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User-Generated Content (UGC)

Understanding the Activity of Media Use in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Abstract: User-generated content was launched in the early 1990s as a concept for describing media content produced outside of professional media institutions by everyday media users. It gained widespread popularity around 2005 and in the article it is argued that the rise of the concept coincides with the interactive web and the ability for industrialized media and culture production to take advantage of the productivity of ordinary users. The article discusses first the frameworks of production of UGC, including the business models of the platform economy into which this kind of content is drawn. Secondly it discusses the types of users who generate content, and thirdly it accounts for some of the criticism the concept has met. The article ends with situating UGC in the longer history of media production and suggests an explanation for why the concept appeared at the time it did.

Keywords: media production, media users, media content, amateur production

User-Generated Content, or UGC as it is commonly abbreviated, is a concept that gained popularity with the widespread use of personal computers and the launch of user-friendly interfaces for search engines, video-sharing, and social networking sites, etc., in the early 2000s, when media users suddenly became equipped with advanced means of production. The concept was connected to the rise of the Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2007), that is, the interactive or participatory web, and refers to the ability for everyday media consumers to suddenly turn into producers through the uploading and distribution of self-produced media content on blogs, wikis, social media platforms or other public online media.

UGC can be defined as (digital) "media content generated by people outside of professional media institutions, often for no pay, which is made available to the public" (Daubs 2019, 1825). The first mentions of the concept in academic writing appeared in the early 1990s, perhaps inspired by the concept of "usergenerated data" that had already appeared in computer science in the 1970s. The popularity of the concept within media and cultural studies is often attributed to writers such as Henry Jenkins (2006), who in his *Convergence Culture* points to the activity of media users on digital social media platforms. A Google Ngram analysis of the search term "user – generated content" reveals that its

peak popularity was in 2005, the year before the publication of Jenkins' book, and although the UGC concept is listed in the index of Convergence Culture, Jenkins in fact never mentions the term in the book but instead writes of "audiencegenerated content" or "consumer-generated content." Admittedly, Jenkins had studied active audiences for more than a decade by then, and especially various types of audience productivity, and he also soon followed up on the success of Convergence Culture by co-authoring Spreadable Media, emphasizing the ease by which such content could be disseminated (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). With reference to Jenkins, UGC has often been held forth as the possibility for media users to counter the one-way communication structure of the mass media, thereby introducing a more democratic tool for citizens to make their voices heard, and to participate actively in the societal communication structure.

In parallel to the work of Jenkins, UGC was also related with adjacent concepts such as produsers – an amalgamation of the concept of producer and user launched by German-Australian media researcher Axel Bruns (2006), who developed it influenced by Alvin Toffler's (1971) concept "prosumer," which Toffler used to emphasize the productive side of consumption in the information society. Alternative concepts were also launched for describing the same phenomenon at the time, for example Pro-Ams – a combination of professionals and amateurs (Leadbeater and Miller 2004; Anderson 2006), or peer production, as discussed by Joshua Benkler in his influential book The Wealth of Networks, where he positions this production in a new and decentralized "networked information economy" that is replacing the previous stage of "industrial information economy" with its more centralized production processes (Benkler 2006, 3). Famous examples of such peer-production are Wikipedia, founded in 2001, but also video-and music-sharing sites such as YouTube and Soundcloud. It was also applied to phenomena such as "crowd-sourcing" (Brabham 2008), a web-based business model based on online, distributed problem-solving, and production which is less about the content itself but rather the ways in which media industries can benefit from small contributions from a lot of people.

The rise of concepts for business models in relation to USG is significant, and as I will show in the following, the concept of USG was born in relation to the technological affordances and commercial potential of digital media even if the productive activity of everyday media users itself has a very long history. Against this short background, I will in the following discuss the longer history, or perhaps pre-history, of the phenomenon itself. The concept itself focuses on users and content, but I will start by describing the prerequisites to this specific kind of content generation by users as it is my point that it is within the technological and commercial frameworks of production that the concept itself becomes

intelligible. I will then discuss the users that generate content, and how their content production has been seen as non-profit motivated, non-professional or amateur textual production. Third, I will account for some of the criticism that the uses of the concept of user-generated content have generated. Lastly, I will bring this discussion together to make some conclusive reflections on the rise and popularity of the concept.

