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Participation From Above and Below:
The Contours and Contradictions of Audience Participation,
From Video Games to Social Media

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Sociology

by

Gary Yeritsian

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Participation From Above and Below:
The Contours and Contradictions of Audience Participation,
From Video Games to Social Media

by

Gary Yeritsian

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Stefan Bargheer, Co-Chair

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This dissertation comprises three case studies of audience participation in media, addressing in turn Web 2.0, fan culture, and video games. The overarching theoretical framework highlights the dynamics between participation ‘from above’ and ‘from below,’ emphasizing the fact that participation is managed, controlled, and commodified on the one hand, and holds the potential for autonomy, creativity, and resistance on the other. This framework represents a synthesis of existing approaches to the study of audiences, bridging accounts of ‘participatory culture’ and ‘audience autonomy’ with those emphasizing the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ and the ‘social factory.’ The first constituent chapter is a study of the ideology and practice of Web 2.0 platforms, centering on a thematic analysis of managerial literature that finds such platforms to be extensions of what Boltanski and Chiapello term the ‘new,’ ‘participatory’ spirit of capitalism. The second chapter explores the contestation that arises within brand communities between managers and consumers; more specifically, it takes up the case of professional wrestling fan culture, developing a historical

analysis of how company efforts to arouse and contain fan participation within sanctioned parameters clash with fan efforts to organize via online and offline communities to alter the direction of wrestling storylines. The final chapter draws upon contemporaneous newspaper articles and interviews with gamers to understand the earliest American home video games as a historical milestone in the emergence of participatory media consumption. The conclusion considers each case study in light of the framework of participation from above and below, ultimately connecting this discussion to the problem of structure and agency in social theory.

The dissertation of Gary Yeritsian is approved.

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2019

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INTRODUCTION

THREE STUDIES OF AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

This dissertation probes the sociological dynamics of the emergence of audience participation in recent media through the lens of an original theoretical framework highlighting the relationship between participation ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’ The core of the dissertation comprises three case studies, of Web 2.0, fan culture, and video games respectively. In this introduction, I provide broad theoretical background to the underlying questions animating these studies. I first present an account of Henry Jenkins’ work, most notably his concept of ‘participatory culture.’ I then place this into dialogue with Jose Van Dijck’s political economy critique, emphasizing the commodification of cultural participation. This political economic dimension is deepened in the autonomist Marxist conception of the ‘social factory’ and Boltanski and Chiapello’s ‘participatory spirit of capitalism,’ both situating participation in broad social processes of value extraction. I propose that participation needs to be understood – through a combination of these perspectives – in terms of both its democratic, bottom-up potentialities and its managerial, exploitative ones. I move on to introduce

the case studies, which serve as a means of developing this theoretical account through concrete empirical investigation.

Jenkins and Participatory Culture

In recent decades, scholars of media and communication have pointed to increasing opportunities for audience and user participation in contemporary media forms. The most prominent figure arguing for this position has been Henry Jenkins, known for his work on ‘participatory culture.’ His first major foray into this area, *Textual Poachers* (1992), examined how television fans actively manipulated and constructed meanings in their engagement with mass media content. Drawing on Michel De Certeau’s (1984) account of active reading as ‘poaching,’ Jenkins explores how fans not only interpret content dynamically but also create their own. Referring to Howard Becker’s (1982) famous concept, he writes, media fandom constitutes

its own distinctive Art World ... founded less upon the consumption of pre-existing texts than on the production of fan texts... [Science fiction] conventions are also a marketplace for fan-produced artworks and a showcase for fan artists. Fan paintings are auctioned, zines are sold, performances staged, videos screened, and awards are given in recognition of outstanding accomplishments. (Jenkins, 1992: 48)

Thus, going beyond Stuart Hall’s (1980) notion of ‘oppositional reading’ – which still centers on the ‘dominant’ text – fans of shows like *Star Trek* make up a community of producers creating their own art.

By the time of his 2006 book, *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins had more fully elaborated the concept of ‘participatory culture,’ noting that it

contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as

participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands. (2006: 3)

Rather than being a purely ‘new media’ phenomenon, moreover, participation takes place within the context of convergence between old and new. The show *American Idol* is a major reference point here, as it was featured on ‘old’ broadcast media while incorporating a comparatively novel dimension of audience participation, via fan voting on singing contestants. Nonetheless, the proliferation of media outlets, a development that Napoli (2011) refers to as ‘media fragmentation,’ has been crucial: ‘a move from three major networks to a cable environment with hundreds of more specialized channels and the introduction of alternative forms of home entertainment, including the Internet, video, DVD, and computer and video games’ (Jenkins, 2006: 66). Fragmentation, especially online, has enhanced opportunities for participation.

At the same time, Jenkins does not present an entirely rosy picture of these developments, as implied by his broad reputation as a new media ‘booster.’ He frames the ostensible ‘democratization’ of media as being more complex, driven by a managerial strategy of building a loyal and active consumer base as much as any effort to empower ordinary people. On the whole, though, his perspective is largely optimistic, underlining the potentialities afforded by new technologies and platforms for users to create individually and collaborate collectively.

Jenkins’ 2013 book, *Spreadable Media*, pays special attention to the latter dynamic, namely the networked aspects of participatory culture: “‘Spreadability’” refers to the potential — both technical and cultural — for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes’ (Jenkins et al., 2013: 3). The growing technological affordances allowing the spread of ‘viral’ content, moreover, point to the expansion of participatory culture from a niche phenomenon, as with the case of fan fiction communities

discussed in *Textual Poachers*, to one in which almost all media consumers are involved in the creation and sharing of messages (even if those might be as simple as tweets or Facebook updates).

Political Economy Critique of Jenkins

Jenkins' work has faced pointed critique from a number of perspectives, most notably scholars drawing on political economy, like Jose Van Dijck and David Nieborg (2009). Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009: 868) compare the tone and content of Jenkins' work to 'manifestoes' written by Web 2.0 gurus: 'Jenkins is unequivocally positive about the power of millions of active internet users to provide an alternative source of creativity and information.' A main component of ideology-critique in their examination of management literature is to problematize the notion that all users are equally creative and participatory. They point to hints of this perspective in Jenkins' early, optimistic accounts of fan culture, growing into a celebration of the much richer participatory possibilities afforded by the web:

While he clearly assumes creative fandom as his guiding principle for hailing Web 2.0, it remains unclear whether he defends a cultural model or a business model; in fact, the distinction between the two is rendered entirely irrelevant because they converge beyond distinction. (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 868)

Jenkins' lack of attentiveness to material dynamics, then, tends to obscure the economic drivers and dimensions of participation.

