

## **Digital audiences' disempowerment: Participation or free labour**

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### **Abstract:**

The appearance of digital interactive technologies opened up space where the audiences can express themselves freely through the user generated content. Often these new possibilities have been associated with the concepts of 'participation' and 'empowerment' on one side, and 'free labour' and 'exploitation' on the other. Through literature published during the past decade, this paper explores the relationship, tensions and connections between different perspectives of cultural studies and political economy on these phenomena. In some places this relationship is explained more directly, in the others indirectly. While the cultural studies perspective considers media users as active and productive, the political economy perspective looks at the audience's activities as producing profit for media industries.

As both perspectives are important and interlaced in audiences' experiences, this essay argues that there is a need for more studies that will try to build bridges between participation and labour. This brings novelties and openings in the area of intersection of cultural studies and political economy.

**Keywords:** participation, labor, digital technologies, cultural studies, political economy

### **Introduction**

With the emergence of digital interactive technologies and the appearance of web 2.0, many audiences' studies have started to look at the active role of audiences, through the production and creation of content. This 'participatory' turn has often been framed in terms

of civic and cultural ‘empowerment’, a buzzword that is especially present in the policy makers’ discourses and industry that relies on techno-scientific utopia and imaginaries, through which technology is presented as having a salvational role for the society (Van den Hove et al, 2011; Benessia, 2013). Political economy scholars, such as Andrejevic (2009), who base their work on Marxist theory, are equally interested in these changes but look at them from another perspective. They use, instead, the concept of ‘free labour’ and exploitation in relation to the user-generated content. Which of these concepts is used is important, because it is connected to the ideas of power and control in the (digital) society.

Despite the different perspectives of cultural studies and political economy, this new phenomenon is one of the dominant themes in digital audience research. As it consists of two different perspectives, we argue that a merging view that would comprehend both, is necessary. In this essay, we looked at 35 articles in the area of audience studies, published in the period 2005-2015. For the purpose of selection, we used specific keywords (such as participation, active audience, labour, produsage, playbor, exploitation) and the Google Scholar database of published articles and books or book chapters. Based on a grounded theory approach, we created 20 categories in the coding scheme. Through selected literature, this essay explores the tensions between different views regarding participation, empowerment, free labour and democratisation of production. It examines the relation among these concepts and argues about the way they could complement each other.

## **Two exclusionary perspectives**

Besides many old, new and revisited concepts that the analysed articles use (in relation to free labour, participation, empowerment and so on), the main theme that we were looking for was the relationship between labour and participation nowadays. In some places this relationship is explained more directly, in others indirectly. While the cultural studies perspective considers media users as active and productive and thus reception as subjective – i.e. the audience is actively engaged in media texts – the political economy perspective looks at the audience’s activities as producing profit for media industries that take advantage of the ‘surplus watching’ (Bolin 2012). In cultural theory, user agency is connected to participatory engagement, while in political economy it is a part of production more than consumption, and in labour relations users are seen as amateur producers compared to working professionals. For instance, Andrejevic (2008) agrees that participation, defined as ‘creative activity’ and labour, i.e. ‘exploitation’, co-exists in the online economy and he refers to it as ‘the exploitation of participation as a form of labour’. However, as a political economist, Andrejevic opposes Jenkins’ (1988, 1992) views, which are from a cultural theory perspective, that audience participation has some kind of subversive character. According to him, it is nothing more than the exploitation of free labour.

One of the rare authors who tries to embrace both the cultural studies and political economy perspectives is Bolin (2012). By looking at both traditional and digital media, he argues that the web 2.0 user produces aesthetic and social values through social labour as

well as user-generated content, which is appropriated by industries in order to make profit. But he also states that while interacting with friends on Facebook for example, our activities are framed by advertisements that are presented to us, which are calculated and do not always represent our needs, but economic power relations.

Acknowledging as unavoidable the blurring of boundaries between production and consumption, and between meaning and work (Deuze, 2009), some contributions have proposed new concepts that try to embrace this constitutive duality. This is for instance the case of 'playbour' (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013) through which the authors try to grasp the merging of 'play' and 'labour' in online activity. But the playful creativity that is experienced by users is ultimately sold to advertising companies as a data commodity (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013).

