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Audience Incorporated (Inc.): Youth Cultural Production and the New Media

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It's [2006] a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before.... It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.... We're looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it's just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy.... And for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, TIME's Person of the Year for 2006 is you (Grossman, 2006, 14-15).

As we move away from the old monolithic one-way flow mass media to the new "interactive" environment of Web 2.0 platforms such as social networking sites MySpace and YouTube, and knowledge sharing sites such as Wikipedia, there has clearly been a shift in the conditions in which having a voice in the public sphere is even possible. Changes in access to technology have facilitated new conditions for young people to shoot, cut and mix multimodal texts, and the emergence of the Internet as a convergent

multimedia vehicle and a hang out for a global audience has enabled youth to communicate across borders and across the street. The phenomenal growth of this activity prompted TIME magazine to name us – or more specifically “you” – the Person of the Year in 2006. Although there is a tendency to overstate the case and imagine that young people didn’t do any writing or video production before the advent of blogging, podcasting or vlogcasting, it is no doubt true that access to ‘the means of production’ and even more importantly, to control of distribution, and the fracturing of the mass audience into niche markets, has created an intense period of cultural production and communication by previously excluded and marginalised young people. While new digital divides are increasingly apparent, a great number of young people, middle and upper class kids with modems and those of lower economic status who get involved in youth media organizations or media education in school, have the capacity today to create sophisticated media and to share it. That is an extraordinary development, and cannot be minimized. Power is a scarce resource for young people and if we consider social, political, economic and cultural arenas of power, then we must recognize the potential that laptop and camera toting young people have an extraordinary advantage over previous generations of a comparable demographic. While some corporations are making a fortune producing and selling the new relatively low-cost hardware and software for the new hyper media generation, the reality is that the costs of production and distribution have dropped so low that millions of young people can join the new virtual studio, some becoming instant celebrities and many others just having the potentially feel good moment of being a part of the hyper media world. These new conditions have allowed for an outpouring of youth expression, a channelling of already latent youth voice, now

redoubled with the potential of making a difference, changing someone's mind, making a mark on society.

Given the unprecedented flow of new cultural production, it is an opportune time to pay attention to youth cultural production. However, the vast torrent of material appearing online daily, that would exhaust even the most prolific reader or viewer, ensures that much will be left unread, unseen, unheard. This is where an active audience plays a part in what would formerly have been the selection and distribution of content. The new folksonomy is determined by arbiters of taste who are viewers and readers that with a click of the mouse determine a v-log's popularity or a blog's selection and increasingly decide what will rise above the rest. While we should remain sceptical of TIME magazine's assertion of "the many wresting power from the few," the grassroots "seizing [of] the reins of the global media," there is an element of truth to it. Certainly we did not take over the profit making, corporate control side of show business. Nor did we make the big decisions about mass media content, far up the corporate ladder. But we did begin to make multiple small decisions about content on a daily basis, both while producing and consuming it. These small decisions, multiplied by millions of users, began to add up to major influences on what content rose above the rest. This chapter is about the production of content and its consumption. Today, the most popular web site, v-log or blog is determined by the number of people who visit it, view it, write a comment, rate it, link to it, and follow it on their RSS feed. Marketing has not disappeared, but has become a more inexact science, relying even on the very vagaries of viral communication used by

people in everyday interactions. The audience has come into its own in the new environment.

Of course, audience incorporation – Audience Inc. – is of necessity always already a part of the circuit of communication. The Web 2.0 innovation is to incorporate readers also as writers, allowing readers to write/produce their own texts/shows. While an active audience in times past has been one that uses its imagination, critical faculties, and capacity for sharing with one another, the new Audience Inc. is also a generating audience, an audience of writers or producers. The inherited tradition of an active audience in an era of one way media flow was of taste cultures (Bourdieu, 1984). From the scientific audience capture of Nielson ratings to the soft science of water cooler buzz marketing, the audience of the past exercised its power by selecting from given choices and ever so subtly inflecting cultural change upon the media by letting its evolving attitudes and worldviews be known. The audience relation to media production in the new environments is far more intimate and the effect is much more immediate, increasingly embedded or incorporated into the message itself. Much in the manner a flash mob assembles - a real world gathering of people who use IM and cell phone technology to bring a large group of people together quickly - the new denizens of the Web 2.0 mobilize audiences to quirky new v-logs, blogs and web pages. For example, when P. Diddy launched his YouTube channel in partnership with Burger King in October, 2006 he had 750,000 views within a week. A culture jammer called Lisa Nova produced a spoof of Diddy's v-log the next day that was seen by over 650,000 people in a six day period. Four months later, Nova's mockumentary had been seen by a total of over

one million, but the biggest buzz occurred relatively spontaneously in that first week. A great part of the success of v-logs such as this one lies in the active audience functions of social networking sites such as YouTube where audiences vote with their mouse clicks to launch the most popular v-logs and directors of the week or of all time. The empowered audience has emerged as the newest actor in the mediasphere, helping to determine and create content and seemingly balancing out increasing corporate control, the other major development in our mediascapes. Incorporated into all of the stages of consumption and reception, the audience appears to have unprecedented power to shape and determine media content. I will argue that differing conceptions of audience - incorporated into the act of media creation - produce different outcomes, and that there are strong residual communicational and cultural elements in contemporary “participatory” media production. Thus, as young people are drawn into new forms of media practice, they also draw substantially on a pre-existing repertoire of cultural meanings.