While Van Dijck and Nieborg acknowledge that Jenkins pays lip service to the idea that participation is unequal and varied across users, they contend that he obscures the fact that most users are passive while a relatively small minority takes on the role of active creators. Moreover, the master category of participation occludes the *variety* of forms of participation, and their implications: '*Convergence Culture* trumpets the virtues of active users as creative fans, 'spoilers', citizen journalists and grass

roots political organizers without ever discussing the different (economic or ideological) interests of various kinds of users' (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 868). In sum, participation takes on the character of a new hegemonic reality; implicitly, this critique targets the 'epochalist' tendency in Jenkins work, the implicit and sometimes explicit welcoming of a Brave New World (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 868).

Jenkins, from this perspective, does offer some convincing cases of participation that upset the status quo or people in power – the spreading of the Abu Ghraib torture photos, grassroots campaigns run through Move On – but fails to situate them in political economic terms to grasp how general of a phenomenon such forms of participation are relative to comparatively mundane ones. Instead, the cultural and economic become conflated in a theoretically murky way:

While Jenkins' cultural theory includes statements acknowledging the relevance of economic and ideological diverging interests, he hardly allows political economy to get in the way of claiming the universal hegemony of convergence culture. In more than one way, his theory peculiarly mirrors the rhetoric of contemporary Web 2.0 business manifestos. (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 870)

Van Dijck's critique takes on overlapping Marxist and structuralist dimensions here. In terms of the former, she wants to remain attentive to the material determinants of cultural and ideological phenomena, and, broadly speaking, to root culture in economy. In so doing, she treats political economy as constituting a social structure that anticipates and shapes the activity of agents, in this case Web 2.0 users. The latter are thus treated as much more determined than determining.

So what, for her, are the actual coordinates of contemporary user participation, and how do they differ from the more utopian or optimistic thread that characterizes much of Jenkins' work? For one

thing, while new media users indeed ‘participate,’ this does not mean that older media forms engendered an inert or passive audience. For example, the

popularity of personal and communal media (home movies, home videos, community television) has profoundly affected television culture, particularly since the 1980s. What is different in the digital era is that users have better access to networked media, enabling them to ‘talk back’ in the same multimodal language that frames cultural products formerly made exclusively in studios. (Van Dijck, 2009: 43)

Moreover, the fact that such participatory affordances exist does not mean that everyone makes equal use of them. Just as old media consumption was not necessarily passive, new media ‘prosumption’ is not necessarily active. Upwards of 80% of users on user generated content sites tend to be ‘passive recipients,’ while perhaps a fifth constitute ‘active creators’ (Van Dijck, 2009: 44). Additionally, while some of these users might become more active citizens through online political engagement – a point underlined by Jenkins in his discussion of online information and advocacy campaigns – collaboration and sharing are just as likely, if not more likely, to take place within family, friend, and taste networks rather than more ‘impersonal’ political networks (Van Dijck, 2009: 51).

Whatever the networks in which participation takes place, it is never ‘pure’ but rather always managed and directed by a site’s interface. Algorithms figure centrally in this process. As Van Dijck (2009: 45) writes,

YouTube users are steered towards a particular video by means of coded mechanisms which heavily rely on promotion and ranking tactics, such as the measuring of downloads and the promotion of popular favorites. The site’s users indeed serve as providers and arbiters of content – both unwittingly by means of download counts and consciously by rating and

commenting on videos – but rankings and ratings are processed with the help of algorithms, the technical details of which remain undisclosed.

Finally, the comparatively ‘passive’ function of providing data for platforms – through views, likes, and shares – is more economically significant than the ‘active’ function of actual content creation.

In sum, Van Dijck shines a light on the material determinants, dimensions, and limitations of user participation in a much more systematic way than Jenkins’ more rosy account. Theorists of the Italian autonomist Marxist tradition, on whom she occasionally draws, offer further insight into the political economy of consumer participation, and its relationship to advanced forms of capitalism, through such concepts as ‘immaterial labor’ and the ‘social factory.’

The Autonomist Perspective

Adam Arvidsson (2005, 2006) is among the most influential researchers in consumer and media studies whose work is rooted in Italian autonomist Marxist theory. In understanding the ‘active’ and ‘participatory’ consumers of advanced capitalist economies, he relies centrally on the notion of ‘immaterial labor.’ This concept describes the increasing salience of communicative, informational, and affective factors in material production and reframes as labor forms of productive activity not traditionally considered such – e.g., creative production, affective and communicative exchange, and domestic work (with the last of these, in a thread running back to Engels [1972], viewed as reproducing successive generations of labor-power) (Terranova, 2000: 41). Per Michael Hardt (1996: 4), ‘capital is moving away from dependence on large-scale industries toward new forms of production that involve more immaterial and cybernetic forms of labor, flexible and precarious networks of employment, and commodities increasingly defined in terms of culture and media.’

Arvidsson (2005) applies these concepts to an understanding of the social logic of contemporary branding. He argues that brand meaning and value are the result of capturing a ‘social surplus’ generated by the autonomous sociality of consumers, who engage with brands much more dynamically than had been the case in the past. Contra the older logic of brand managers dispensing messages to consumers via broadcast media, contemporary brands ‘invite’ the consumer to participate, create, and share, and then recuperate the value they create. He describes the brand management strategy thusly:

brands are inserted into the life-world as means of production, and consumers are encouraged to use them in their production of an ethical surplus. Then two strategies are possible: one, it is ensured that the ethical surplus thus produced evolves in particular directions, towards the reproduction of particular forms of life that can be embodied and anticipated by the brand and its logo; two, the autonomous productivity of consumers is used as a source of innovation. (Arvidsson, 2005: 249)

On this analysis, then, audiences, users, and consumers, are not simply ‘engaging’ or ‘participating’ vis-à-vis cultural objects and brands, but rather involved in a kind of work. Their collaborative creativity helps to shape the meaning of the brand and to generate value for it. Thus, if one visits a Starbucks with friends and shares a subsequent photo of the encounter on Facebook, one is helping to define Starbucks’ brand meaning and the sociality of the interaction is ‘captured’ through its association with the brand name. This mode of analysis is a structuralist one, tending to point to ways in which ostensible consumer agency is subsumed by ‘informational’ (Castells, 1996) or ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean, 2010).

As Maurizio Lazzarato (1996: 133) argues in this vein, ‘immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work” — in other words, the kinds of activities involved in

defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.’ Thus formal work itself has become more informational and communicative, while leisure has been increasingly subsumed into processes of capitalist valorization. The result is a ‘social factory’ in which commodification pervades all corners of society.