1 Prerequisites for UGC

Although the concept of UGC is relatively new, dating back to the early years of the twenty-first century and the rise of the interactive web, the phenomenon that it refers to has a very long history. It might therefore be instructive to account for some of the analogue predecessors to digital UGC, in order to understand its specificity and in which ways it differs from historical communication forms. Portions of the content in the press and on the broadcasting media can, for example, be considered as early such forms of UGC. One can, for example, think of letters to the editor, where readers can voice their opinion in textual form, or phone-in programs on the radio, where ordinary listeners can make themselves heard. Obituaries are another example that is common in the print media. As has been discussed by Lobato, Thomas and Hunter (2011), such forms point to the tensions between formal and informal media production in which UGC is often produced by non-professionals but distributed within industrialized frameworks which are formally regulated through state policy, taxation, and regulation, especially UGC distributed via the mass media press, radio, and television. This places the producer in relative control of the construction of the text but not over its distribution since there is no guarantee that letters submitted to the editor get published. And even if they do get published, the newspaper editors can, and often do, edit the letters or obituaries. The content also needs to follow editorial principles in terms of length and tone of language. The same goes for debate articles which, to the contrary of letters to the editor or obituaries, are often written by people in their capacity as experts, such as researchers, politicians or corporate executives. All these types of content are produced outside of the distributing organization but are subsumed by its editorial processes of selection, policy, and quality assessment.

However, it could be argued that what we today consider to be UGC precedes the mass media, and that it is one of the central features of traditional communications systems such as the postal system, or the telephone system. Just like the postal and telephone system, social media platforms such as Facebook,

Twitter, and Instagram, and sharing platforms such as YouTube, Flickr, and Soundcloud are not content producers themselves, but are offering a service where users can communicate with distant others. They are infrastructures for communication, offering a service to the user, and their business models are founded on that type of functionality.

The earliest known postal systems were established in ancient Egypt and China ca. 2.000-1.000 BC. The Roman empire developed the most advanced postal system of the time – the cursus publicus – composed of stations equipped with fast-running horses distributed with regular intervals along the main roads of the empire (Siegert 1993/1999, 6-7; cf. Balbi and Kittler 2016, 1976). This communication system was, however, mainly used by the emperor and his provincial governors for messages between the different parts of the Roman empire. In this exclusive function, it was largely similar to the telegraph in the early 1800s (Carey 1983). Like the *cursus publicus*, the telegraph was for the most part not a medium that was operated by private citizens. Electronic communication networks for the general public came first with the telephone, patented by Alexander Graham Bell in the 1870s, and spread among the general populations first in the US but also in many other industrialized countries in Europe and elsewhere. And even if this medium initially had its experiments with mass distribution, its dominant use was for interpersonal communication at a distance (Marvin 1988, 223–228).

Both the postal and the telephone systems, when introduced to a general public of users, provided them with a service to take advantage of for a fee. The business model was then based on selling access to the service to customers wishing to communicate across distance. When sending mail, you needed a stamp, and when making a phone call you paid a subscription rate in combination with a fee per call made, and per minute used. Long-distance and especially international calls were more expensive, just as sending letters with express delivery was more expensive. Prices were thus set according to the service level delivered to the customer.

This is, however, how the postal and telephone systems also differ from the platform companies of today, since most of them - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or search companies such as Google, Yahoo, etc. – do not provide the service for a fee but for access to the data that the users provide them with when they act in the digital space, and sometimes also for the content they produce. This is because in this business model it is not the user of the service that is the customer. Those who use the service in order to communicate with friends and relatives only contribute to the revenues for the platform companies indirectly as their data are not directly sold to advertisers. The customer is instead those advertising companies, or their representatives, who wish to reach the attention of users in order to promote their products or are in other ways seeking to gain the attention of the service users. In that sense, platform companies are more similar to traditional commercial broadcasters who get their revenues from the sales of advertising. Platform companies are thus merging two business models: that of the traditional commercial mass media that build on the selling of texts to users (the text-based business model), or on delivering users' attention to advertisers (the audience-based business model) and that of the telecommunications business (the service model). The latter is necessary because it is the telecommunications sector that controls the flows of digits through their fiber optic cables and Wi-Fi networks, and thus controls access to the IP numbers of digital devices, which is needed in order to produce the digital consumer based on his or her movement in digital space. It is the combination of these business models that makes contemporary platform companies unique. Content, in this case, is both the actual texts produced by media users but also the data produced as a result of the users' activities.