### **1. Participation (Cultural Studies)**

The notion of participation has attracted a growing interest among scholars of media and communication to such an extent that a new research paradigm, entirely focused on how media enables or impedes participation in society, seems to be gaining ground (Livingstone, 2013). While acknowledging how flawed the metaphor of paradigm is when applied to the field of audience research, Livingstone (ibid) highlights some fundamental changes occurring both in the object and in the purposes of research. Firstly, the centrality of participation is closely related to the capillary mediatisation of society. More than through a noun indicating a social entity circumscribed in time and space, the current relationship between people and the media can be efficaciously grasped by the verb of 'audiencing' (Fiske, 1992), intended as a vital mode of engaging with all the spheres of life through and within media. As far as audiences are becoming more participatory, and participation to society is ever more mediated, the agenda of audience research has undertaken a normative stance in exploring to what extent participation to an audience is conducive of participation in culture, community, civil society or democracy. This normative stance is exceptionally relevant for the literature review we are following here because it has illuminated some of the ambiguities that bring participation to structurally intersect with labour and commodification of grassroots production. A clear articulation of this normative stance can be found in the written dialogue on participation and politics between Jenkins and Carpentier (2013). Both scholars attribute to participation the quality of utopia, and agree in acknowledging that a proper participatory culture will remain an unachievable ideal, constantly hindered by the conservative tendencies of elitist forces. Therefore, the critical-normative approach springs from the need of preserving this never-to-be-reached ideal from becoming an inflated empty signifier that can be applied to deeply differentiated media domains. Platforms for content-sharing and social networking have constructed their social perception on a promise of participation that is up to user to actualize. Analysing the discursive work done by online content providers as YouTube to position themselves to users, clients, advertisers, Gillespie (2010) shows as the notion of 'platform' has been efficacious 'to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while also eliding the tensions

inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising' (Ivi, p. 348). Proclaiming itself to be 'committed to offering the best user experience and the best platform for people to share their videos around the world' (YouTube, 2006, quoted in Gillespie, 2010, p. 352), YouTube is exploiting the semantic richness of 'platform' hinging on both its political resonance - 'a place from which to speak and be heard' - and architectural connotation - 'in that YouTube is designed as an open-armed, egalitarian, facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical restrictions' (Gillespie, 2010, p. 352). The reassuring effect exerted by technical neutrality and progressive openness, allows mediators like YouTube to ride the long-standing Web 2.0 rhetoric about user-generated content and peer networking, while concealing the substantial work of gatekeeping they carry out in selecting 'what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits' (Ibid, p.359). What is happening, in Jenkins words, is that these platforms are 'over-promis(ing) and under-deliver(ing) in terms of their promises of participation' (Jenkins, Carpentier, 2013, p. 273). They promise to be at the service of the community but ultimately their constraints on content ownership and circulation break down that logic of gift and freedom on which participatory cultural production is based. It is therefore helpful to get back to the etymologic sources of the term 'participation', as Livingstone (2013) does, to remind that, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word indicates the 'state of being related to a larger whole'. The distinction between participation *in* the media and *through* the media, introduced a long time ago by Wasko and Mosco (1992), is no longer a sufficient compass in an era where platforms such as Facebook and YouTube constitute efficient and low-cost tools that can be used both for the self-production of media tools and for the extensive participation in public debate. The ambiguity inherent in current networked media resides exactly in the 'whole' that is pointed out by the etymology of the term, in that this whole is at the same time the community and the public that are addressed and mobilised by user-generated content, and it is also the economic system that is sustained by grassroots production and whose working rules are completely out of their users' control. For Jenkins, the abstract promise of participation can be in itself a driver for solving this structural ambiguity insofar as it brings users who rely upon it to struggle for achieving a reality closer to their democratic utopia and for making platforms accountable and responsive to its members (p. 272). From this statement, it comes that the acceptance of the normative stance that is inherent to participation paradigm does not require us to deflect the research focus from what users experience as creators and collaborators in their use of media, and from the motivations and gratifications that bring them to play active roles within these collaborative activities. A promising but still not enough explored research path is that of conducting qualitative comparisons of the processes of produsage with those that characterize 'consumption communities' and 'grassroots creativity' (Harrison, Barthel, 2009). This could help in uncovering those institutionalized or top-down genres of participation that, according to Livingstone (2013), are materialized in

recognizable social and semiotic conventions through which media practices are actualized and interpreted.