One prominent way in which these ideas have been linked to cultural participation has been through the concept of ‘digital labor’ (Scholz, 2013). On this perspective, which overlaps with Arvidsson’s argument about the consumer production of brand value, social media and Web 2.0 users, while ostensibly engaging in voluntary leisure activity, are performing labor for the platform insofar as the content they create and the data associated with it generate value that is recuperated by the site. As with Arvidsson, social action is understood here through the lens of a Marxist critique which aims to unearth its material underpinnings; to the extent that, for example, identity construction takes place through the media of brands and web platforms, ‘Capital feeds directly off life itself’ (Arvidsson, 2005: 252).

This line of analysis is more ambitious than that proposed by Van Dijck; whereas she focuses on more ‘concrete’ material dynamics like rates of user participation and modes of data monetization, the autonomists aim to go one step further, tying these more observable phenomena to underlying shifts in the organization of capital and labor. In the process, they risk going too far, especially in stretching the concept of labor. On their view, labor, both material and immaterial, produces not only goods and services, but social life; it is the ‘source of sociality itself, the material out of which all our social relations are woven’ (Hardt, 1996: 6). Hardt and Negri (2000) propose essentially the same theoretical framework in elaborating their concept of ‘Empire.’ Under Empire, capital is no longer confined to formal workplaces, as production tends toward *detrterritorialization*; the site of production shifts from the assembly line to the network, and it becomes more deeply integrated with the circuit

of consumption (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 295-6). For Hardt and Negri, capital's rule permeates the social field, capturing value from productive activities carried out throughout that field. Capital is 'everywhere and nowhere.' There is no 'outside' to Empire's logic (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 190).

These more philosophical framings risk conceptualizing all forms of human activity and interaction as 'labor,' rendering the concept too broad to be analytically useful. However, Arvidsson and the digital labor theorists generally avoid this trap, given their linking of these ideas to quite concrete processes of value co-creation on the web and within the cultural industries. They succeed in re-thinking particular forms of leisure activities as labor, given that those activities are surveilled, managed, and commodified by cultural and internet firms.

Boltanski and Chiapello

A related but distinct effort to connect the notion of labor 'participation' to contemporary capitalism comes in Boltanski and Chiapello's very influential book, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007). On their account, advanced capitalism has steadily reorganized economic production since the late 1960s so as to make it increasingly participatory and affectively and aesthetically engaging for employees. This reorganization came as a response to the 'artistic critique of capitalism' that played a major role in fueling the popular rebellions of the 1960s. That critique had targeted the oppressiveness of capitalism, framing the system as an obstacle to people's capacity to attain personal authenticity and self-realization. In place of the bureaucratic workplace oriented around top down command and clear hierarchy, emerged a post-68 model of production that was networked and horizontalist, encouraging individual employees to invest psychologically in their work. The tradeoff for this increase in employee *autonomy* – representing, in effect, an incorporation of the artistic critique into the system – was a decline in the *security* associated with organized, bureaucratic capitalism, which aimed to guarantee its workers a stable, life-long career, accompanied by the benefits provided by

robust welfare states. Instead of remaining attached to a secure career, workers tended to jump from job to job, ‘project’ to ‘project,’ while neoliberal reforms eroded the welfare state.

The authors argue that the sequential ‘spirits’ have developed historically in response to and interaction with prominent critiques of capitalism. These critiques themselves fall into two basic categories, each linked with a particular social stratum. The *social* critique, from the perspective of which the capitalist system is unjust because it produces economic inequality and encourages egoism, is historically associated with the working class. The *artistic* critique, from the perspective of which capitalism engenders alienation and hinders individual autonomy, authenticity, and liberation, is historically associated with middle-class intellectuals, artists, and students. Thus the second spirit of bureaucratic capitalism itself incorporated the Communist ‘social critique’ according to which the system was unjust, inegalitarian, and anarchic. Under the second spirit, firms were conceptualized as being part of a collective social project – and in alliance with the welfare state, they sought to guarantee economic security. ‘Organized,’ bureaucratic welfare state capitalism, especially in the period of the long postwar boom, aimed to serve the common good and protect basic living standards within a market society (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 86-9). The authors thus emphasize the flexibility and adaptability of capitalism, its capacity to ‘assimilate’ critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: xv).

In formulating this framework, Boltanski and Chiapello by turns lean on and break with the work of classical sociologist Max Weber. Contra Weber’s (1981) ‘whip of hunger’ thesis, the authors hold that one cannot simply assume that workers are willing to be subjected to exploitation as a result of economic necessity – understanding capitalism’s capacity to absorb critique and opposition requires an appreciation of how the system functions in terms of *hegemony*, that is, with respect to its capacity to mobilize *workforce participation*. (Thus, they do follow early Weber [2002] in maintaining that people

need a cogent moral and ideological rationale, some regnant justificatory ‘spirit,’ for ‘rallying to capitalism’ [Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 8-9]). Under ‘post-68’ capitalism, employees are urged to seek personal fulfillment and self-realization through participation in a series of projects, rather than remaining bound to a lifelong career. This new variant of capitalism has absorbed the artistic critique of the May 1968 rebellion, developing within its circuits of production mechanisms through which ‘individual authenticity’ might be achieved through personally fulfilling, ‘participatory’ work.

The empirical core of their study is a comparative discourse analysis of French managerial literatures from the 1960s and 1990s, based on which the authors argue for the emergence of a new, ‘post-68’ spirit of capitalism. Whereas the pre-68 texts reflect the logic of hierarchical bureaucratism typical of post-WWII ‘managerial’ capitalism, the post-68 texts privilege ‘networks’ (markets) over hierarchies (organizations), polemicize against planning, and celebrate the global competitiveness and rapid technological development characteristic of an increasingly multinational capitalism. This new spirit aims to motivate employees to ‘rally’ to capitalism, reframing work in terms of individual authenticity, fulfillment, and most centrally, *participation*. And while the empirical analysis is centered on France, the authors suggest that ‘basically rather similar processes have affected the principle industrialized countries in the Western world’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: xxi).

What this somewhat grand historical argument suggests is that participation itself can become a technology of power, a mode of organizing the work process such that capital can maintain hegemony vis-à-vis labor. The latter becomes bound to the production process ‘psychologically,’ viewing it as a means by which to attain fulfillment and self expression. Working class solidarity is broken down as workers are individualized, each encouraged to see himself as a kind of entrepreneur engaging in a series of ‘projects.’

To the extent that the new spirit of capitalism involves the management of labor, then, it can be applied to the forms of immaterial, collaborative, creative, and digital labor performed by users and consumers. The work of the user is framed as fun and creative, obscuring the fact that the value generated is being captured by the firm. Economic alienation, *stricto sensu*, prevails – as producers are estranged from their products – while the *process* of production is rendered less alienating and more engaging.