What distinguishes contemporary platform companies from the service providers in the pre-digital era is that the telephone companies never sold the content provided by the partakers in telephone conversations, and the post companies did not provide third parties with the content of letters. This is, however, exactly what is the basis for the platform companies' business models. Of course, there are anecdotes of wire-tapping by telephone operators in the early days of manual switchboards, and in some totalitarian states this has also been part of systematic state surveillance strategies (e.g. Weiner and Rahi-Tamm 2012). However, these are examples of state surveillance for political purposes, for crime prevention, or simply snooping behavior by private individuals. Commercial companies have not had any incentives to open mails or wire-tap customers. Arguably, this is also one of the reasons the concept of UGC is seldom used in relation to all service providers but reserved for production that in the end produces economic value. We shall return to this point and what it means for the rise of the concept of UGC but, before that, we need to say something about those who are generating the user-generated content, that is, the media users.

2 UGC and Amateur Media Production

Within media audience studies, a recurring discussion has approached the degrees to which audiences are active or passive recipients of media messages. The history of media audiences research is often described in terms of a pendulum that swings between the views on the audience as either passive or active. The media were initially seen as powerful agents that injected their messages into the audiences who received the messages in a uniform manner. When research had a hard time establishing these uniform influences, the question "what do the media do to people" was reversed and uses and gratifications research regarded media users as active subjects who sought to satisfy individual "needs." Both the theories of uniform influences and the uses and gratifications theories focused on the effects or the needs of the individual as a psychological subject. With theories on cultural imperialism and cultivation theory, the relationship between the media and their audiences was again reconsidered, and it was no longer individual texts or individual users who were under focus but the power of the cultural environment in its entirety that influenced users as social subjects on a societal level. With the rise of Cultural Studies as a research field, the active audience was again reevaluated, and with the ambivalences and resistance potentials to dominant messages emphasized as well as the empowering potentials of popular culture. This is also where audience activity got thematized in terms of productivity: the concept of audience was largely abandoned to the benefit of the more active noun "users" and these became theorized in terms of their "identity work" (Ziehe 1982/1986), or "symbolic work" (Willis 1990), or in terms of their engagement in social or textual productivity (Fiske 1992).

Parts of the productivity resulting in UGC stems from amateur production, for example the writing of diaries, poetry for the desktop drawer, or amateur photography and film-making. The English word amateur is borrowed from French, and has its root in the Latin word *amator*, i.e. one who loves or is fond of something, but has become understood as one "who cultivates anything as a pastime, as distinguished from one who prosecutes it professionally" (Oxford English Dictionary; see also the chapter on amateurism in this book). To be an amateur producer usually also means that the activity is less formally organized than commercial media production or other types of professional media production, such as production within public service broadcasting. Amateur production is, in fact, a broad category that includes everything from individual scribblings of poetry or diary writing to quite complex online broadcasts of amateur music festivals or theatre plays.

The concept of amateur as opposed to professional media producer of course only makes sense in a capitalist economy where production and consumption of cultural objects and texts is separated. The first such market was the market for books, following the possibilities of mass production of the written word since the mid-fifteenth century. This market was, however, quite restricted until the rapid modernization of European infrastructure in the nineteenth century, including new means of transport such as railroads. This expansion of the market can also be related to further developments in print technology, where setting machines and rotary presses made it possible to drastically increase print runs of books and newspapers (Williams 1958/1963, 290). With the subsequent introduction of continuously new media technologies, the market for cultural products expanded to include photography, film, radio, television and so on. Some of these technologies, such as photography, have always also been areas where the lines between professional and amateur might not be too sharp. Other media forms that are reliant on large investments and complex production apparatuses, such as filmmaking, have had stricter lines between them, where separate technical formats have been reserved for professional filmmaking (35 and 70 mm film) and amateur formats (8 mm, with 16 mm as a middle format between these) (Zimmermann 1995). Beyond the technological formats, professional film and television production also requires a distribution network that goes far beyond what amateurs have access to.

