Alternatives: Common Culture

The debates considered in this chapter illustrate that popular culture on social media can neither be adequately understood as purely emancipatory nor as necessarily dominative. Opening up media and cultural production is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to achieving a participatory popular culture. Popular culture as such - even on social media - is not enough for a truly democratic culture to emerge. The problem thus is not that people participate on social media, but that social media are not participatory enough: participation is limited to content production while ownership and decision power are privately controlled by corporations.

A fruitful starting point for thinking about more participatory alternatives is Raymond Williams' concept of a common culture. He argued that “the creation of all meanings is an activity which engages all men” (Williams 1989: 35) and therefore famously concluded that “culture is ordinary” (1958; 1989). Creating a truly common culture would thus require “a condition in which the people as a whole participate in the articulation of meanings” (Williams 1989: 36). A common culture presupposes an “educated and participating democracy” (Williams 1989: 37): participating because a common culture can only be what is commonly created by all people and educated because education is necessary to acquire the means and abilities to fully participate.

The idea of the common as it has been recently revived by Marxist scholars points not only at the participatory aspect cultural production but also collective ownership of cultural resources (Dyer-Witheford 2010: 82; Hardt and Negri 2009; Harvey 2012: 73). Nick Dyer Witheford stresses that commons are shared among collectivities: “The notion of a commodity, a good produced for sale, presupposes private owners between whom this exchange occurs. The notion of the common presupposes collectivities – associations and assemblies – within which sharing is organized“ (Dyer-Witheford 2010: 82).

Based on Williams' (1989: 36) description of a common culture and recent debates on cultural commons (Dyer-Witheford 2010: 82; Hardt and Negri 2009; Harvey 2012: 73) we can thus identify two main aspects of a common culture: common participation and common ownership.

The idea of a common culture has the potential to overcome both the dualism between high culture and popular culture as well as the dualism between economy and (popular) culture: On the one hand Raymond Williams describes common culture as “the culture as the way of life of people, as well as the [...] contributions of specially gifted and identifiable persons” (Williams 1989: 35). On the other hand idea of a common culture relates questions of cultural production to economic questions of ownership: Common culture not only democratizes cultural production but furthermore democratizes ownership rights. Envisioning a common social media culture thus means to imagine social media platforms on which popular culture is collectively produced as well as collectively owned and controlled.

If we want to take the creative practices of Internet users serious we must risk being uncool and restlessly criticise their corporate appropriation. In order to realize the true potential of social media as platforms that are not only socially produced but also socially owned and controlled we need to find ways to go beyond the commercial social media model.

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