Enabling youth expression is a good thing, but it is wishful thinking to assume that an outpouring of unadulterated youth voice will yield copious samples of enlightened interventions against the stereotyping of youth or the multiple injustices some or all youth face. If anything, youth online cultural production is profoundly ambivalent, dependent on audience and occasion. Youth voice is always inflected by some assumption of the expectations of the audience, whether an active peer audience of frivolous pranksters, a niche market of well-meaning adults or some hybrid of the two. Take, for example, YouTube’s #1 most viewed youth production, the Pokemon Theme Music Video (#2

over all).¹ With over 20 million viewings in just over one year, this video has made its 19-year-old producers Anthony Padilla and Ian Hecox among the early success stories in the new world of grassroots media production (www.smosh.com). An earnest display of lip synching and amateur dance moves, this video is endearing and silly, perhaps a testament of yearning nostalgia for lost childhood, but more likely just a couple of guys hamming for the camera. Their notoriety has increased traffic to their Web site, a promotional and commercial vehicle for smosh shirts and hoodies. Winners of a recent contest at smosh received iconic t-shirts with the logo, “The Pledge. You will learn nothing useful here.” Not to detract from the determined good fun of smosh productions, their appeal is to an audience of leisure seekers, apparently the majority audience of Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube. But the youth audience is a hybrid one. Not only does the audience include a spectrum of shades of difference, individual viewers/participants can draw on an array of video resources, some frivolous, some deeply serious. Indeed, it is an audience willing to learn, as long as learning can be made fun.

As we race to understand and respond to the new literacies required for the new media, privileged young people – middle class kids with modems - are involved in one of the most extraordinary peer to peer learning experiments in human history. This is a just in time pedagogy environment involving millions of people with access in real time to what one another are saying, where the activity of learning to play and playing to learn is supplemented by the use of cheat sheets, queries to peers and consulting resources

¹ Postscript: This video has fallen victim to the copyright battles that are beginning to heat up over unlicensed YouTube content. In June 2007, the video was removed from YouTube after Shogakukan Production Co. Ltd. threatened YouTube with legal action over copyright infringement despite a parody fair use claim by the Smosh auteurs (The Utube Blog, 2007).

offered by Web 2.0 sites as well as the Web at large. Rather than a predetermined, standardized curriculum, just in time pedagogy on the Web is learning on demand, user-centred, task-driven and immediately applicable. Jim Gee describes the just in time principle among 36 learning principles he derives from the learning communities developed by video game players: “The learner is given explicit information both on-demand and just-in-time, when the learner needs it or just at the point where the information can best be understood or used in practice” (211). Of course, every student who has ever raised an arm in class to get clarification or elaboration on a question has taken advantage of just in time pedagogy, but the point is that the online world treats teaching and learning as activities virtually always undertaken mid-task, hence just in time pedagogy is an operating principle. One does not read an entire user’s manual before using an application or a technology. Rather one tends to boot up and follow intuition as far as possible before seeking out instruction.

Young people are among the many who have begun to inhabit the Web and populate it with visual, audio, print and multimodal texts. The problem, however, is that amidst the massive data flow online worldwide, apparently 1.5 billion gigabytes per year (adding up to 2.5 million megabytes per person on earth), much of what is said goes unheard, that in effect the pursuit of attention is more significant than the pursuit of communication (Lanham, 2006). We are still in relatively uncharted waters, multiple cartographers of the new medias and new literacies notwithstanding. For this reason, it warrants caution to not get caught up in the allure of new platforms and new contexts of cultural production, but to look at how youth are articulating themselves in the liminal spaces between and

around texts. Here, the active audience helps to focus and distribute attention through folksonomy tools (Jenkins, 2006), rating, favoriting and tagging that which deserves attention, for whatever reason. Lanham's *Economics of Attention* interests me for another reason as well, because it is precisely a sense of deficit in the attention economy that fuels the imaginary of youth anomie and the generative, albeit fictional space recorded in the Generation X literature at the end of the last century (Hoechsmann, 1996). Youth anomie as imaginary construct feeds both ways; it is at once proof or evidence both of adult indifference and youth slackerdom. Outside of a real appreciation for youth cultural production, generations of adults misinterpret youth intentions and practices, while youth sense indifference and inattention to their needs and desires. It is a vicious circle, as real as the set of symbolic exchanges that occur in the circuits of consumption. There, the opposite happens. Adults, or more specifically marketers, spend great resources and time trying to understand youth. While Lanham helps us to identify the new conditions of scarcity, not of information, but of attention, it is precisely this that youth have been clamouring for throughout the years, both at a biographical level as young people growing up and at a generational, sociological level as a social demographic.

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