A specific form of amateur production is the productions made by fans (see also the chapter on fandom in this book), that is, highly engaged followers of a specific media content or a specific star or artist. Many studies of UGC have in fact taken fans and their textual production as their point of departure and, unsurprisingly, this is also the point of departure for the above-mentioned Henry Jenkins, whose first book was a study of fans of the television series Star Trek (Jenkins 1992). These fans were highly active and productive, and arranged conventions, produced artworks, wrote stories, made fanzines, etc., all of which circulated within the "participatory culture" of Star Trek followers. Jenkins' Star Trek study was published in 1992, and the research that led up to it therefore preceded the interactive web. He was not the first to do research of fans, not even on Star Trek, but his ideas sparked off an avalanche of studies on participatory culture over the next decades (Hills 2002).

Amateur media production naturally needs to be related to professional production within the technological framework of digital telecommunications systems. Elsewhere, I have suggested that this can be theorized as two separate fields of cultural production: one that is commercially driven within the framework of a market economy, and one which is non-market driven within a social and cultural economy, and where the non-profit motivated production of everyday media users in this field of "prosumption" gets appropriated and taken advantage of by the industrialized field of media production where it is converted to economic profit (Bolin 2012).

What distinguishes amateur production from its professional counterpart is not quality in itself, but the motivations and the frameworks. Professional media production is goal-oriented, organized and remunerated. Amateur media production is based on a "labor of love," and admittedly also professional producers can love what they do for a living but their labor is only compensated for economically if it meets the objectives of others. An amateur musician is not necessarily less skilled or talented as a professional musician but is mainly motivated by other values such as aesthetic or social values. Many professional journalists are less eloquent than amateur writers, but they are conducting their writing within a framework of formal employment, union membership, etc. that gives them access to accredited places at certain events and places (cf. Lobato, Thomas and Hunter 2011).

3 Critical Perspectives on UGC

The concept has also met with a fair deal of criticism. One such criticism concerns the idea that the boundary between media production and consumption had disappeared with the new interactive technologies. This idea has been criticized on the grounds that, first, there are clear differences between the production conducted by large-scale media corporations, such as the big television networks, the film and publishing industry, the music industry, etc., and the more limited and less profit-driven production by everyday media users. There are also empirical studies which have analyzed the extent to which media users contribute with content in the commentary fields of newspapers and concluded that it is not much, and that users are fairly restricted in what type of content they can contribute with (Örnebring 2008). Typically, UGC is produced by a small but very active minority of media users (Balbi and Magaudda 2018: 100f). The language of "activity" and "passivity" is also reflected in how everyday media users talk about their own online behavior, where it is common to refer to one's own behavior in passive terms (Bolin and Velkova 2020).

A related reflection on the concept is that it overstates the activity and productivity of users. Most of what is published and disseminated on social media and sharing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., is actually produced by the traditional cultural industries – the film industry, the television industry, and the press. The activity of users is mostly in the form of distributing video clips and text snippets, and very little of what is circulating is actually produced by evervdav media users. Lothar Mikos has thus suggested that it would be more accurate to talk about "user-distributed content," since 83 per cent of the most popular content on YouTube was actually produced by professional content-producers in the media industries, and only 17 per cent produced by everyday media users. Fans, he argues, have become part of the marketing and promotion activities of large-scale professional productions, for example, various talent shows such as *X-Factor* and fiction franchises such as *Lost* (Mikos 2010).

Another type of criticism focusses on the fact that UGC contributes to the exploitation of "free labor" (Terranova 2000). This criticism is directed to the fact that those who produce data through their activities on social networking media and upload and distribute content provide the basis for the profit of the platform companies in the digital economy, and that their "labor" is not remunerated. The argument is that the activity of users is what generate the revenues for the platform companies. This labor is "free," both in the sense that it is free to exploit by the platforms but also freely given by the laborers. This criticism is highly influenced by the Italian autonomist Marxist paradigm, with authors such as Michael Hardt and Maurizio Lazzarato theorizing this type of activity as "immaterial labour" (Lazzarato 1996). This is the kind of labor "that produces an immaterial product, such as ideas, images, forms of communication, affects, or social relationships" (Hardt 2005).