Theoretical Synthesis: Participation From Above and Below

Having laid these theoretical foundations, I propose here a theoretical synthesis that aims to combine the best of the perspectives discussed, not with the goal of mere ‘eclecticism’ but rather aiming at a richer and more multifaceted account of cultural and user participation.

I submit that what emerges from a combination of these frameworks is the notion of *participation from above and from below*. New media *have* opened up genuine participatory possibilities for ordinary people to make culture in a bottom-up way. But participation is also a modality of power and commodification, subject to managerial direction, control, and exploitation.

There is little doubt that Jenkins brings to light some very significant developments in contemporary media and culture. The media fragmentation that has proliferated in recent decades and accelerated in the digital era has transformed the mediascape. Ordinary people are able to produce culture and most importantly, as Napoli (2010) emphasizes, they have greater access to means of *distribution* (especially via the Internet) than had been the case prior. The fan cultures that were possible with respect to ‘older’ media forms like broadcast television have proliferated with the affordances offered by digital media. And in an expansion of the classic cultural studies treatments of the ‘active

audience' and 'oppositional reading,' audiences are much more frequently *creating* content now, as the divide between production and consumption blurs.

At the same time, Van Dijck's critique holds significant analytical value, as she probes more deeply than Jenkins into the actual nature of this new participation. Jenkins does not pay sufficient attention to the economic dynamics of participation, instead focusing almost entirely on culture. He does not interrogate the inequalities that obtain in online participation in particular, or theorize the very different forms participation can take (e.g., voting on *American Idol* contestants is very different from maintaining an oppositional blog in an authoritarian country). Moreover, he fails to systematically theorize the ways in which participation is managed and directed, both by human and non-human systems (platform and brand managers, in the former respect, and technological and algorithmic assemblages, in the latter). Jenkins' broad 'epochalism' (Morozov, 2014) tends to swallow up these distinctions.

The autonomists successfully enrich Van Dijck's materialist account, broadening out from a 'media studies' focus to a larger sociological framework that locates participatory culture within the new capitalism. Framing user activity as immaterial labor helps to highlight its commodification while connecting it to other types of informal, affective, and communicative activity, for example in the service economy. The autonomist concept of the 'social factory' jibes well with Boltanski and Chiapello's 'new spirit of capitalism,' which combines economic exploitation and insecurity with increased participation and autonomy of labor.

These twin dynamics, participation and exploitation, autonomy and management, point to what I am arguing is the dual nature of contemporary cultural participation, its simultaneous 'from below' and 'from above' tendencies.

Case Studies

The three case studies comprising this dissertation aim to explore, within three distinct media environments, these dynamics of participation from above and below. The first chapter, dealing with the ideology and practice of Web 2.0 firms, derives directly from the framework elaborated by Boltanski and Chiapello. Just as they rely on an analysis of managerial literatures to understand shifts in the logic of capitalism, I carry out an analysis of Web 2.0 managerial texts to understand the contemporary organization of digital capital and digital labor. I find three core frames structuring the ideology of these texts – user participation, networked collaboration, and social transformation. More than ‘just’ ideology, moreover, these frames are connected to practical business models that capture value produced by participatory users. I argue that the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ has spread to the web, expanding both spatially and temporally in the process. Rather than only reframing and reorganizing the labor of formal workers during the working day, it has pervaded the 24/7 social factory of contemporary digital capitalism, capturing the creative and collaborative activity of hundreds of millions of online users.

The second study, dealing with the culture of wrestling fandom, was the initial source of the broad theoretical framework encompassing the dissertation. It examines the ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ features of professional wrestling, understanding it as a medium in which fans are both subject to managerial control and have the potential for collective autonomy. I trace the development of key storylines within World Wrestling Entertainment from 2014 to 2016 and explore the extent to which these ‘official’ narratives were altered and affected by fan participation. I find that such ‘participation from below’ proved very effective both in live arenas and online, as critiques developing on forums like Twitter manifested in the form of live reactions by audiences, and vice versa. Ultimately, I

contend that the WWE's effort to forge an online and offline 'brand community' from above continually comes up against autonomous and unsanctioned fan initiatives.

The final empirical chapter explores yet another media form, early American home video games, understanding them as an important historical moment in the development of 'prosumption' (active or 'productive' consumption). I aim to understand the prosumer as a technologically co-constituted mode of mediatized subjectivity. To get at this empirically, I draw upon an original dataset of 1970s newspaper articles and eleven semi-structured interviews with gamers of this period. The core categories of analysis I develop to understand the sociocultural reception and experience of these game systems are participation, player imagination, and computerization. The last of these points to the ways in which video games anticipated personal computing and helped to give rise to the kind of subjectivity whose apotheosis one finds in the networked user of today, always and everywhere tethered to interactive technology.

To conclude, I offer some reflections on each chapter through the lens of the overarching theoretical framework of contested participation.

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CHAPTER ONE

WEB 2.0 AND THE NEW SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

Chapter Abstract

This chapter locates social media management literature in relation to broader shifts in management ideology. While studies of recent management ideology have highlighted its emphasis on the participation and autonomy of labor, they have largely failed to address how similar discourses have developed with respect to the informal ‘digital labor’ of social media users. I argue that the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ has spread from the formal workplace to the internet, and from the employee to the user. More specifically, I carry out a thematic analysis of ‘Web 2.0 manifestoes’ that finds them to be animated by three central ‘frames’: (a) user *participation*; (b) the pooling together of the contributions arising from that participation via the *network*; and (c) the resulting *transformation* of business and society. I conclude by pointing to the persistence of these sorts of ‘normative’ managerial discourses around social media, even with the recent prevalence of more ‘rational’ data-centered discourses.

Introduction

Numerous studies produced by both theoretically and empirically oriented scholars in recent years have argued for basic shifts in capitalist management discourse (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Castells, 1996; Du Gay, 1996; Fleming, 2009; Sennett, 2006). In one form or another, these studies have developed an account of what Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) term the ‘new spirit of capitalism,’ a set of discourses oriented around the participation and autonomy of labor. Especially prominent in sectors of the economy characterized by ‘symbolic-analytic services’ (Reich, 1991) and ‘informational labor’ (Webster, 2014), the new spirit frames work as an outlet for creativity and self-expression, rather than an activity in which the employee is subject to top-down command and the performance of repetitive tasks. These discourses are aimed at the incorporation of laboring subjects into capitalist work processes.