On the contrary, Carpentier makes claims for a normative closure of the notion of participation. Its material and actionist consistence doesn't allow us to ascribe its meanings to how we think or feel about it (Dahlgren, 2011, p. 8, quoted in Jenkins, Carpentier, 2013, p. 275). It's for this reason that he proposes to restrict participation to the real practices of involvement in decision-making processes and closely related to that 'political dimension' that ontologically pertains to every social domain (Mouffe, 2005). From this perspective, being critical in regard to participation means to resort to a conceptual anchoring point through which variable participatory intensities can be detected and assessed in effective media practices. While distinguishing between access, interaction and participation (Carpentier, 2011), Carpentier defines the latter as equal distribution of power in decision-making process. Cultural participation, intended as the development of 'latent capacities' in terms of our ability to form and navigate through social networks, to create and circulate images (Zuckerman, 2013), is going to be effective only within a media culture where equality of power relations encompasses all the different levels of media production (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 271). Both in its radical or moderate versions, the cultural perspective on participation offers a conceptual fine-tuning and a set of new vocabularies that may shorten the distance from the research focus on labour that will be discussed in the following paragraph.

## ***2. Labour (Digital Political Economy)***

The notion of labour, either as labour exploitation in Marxist terms or the revisited notion of free or immaterial labour, has been the leading concept present in the political economy literature. The concepts of surveillance and control are discussed together with the notion of labour and furthermore they are intertwined with it. Another new and important phenomenon that can be found in the selected literature is the phenomenon of 'crowdsourcing'.

### ***Democratic character of the Internet and commodification of users***

From the beginning of its existence, the Internet has been considered as inherently democratic. The renewed deterministic techno-optimism is often seen through the discourses of the democratisation of media and society through Internet (Fuchs, 2009). Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) stress that online corporate platforms are always presented in a positive light, as a part of democratic and participatory culture. For instance they were seen as main instruments of the Arab Spring or as creators of a more open and connected world. The negative impact of the Internet is often left out, which creates a very positive perception of the internet among general audiences. In fact, the concept of Internet and especially web 2.0 (or read-write web) is usually followed by attributes such as democratic, participatory, or a stress on the role of users (Fisher, 2012). And consequently, through the

creation of pleasure and usefulness, they become domesticated. This is connected to Marx's concept of the 'social individual', whereby the development of individual is a condition for the development of all. In the Marxist tradition, Fisher (2012) connects participation with capitalism and discusses the transformation of users into 'losers', and the role of active audiences changes from meaning-making (Birmingham school) to money-making. This process happens as use becomes a practice similar to work. It is not new that the mass media are seen as the vendors of the audience commodity to advertisers (Smythe, 1994). In this way, both media and audience became keys for the existence of capitalism. In addition, while on television, users' data are sold as a commodity, and in the world of web 2.0, users' content is commodified. Therefore, Smythe's (1994) concept of audiences as a commodity is particularly suitable here. But, as users are at the same time consumers and producers of information, Fuchs (2009) suggests the transformation of Smythe's concept into a new notion of 'internet prosumer commodification'. He goes even further, by suggesting the creation of a term 'the total commodification of human creativity' seen in the Internet era (Fuchs, 2009, p.82).

### ***Exploitation and participation or labor power = communication power***

The exploitation of users is possible through the architecture of participation that allows the companies to use the participatory potential and user-generated content to create profit through making interfaces or other strategies, as well as through the creation of the platforms such as social media that allow user-generated content (Fisher, 2012). That is why Fisher (2012) argues that there is a need for a new theory of labour that will capture both exploitation and free labour. One of the recurrent arguments when discussing the digital labour is that users are not exploited, as they use a platform because they enjoy doing so, or because they find it useful in order to socialize with other humans, since a considerable part of communication nowadays takes place online. An interesting observation from Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) is that consequently labour power can be partly considered as communication power.