Now, it can be argued that it is not really the labor itself that is immaterial, but the result of labor – even signifying how practices that are at the bottom of the production of sign commodities are material. Furthermore, those who actually conduct work in producing the digital media user commodity are not the ones who generate data but the ones who process these data and package them into the audience commodity that is then offered to advertisers and others who wish to buy this kind of intangible commodity. Thus, it is not the audiences who work but rather the statisticians at the analytics and marketing departments of the platform companies (Bolin 2009). José van Dijck also problematizes the activity on the grounds that the relations between media use and industry is much more complex than both the affirmative "produsage" paradigm or the free labor paradigm accounts for (van Dijck 2009), whereas Søren Mørk Petersen has argued that UGC would be better labelled "loser-generated content" because the fruits of the labor are robbed from the media users (Petersen 2008). David Hesmondhalgh (2010) has also thoroughly criticized both the affirmative stance of the "produser" debate and the free labor discourse and argues that the analogy with work is misleading. His main argument is that the idea of media use as work does not fit into the Marxist theory of exploitation because of the lack of force and forced relations between capital and labor. Hesmondhalgh refers to a distinction made by Mark Andrejevic between "user-generated content" and "user-generated data", where it is mainly the latter that is the basis for profit in the media industries (Andrejevic 2009).

The question, however, is why do people contribute with their data, and sometimes with their content, if they know that the data collected is intrusive, and that the platform companies are making money on their actions in the digital space? Elsewhere, I have suggested that one might think of the mechanisms behind the activities as two separate but related fields of action (Bolin 2012). In the field of "presumption", as we might call it for want of a better term, social subjects produce posts on social media, communicate in chat rooms, share pictures on sharing sites, all for the benefit of social and cultural value. This field is based on a social and cultural economy, not profit-driven, and producing social and cultural value for the involved subjects. These activities, both the usergenerated data produced and the UGC, get drawn into the field of professional media and cultural production into a field that is indeed profit-driven within the framework of a commercial economy, where the main value is economic. If seen from this perspective, it is hard to talk about the subjects generating data as doing labor or being exploited. Their activities do admittedly result in data, which is then appropriated by the commercial media and culture industries and enters into the commercial economy. But the motivations for user production are rewards in value forms other than the economic.

4 The Long History of Everyday Media Production and the Short History of UGC

Before media texts became commodities in the wake of print technology, media production and consumption were less separated. It is only with print capitalism, and the fixation of the text or the cultural object to a tangible carrier, and hence a controllable commodity that a market for texts appear. British-Danish literary scholar and Shakespeare expert Tom Pettitt (2007) launched the concept of "The Gutenberg Parenthesis" to argue that print technology introduced the prerequisites for the media market and the separation of textual producers from consumers (in addition to several other consequences of the printed text, discussed by historians such as Elizabeth Eisenstein 1979 and Walter Ong 1982). With the introduction of the printing press, the word became affixed, whereas it in earlier times had been a floating object that could change, for example in the performance of a song or a theatre play, or when hand-copied scripts became altered in the copying process in chirographic culture. The object form thus paved the way for the commodity form. Pettitt argues that we are now at the end of this parenthesis, and that texts are again becoming freed from their affixation to a specific carrier.

In a historical perspective, a concept such as user-generated content thus only makes sense after this market has separated production and consumption from each other, and hence also separated those who produce texts from those who consume them. Before this separation, the concept does not make sense. Furthermore, it continued to be largely unintelligible as long as this separation

was upheld, and early media studies rather talked of audiences, recipients, listeners, viewers or readers of media content. With the re-evaluation of audience activity in the 1980s and 1990s, the "user" was born, and "user-generated content" appeared for the first time. But it is not until the culture and media industries develop business models for capitalizing on this content production that the concept takes off in popularity. With the interactive web it became, for the first time in history, possible for the media and culture industries to capitalize upon the activity of media users, to integrate their productivity into the industrialized and profit-driven production circuit. Indicative of this was the rise of the concept of user-generated content, which was introduced in the early 1990s, but took off rapidly with the launch of the interactive possibilities of digital and online platforms in around 2005. As Walter Benjamin (1936/1977) observed, something happened with cultural objects in the age of mechanical reproduction; we could say that we have now witnessed another transformation of cultural objects in the age of digital reproduction and the re-integration of production and consumption.

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