What such studies have failed to account for is the way in which similar discourses oriented around autonomy have developed and spread with respect to informal, unwaged labor, especially the ‘audience labor’ or ‘digital labor’ that are central to new media (see Andrejevic, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; McGuigan and Manzerolle, 2013; Scholz, 2013; Terranova, 2000, 2004). In particular, firms associated with social media or ‘Web 2.0’ are reliant on the capture and monetization of user activity. Web 2.0 management ideology, in turn, frames user activity on these platforms as fundamentally participatory, while eliding its more exploitative dimensions, suggesting that the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ has spread from the formal workplace to the informal ‘social factory’ of the internet (see Gill and Pratt, 2008).

This chapter aims to develop that argument, first by discussing work that elaborates the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ thesis, and then by linking that literature to the rise of Web 2.0. The empirical core of the study consists of a thematic analysis of a number of widely read Web 2.0 ‘manifestoes,’

understood here as a sample of social media management discourse (see Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009). I find that these texts are oriented around three constitutive frames: *participation*, *network*, and *transformation*. More specifically, according to the manifestoes, the pooling together of user contributions enabled by new media platforms has brought about fundamental social, economic, and cultural shifts. I conclude by locating these findings with reference to Barley and Kunda's (1992) categories of 'rational' and 'normative' management discourse.

The New Spirit of Capitalism

Boltanski and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007) is perhaps the most important of recent studies that have aimed to elucidate the shifting discursive justifications of capitalism in the last several decades. The heart of the work is a comparative discourse analysis of French managerial literatures from the 1960s and 1990s, based on which the authors argue for the emergence of a new, 'post-1968' spirit of capitalism. Whereas the pre-1968 texts reflect the logic of hierarchical bureaucratism typical of post-Second World War 'managerial' capitalism, the post-1968 texts are oriented around a number of common frames: they privilege 'networks' (markets) over hierarchies (organizations), polemicize against planning, and celebrate the global competitiveness and rapid technological development characteristic of an increasingly multinational capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 64–86). The new spirit aims to motivate employees to 'rally' to capitalism, reframing work in terms of individual authenticity, fulfillment, and most centrally, *participation* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 8, 90–9). And while their empirical analysis is centered on France, the authors suggest that 'basically rather similar processes have affected the principle industrialized countries in the Western world' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: xxi).

Boltanski and Chiapello's account of the new discursive formations characteristic of late capitalism resonates with Castells' (1996) notion of the 'spirit of informationalism' attendant to 'informational

capitalism'. That spirit provides an ideological justification for the new capitalism, embracing the ceaseless change associated with virtual culture, "'creative destruction" accelerated to the speed of the optoelectronic circuits that process its signals' (Castells, 1996: 199). This ethos has been especially internalized by 'informational labor,' which has become increasingly salient and socially powerful as the traditional working class has declined, and which has been described elsewhere as 'symbolic analysts,' 'knowledge experts,' and the 'cognitariat' (Webster, 2014: 125).

Sennett (2006) proffers an argument relating the new capitalism to the culture of the 1960s that aligns with the historical logic of Boltanski and Chiapello's framework. While the latter contend that French capitalism has incorporated the 'artistic critique' of May 1968, Sennett makes much the same claim with respect to the way in which mainstream institutions in the US have incorporated the anti-bureaucratic critique of the New Left. Though, like Reich (1991), Sennett (2006: 10) recognizes that the 'new economy' centered on technology, finance, and media represents a proportionally small segment of the whole economy, he holds that it 'does exert a profound moral and normative force as a cutting-edge standard for how the larger economy should evolve.' This 'cultural influence' especially concerns the constitution of self, the navigation of short-term relationships and the migration from job to job. Contra Max Weber's analysis of the militarization of civil society through the rise of large bureaucratic organizations, contemporary capitalism is increasingly characterized by casual and precarious labor, flexibility, greater autonomy of groups and individuals in the workplace, and massive inequality. More flexible organizations have emerged in place of the iron cage, yet unequal power persists, with the 'center controlling the peripheries of power in institutions with ever fewer intermediate layers of bureaucracy' (Sennett, 2006: 81). Ultimately, then, the new capitalism has brought with it increasingly 'networked' forms of production in which power and control are

more subtle but no less real and in which prevailing discourses privilege autonomy, flexibility, and ephemerality.

Barley and Kunda (1992) point to a normative turn in managerial thinking since 1980 that resonates with theories of the new capitalism. The authors tie changes in managerial discourse to structural developments, specifically the ‘decline of traditional industries and the rise of the service economy’ (Barley and Kunda, 1992: 380). New discourses have called for the enrichment and strengthening of organizational cultures within firms that mimic the ‘Japanese corporation’s ability to inspire commitment without sacrificing flexibility and performance’ (Barley and Kunda, 1992: 381). Central to this project has been the enhancement of employee autonomy, with commitment to the firm seen to ensure that workers will put its best interests first. The manager is conceptualized in the new business literature as a ‘mythical hero’ or ‘missionary’ whose chief task is to win employees to a core set of values (Barley and Kunda, 1992: 383). The goal of these managerial strategies is to coopt and integrate ‘workers’ identities, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs’ into the day-to-day operation of the firm, as ‘employees were said to perform more diligently when they were committed to a collective whose ideals they valued’ (Barley and Kunda, 1992: 384).

Finally, Du Gay (1996) and Fleming (2009) highlight the prevailing shift to constructing work as a space of authenticity and incorporation of extra-organizational identity. Accordingly, contemporary management discourse, for Du Gay (1996), centers on the quest for meaning and fulfillment, depicting workers as entrepreneurial selves seeking to construct and project their identities in the realms of production and consumption. For Fleming (2009), managerial injunctions to ‘just be yourself’ draw upon a countercultural, anti-authoritarian ethic in the effort to integrate employees’ nonwork identities into production.

An important question raised by critics of such ‘new capitalism’ theories is whether they pertain only to the rhetorical dimension of the system. Thus, Doogan suggests that Boltanski and Chiapello frequently ‘appear ambivalent about whether they are dealing with the rhetoric of the management literature or the practical reality of change’ (2009: 33). It is clear that discursive shifts are related to structural changes, described variously as ‘techno-capitalism’ (Kellner, 1989), ‘flexible production’ (Kallberg, 2009), ‘flexible specialization’ (Piore and Sabel, 1984) and the Silicon Valley model (Osterman, 1999). *Both* the structure and the ‘spirit’ of the system have changed, in ways that are overlapping and mutually reinforcing and confound mechanical metaphors of base and superstructure. As Du Gay argues, ‘discourses of work reform ... are not merely functional responses to ... existing economic interests or needs ... [T]hey themselves actively “make up” a reality, and create new ways for people to be at work’ (1996: 53). Moreover, Fleming (2009: 24) notes the application of ‘just be yourself’ management practices in call centers, IT and knowledge intensive firms, and consulting companies.