At the same time, even Marx's theory of exploitation does not always refer to paid labour. Thus, in that sense, Facebook users, as unpaid contributors, could fall into this category (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013) because their 'brains, hands, mouths, ears and speech, the Internet and platforms' (p.258) are instrumentalized for advertising which 'is part of the alienation of the instruments of labour on Facebook' (p.258).

### ***Surveillance and control***

The surveillance of Internet users is a common topic for political economy scholars who deal with the web 2.0 and digital audiences. This concept also has direct advertising implications. Manzerolle (2010), for instance, defines web 2.0 as 'a set of marketing discourses' with the principal aim of rebranding the web through the creation of a perception of empowered user.

The theme of surveillance developed from the work of Foucault (1977), who made a distinction between the 'object of information' and 'subject in communication'. In the context of web 2.0, the subjects of communication are considered to be users and producers of social media who produce content, upload information, comment on information of others, etc. But when users and producers are surveilled in order for their data to be used in advertising and other purposes, they become objects of information, providing information to companies. In that context the concept of users' free labour can be employed (Fuchs, 2010; Fuchs, 2011; Gandy, 1993). Following Andrejevic's work, Hesmondhalgh (2012) argues that the progressive elements of online participation and the pleasure it brings are compromised by surveillance and profit-making.

Likewise, the role of users as data providers becomes more important than that of content providers (Van Dijk, 2009). However, the creation of neologisms such as 'produser', 'co-creator', and 'prosumer' could lead to the opposite conclusion. Van Dijk (2009) sees the relationship between media producers, advertisers and consumers becoming tighter than ever, as users get a greater role in content production. Nevertheless, they lose agency as consumers because they are surveilled and directed by media companies.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay we explored how the concepts of participation and free labour have been used in audience studies in the period 2005-2015. These two terms, 'participation' and 'free labour', are the major terms that appear in cultural studies and political economy research connected to the study of web 2.0 and digital audiences.

The most important problem that was identified in the analysed articles is the lack of any merging of the perspectives of political economy and cultural studies. This means that in the majority of cases, scholars from one field do not want to look at the same phenomenon from the other angle as well. However, we have selected and discussed those contributions that, through the development of a critical stance on their respective objects, have tried to shed light on the area of intersection between the empirical areas currently grasped by the two concepts. This is important because, as presented in this article, these two realities are in the majority of cases clearly separated, due to two unsettled perspectives, but they are intertwined in users' experiences, and therefore one cannot exclude the other. Therefore our aim has been to isolate the strand of reflections where space has been made for potential bridges between participation and labour. We argue that these authors bring novel ideas and new openings into this area of intersection of cultural studies and political economy.

As underlined by Papacharissi (2010), it should not be forgotten that the pleasure and advantages of online activities co-exist with the economic value to the benefit of online companies and platforms. When we consider consumers as producers of culture (Bank & Humphreys, 2008), we are automatically implying that the boundary between the access to online production and ownership and control over them is fading. However, beyond this consumers' empowerment, their lack of control and possession over the platforms for the

creation and maintenance of content sharing is at the core of online economy (Papacharissi, 2012). This structural ambiguity makes both the concept of exploitation and empowerment deeply problematic and calls for new conceptual developments that can explain what is now formulated as a dualism resistant to a higher synthesis. What our brief review of literature shows, is that it is not any longer sufficient to acknowledge the co-existence of consumers' pleasure with producers' profit without overcoming the analytical separation that descends from the two disciplinary perspectives that have been prevalent in the field. There is an increasing need for a wider research perspective that could comprehend all the deep implications of this structural ambivalence and that could explain in virtue of what this two faces of the same coin are kept together or, if it is the case, are mutually distancing. The number of studies that discuss both perspectives and try to connect them remains still very limited. However, they can be seen as new openings in the field and as offering potential for future studies in this direction. To conclude, we think that further efforts should be carried out in order to explore the mutual crossing of the two perspectives that still frame participation and labour as mutually exclusionary phenomena.

### **Biographical notes:**

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