The imbrication of discourse with reality, moreover, points to the way in which new capitalism discourses function *ideologically*, insofar as they comprise a ‘set of symbolic forms and meanings that serves to establish and sustain relations of domination’ (Sarikakis and Thussu, 2005: 1). This claim is in line with earlier work that viewed the notion of the ‘information society’ through the lens of ideology critique (Garnham, 2000; Lyon, 1988; Slack and Fejes, 1987; also see Dean, 2010), though it contrasts with Fisher (2010a), whose analysis of the discourse of *Wired* magazine links it to the new spirit of capitalism. Fisher’s work (2010a, 2010b) deftly argues that network technology discourse legitimates the development of a de-regulated, post-Fordist capitalism in which technology has brought about the end of alienation and has fundamentally altered markets, production, and human beings. While the concerns animating Fisher’s work overlap significantly with this chapter, Fisher

broadly examines network technology discourse, while I am more specifically concerned with Web 2.0 and social media discourse, especially as it pertains to the management of informal digital labor. Furthermore, Fisher proposes a basic distinction between discourse and ideology with which this chapter differs: ‘Unlike “ideology,” “discourse” does not imply the imposition of false ideas on reality in order to plaster over social contradictions; instead, it suggests a dialectical relation between ideas and (material) reality’ (Fisher, 2010a: 235). Ideology is constructed here in the orthodox Marxist formulation as a set of illusions masking ‘real’ social relations (Marx, 1978); however, this is not in line with more sophisticated late Marxist theorizations. Althusser (1970) characterizes ideology as not only illusory but *allusory*, insofar as ideological fantasies are central to the material operation of capitalism through their constitution of individuals as subjects within the social structure. Similarly, for Žižek (1989: 32–3), ideology refers to ‘illusion which is structuring [people’s] reality, their real social activity.’ In these accounts, ideology retains some relation to what Fisher terms ‘false ideas,’ yet it remains a ‘solid reality, an active material force’ (Eagleton, 1991: 26). In this sense, moreover, the empirical reference points for the new spirit of capitalism are simultaneously ideological-discursive and practical-material.

What studies of recent ideological shifts in capitalism have largely failed to take note of, however, are the changing justifications of informal types of labor outside the bounds of the wage relationship, such as the digital labor of users online. The scholarly literature on this type of audience and user labor has been expanding in recent years in communications and media studies, examining the ways in which ostensibly voluntary forms of activity are incorporated as labor into the generation of value by media firms (see Napoli, 2010; Scholz, 2013). It is in the online management discourse that the language of autonomy, creativity, and fulfillment has been extended both spatially and temporally – to the informal, ‘always on,’ radically dispersed workplace of the internet.

Web 2.0 Manifestoes

The new spirit of capitalism – especially insofar as it oriented around the participation and autonomy of labor – finds its most extensively articulated expression in the managerial literature associated with social media and Web 2.0. These media are built upon the capture of value associated with inputs generated by participatory users – value deriving both from the content of these contributions and the data linked to them (Van Dijck, 2009). As Sandoval (2015: 72) notes, for instance, YouTube emphasizes the engagement of its users as central to its business model: ‘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’ (YouTube, 2013: 2).

Moreover, in both popular and academic discourse, the frame of ‘participation’ has been widely applied to new media in general, and social media in particular. Famously, *Time Magazine* named ‘you,’ the social media user, its Person of the Year in 2006, highlighting the diversity of online user activity and content creation:

And we didn’t just watch, we also worked. Like crazy. We made Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars and reviewed books at Amazon and recorded podcasts. We blogged about our candidates losing and wrote songs about getting dumped. We camcordered bombing runs and built open-source software. (Grossman, 2006)

On the academic front, scholars of popular culture like Henry Jenkins have argued that new media herald a profound shift in content production and distribution, auguring a

more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing

media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined. (Jenkins et al., 2013: 2; also see Jenkins, 2006)

Critical media theorist Jose Van Dijck summarizes this line of argument in media studies: ‘The result is a participatory culture which increasingly demands room for ordinary citizens to wield media technologies – technologies that were once the privilege of capital-intensive industries – to express themselves and distribute those creations as they see fit’ (2009: 42–3; also see Sandoval, 2015).

Indeed, the injunctions to worker participation and commitment highlighted by the new capitalism theorists resurface in the business literature associated with social media, most notably the Web 2.0 ‘manifestoes’ analyzed by Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009). In the rhetoric of those texts, not only is the boss-employee hierarchy displaced, but also the producer-consumer binary, supplanted by ‘peer production models [that] will replace opaque, top-down business models, yielding to transparent democratic structures where power is in the shared hands of responsible companies and skilled, qualified users’ (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 855). Below, I examine the discourse of these Web 2.0 manifestoes in light of the broader trends in late capitalist managerial discourse surveyed above, probing the ways in which they thematize participation and link it to the firm’s capacity to generate value.

Data and Method

I draw upon the category of ‘Web 2.0 manifesto’ as developed by Van Dijck and Nieborg, extending their analysis of Web 2.0 discourse to a number of newer texts. Like the two manifestoes Van Dijck and Nieborg focus on, namely *Wikinomics* (Tapscott and Williams, 2008) and *We-Think* (Leadbeater, 2009), these texts are characterized by the ‘triumphant tone of an already-won revolution’ and are ‘structured by universal claims, revolutionary urgency and inclusive pronouns’ in their accounts of social media platforms (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 859, 867). In addition to expanding the scope

of their study empirically, I apply a more methodologically formal approach, *thematic analysis*, detailed below. Theoretically, moreover, I adopt a special focus on the *managerial* logic on display in these texts, conceptualizing them as instances of late capitalist management ideology and connecting them to sociological accounts of the new spirit of capitalism (Van Dijck and Nieborg, by contrast, offer a broader critical analysis that probes how the manifestoes reflect the discourse of a frictionless ‘dot communism’ that bridges community and commerce).

The five other texts I examine are *Macrowikinomics* (Tapscott and Williams, 2010), *The Digital Economy* (Tapscott, 2015), *Crowdsourcing* (Howe, 2009), and two extended articles by Web 2.0 innovator Tim O’Reilly, ‘What is Web 2.0?’ (2005) and ‘Web Squared’ (O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009). All seven texts have been widely read by key figures in online business. Tapscott currently occupies fourth place in a prominent ranking of management thinkers (Thinkers50), and his 2015 book features endorsements by executives at Mastercard, Cisco, LinkedIn, and HP, among many other firms. Leadbeater was ranked as a leading management thinker by the consulting firm Accenture and has advised the British government as well as such companies as Vodafone, Microsoft, and Ericsson (Leadbeater, 2015). Howe is a journalist best known for inventing and popularizing the term ‘crowdsourcing’ (Howe, 2006a). Finally, O’Reilly is an online entrepreneur and investor who popularized the term ‘Web 2.0’ and has organized annual conferences under its banner.

My sampling aims at being empirically *extensive* without necessarily being *exhaustive*. The seven texts all deal centrally with social media and Web 2.0 *specifically*, rather than with the internet or digital technology more generally. By contrast, Chris Anderson’s *The Long Tail* (2006) and *Free* (2009) deal with shifting consumption patterns brought about by online marketplaces, while Kevin Kelly’s *What Technology Wants* (2010) and *The Inevitable* (2016) are broader exercises in technological utopianism. Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody* (2008) does engage centrally with Web 2.0, but it evinces an

intellectual sophistication that elevates it above the category of ideological manifesto, e.g. in its discussion of the massive inequalities that obtain in online participation.

I conducted a *thematic analysis* (Guest et al., 2011) of the seven selected texts that drew upon both a theory-driven and a more inductive component (Boyatzis, 1998). The theory-driven component derived from the centrality of participation to the new spirit of capitalism; thus I was interested in how these Web 2.0 manifestoes thematize participation and link it to the organization and objectives of online firms. The inductive component centered on a close, immersive reading of every text and extensive note-taking as to their key claims. What followed was an iterative process of drawing out shared central frames, or themes, among the texts. Following Stokes (2013: 148–9), then, the three steps I undertook consisted of text selection, immersion, and the analysis proper; following Weerakkody (2009: 271), the frames identified fulfill a number of functions in the discourse: to diagnose, evaluate, prescribe, and predict. Moreover, the analysis falls under the category of ideology critique insofar as it interrogates the ways in which the frames identified sustain and legitimate the new economies that make up Web 2.0 and social media, with the inequalities of power, participation, and remuneration those economies entail (see Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013: 261; Shirky, 2008: 123; Van Dijck, 2009).

Ultimately, I identified three overarching frames, operating respectively at the levels of the individual, the collectivity, and the society. Participation is indeed central in these texts, but it is linked to two other crucial frames: network and transformation (see Table 1). In what follows, I elaborate each of these three constitutive frames – user *participation*, the pooling of the contributions arising through that participation via the *network*, and the resulting *transformation* of business and society – with extensive reference to the manifestoes.

Table 1. Key frames and associated ‘levels’ of sociality.

Discursive frame	‘Level’ of sociality at which it operates
Participation	Individual
Network	Collectivity
Transformation	Society

Participation – ‘You’re the star’¹

First and foremost, the manifestoes construct the individual user as active, playful, and involved, engaging in the creation, remixing, and modification of online content. Accordingly, Tim O’Reilly’s (2005) foundational definition of ‘Web 2.0’ characterizes it as a web in which firms provide an architecture for user engagement and interaction instead of a single software or service. As O’Reilly (2005) writes in ‘What is Web 2.0?’: “There’s an implicit “architecture of participation,” a built-in ethic of cooperation, in which the service acts primarily as an intelligent broker ... harnessing the power of the users themselves.’ Thus, O’Reilly presents the individual as empowered by these technologies rather than a passive appendage to them.

The key to generating value in Web 2.0 is user data, so sites should be organized to gather such data and incorporate user participation by default. Users should be considered ‘co-developers’ of sites that remain in ‘perpetual beta’ mode, designed for ‘hackability’ and ‘remixability’ that render them quickly responsive to feedback (O’Reilly, 2005). Moreover, applications should be interoperable, syncing fluidly from computers to mobile devices. As O’Reilly and Battelle note in their 2009 follow-up, ‘The smartphone revolution has moved the Web from our desks to our pockets ... The scale of participation has increased by orders of magnitude.’ The participatory functions of the web, then, have multiplied radically, as has the capacity of firms to capture and monetize the resulting participatory activity.

Analogously, in *Wikinomics*, Tapscott and Williams (2008: 19, 32) argue that the ‘publish and browse’ internet of Web 1.0 – in which users remained comparatively passive – has been transformed into the ‘read/write’ internet of Web 2.0. Consumers have become ‘prosumers,’ ‘co-creators,’ ‘peer producers’; this is especially the case among younger ‘digital natives,’ as one Pew survey cited by the authors characterized over half of online teens as ‘content creators’ (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 52). Blog, wiki, peer-to-peer, and personal broadcasting sites have given previously ‘passive buyers of editorial and advertising ... active, participatory roles in value creation,’ shaking up traditional business models (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 14). Ultimately, Web 2.0 alters the basic coordinates of individuals’ relationship to economy, culture, and society:

You’re no longer just a passive recipient of products and services. You can participate in the economy as an equal, cocreating value with your peers and favorite companies to meet your very personal needs, to engage in fulfilling communities, to change the world, or just to have fun! (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 150)

Leadbeater describes these phenomena by reference to the web’s facilitation of a ‘massive expansion in individual participation in culture and the economy. More people than ever will be able to take part, adding their voice, their piece of information, their idea to the mix’ (2009: 6). By contrast to the ‘one-way traffic’ of old media, Web 2.0 allows many more individuals to initiate and take part in conversations on subjects about which they are passionate (Leadbeater, 2009: 30). A participatory logic (with varying degrees of collaboration) has spread throughout the new web, fundamental to video sharing and social media sites, online game communities like Second Life and World of Warcraft, and the musical culture of the new ‘rip, mix, burn generation’ (Leadbeater, 2009: 46). The social web allows ordinary people the ‘freedom to express oneself through creative work ... [to] use computers, software, cameras and other equipment to create pictures, music, films, games, animated

cartoons and web pages, to connect to an audience and to find collaborators' (Leadbeater, 2009: 218). The end result of this may not be monetary compensation for users – in spite of the profits their work generates for Web 2.0 platforms – but symbolic rewards, specifically a 'new way to win recognition for being a good player, programmer, filmmaker, singer, composer, citizen, writer, scientist, researcher and so on' (Leadbeater, 2009: 230).

Rather than view this dynamic as exploitative, Leadbeater argues that the lack of monetary compensation is made up for by the symbolic reward of recognition – it amounts, then, to an unpaid variant of the creative, participatory work associated with the new spirit of capitalism. In this vein, Leadbeater acclaims the new category of 'Pro Ams' (professional amateurs):

[T]hey play for the love of it, not for money or fame, but they play to extremely high standards ... It is now easier than ever for Pro Ams in many fields to create, publish and share content – whether in the form of music, film, software or text. (2009: xviii)

This blurring of the boundary between production and consumption also applies to the increasingly active involvement of consumers in the production process: 'they want to be participants in the creation of services they want' (Leadbeater, 2009: 98). Ultimately, We-Think enables unprecedented numbers of people the space in which to create:

That experience of creative and productive freedom, for so long confined to just a few special people working in special places, is being made much more widely available. More people will learn how to be free by expressing themselves. (Leadbeater, 2009: 221)

He highlights here the participatory and democratic potential of Web 2.0 technology, especially insofar as it is linked to the cultural and media industries Sennett (2006) identifies as the cutting edge of the new economy.

Howe's manifesto on 'crowdsourcing' also highlights the emergence of new avenues for creation and prosumption. Crowdsourcing inspires widespread and voluntary participation, drawing on the efforts of those doing work 'simply for the sheer pleasure of helping one another and creating something beautiful,' in both their capacities as creators and as peers evaluating one another's work (Howe, 2009: 8). Moreover, ties between companies and consumers that allow the latter to become active prosumers render the economy more democratic, decentralized, and participatory. These social dynamics further highlight the effectiveness of non-economic incentives for purposes of motivating labor, as most people participate in crowdsourced projects out of a desire to create and share, not to make money: '[p]eople derive enormous pleasure from cultivating their talents and from passing on what they've learned to others' (Howe, 2009: 15). As with Leadbeater, the emphasis on non-monetary rewards constitutes an implicit argument against the notion that Web 2.0 is a form of exploitation – people *are* being compensated, just not monetarily.

Beyond its economic value for firms, moreover, crowdsourcing is an effective mechanism whereby creative talent that might otherwise remain unknown or undeveloped is discovered and nurtured; it 'adds to our culture's general store of intellectual capital' (Howe, 2009: 16). Here Howe points toward the way in which inputs generated via user participation are pooled together – a la the horizontal team structures associated with the new capitalism – via the *network*.

Network – 'We-Think'

Individual participation in and of itself has radical potential, but only if combined and accumulated in productive ways. Hence, all of these manifestoes connect participation to some broader logic of collaboration, sharing, or aggregation.

For O'Reilly, individual participation generates a network that aggregates the activity and contributions of countless users and extracts value from them. He cites a number of Web 2.0 firms that exemplify this business model. Thus, though Yahoo does create content such as news, its primary function is as a 'portal to the collective work of the net's users' via its search tools (O'Reilly, 2005). Google has transformed search by utilizing user click information to re-order search results. Amazon sells products, but in the context of an architecture that invites user participation through reviews that improve search results and elicits user input to annotate bibliographical data. Flickr utilizes tags to link together individual photographs, for example of photos taken of the same location. Direct marketing is decreasing in significance, being outpaced by viral marketing in which consumers play an active role. Open source projects such as Linux rely on users to develop and modify software. O'Reilly (2005) offers a concise summation of the new digital landscape, from the perspective of digital capital: 'Network effects from user contributions are the key to market dominance in the Web 2.0 era.'

Similarly, for Tapscott and Williams, participation is not an end in itself but rather part of new business models that draw individual inputs into a web of connectivity. The companies that are ahead of the curve are re-adjusting business models to incorporate user participation into value creation; like O'Reilly, the authors cite Amazon's system of ratings and recommendations and its seller accounts, and Google's ranking of pages based on the 'collective judgments of Web surfers' (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 41). They warn that user contributions and remixing might 'conflict with a company's business imperatives,' as when copyrights are violated, but nonetheless come down on the side of prosumption as generating the 'most uniquely qualified pool of intellectual capital ever assembled,' a resource businesses would be unwise to neglect (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 147). Those claims build on Tapscott's 1995 book *The Digital Economy* (2015)² which, by

contrast to those trumpeting the arrival of an ‘information age,’ famously announced that the internet was bringing into being an age of ‘networked intelligence.’ Rather than focusing exclusively on the impact of digital technology on social life, he highlighted technology’s capacity to gather and harness input from human users.

In this sense, the manifestoes fairly consistently privilege humanism over a pure technological determinism – the technology becomes a means to a human end. Moreover, both the accent on cutting-edge technologies and networked over traditional hierarchical structures of production and exchange echo Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) and Castells (1996) in particular.

For Leadbeater, individual participation is not necessarily a positive phenomenon – rather, it can produce chaos and confusion in the absence of filtering. It is the logic of the network that constitutes the bridge from ‘I-Think’ to ‘We-Think.’ Indeed, much of what is generated online is best characterized as the former: ‘People gathering on social-networking sites, downloading user-generated videos or spouting off into the blogosphere do not create anything resembling collective intelligence. More often than not they produce a deafening babble or a deadening consensus’ (2009: 20). The horizontal collaboration, sharing, and collective evaluation enabled by the web order the messiness of individual contributions and allow people to ‘think together’:

The best way through this plethora of material, to find the person and the information you are looking for, is to rely on We-Think: the power of shared intelligence to sort wheat from chaff, whether through search engines, collaborative filters, wikis, or recommendations from trusted blogs and friends on social networks. (Leadbeater, 2009: 36)

Participation and networked collaboration, then, become mutually reinforcing.

Howe’s notion of crowdsourcing relates fundamentally to the network, referring to the ‘act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an

undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call' (2006b). In historicizing the concept and practice, Howe locates the roots of crowdsourcing in the open source movement. Linux showed, on his account, that the crowd could produce a better platform than a corporate bureaucracy like Microsoft: 'labor can often be organized more efficiently in the context of community than it can in the context of a corporation' (Howe, 2009: 8). Given that the bulk of talent will always lie outside of any single formal organization, this process leverages the fact that the 'crowd will almost always outperform any number of employees' (Howe, 2009: 11). And that secret is increasingly being discovered by some of the world's top companies, as in consumer giant Procter & Gamble's experiments with crowdsourced science, whereby an international network of tens of thousands of scientists takes on broken-up research and development tasks. Just as for Tapscott, what is fundamentally at stake for Howe is not technological innovation per se, but how new technologies enable particular human behaviors, especially networked contributions to complex tasks. He describes in oracular terms the 'potential of the Internet to weave the mass of humanity together into a thriving, infinitely powerful organism' (Howe, 2009: 11) as it creates spaces for new forms of work and collaboration outside of traditional horizontal structures.

Crowdsourcing, then, is a fundamentally organic phenomenon. The network of talent and intelligence is *out there*; the internet is simply a mechanism for firms and institutions to tap into it; thus the web arises 'out of the uncoordinated actions of thousands of people, who were doing things that people like to do' (Howe, 2009: 13). Not only does crowdsourcing open up opportunities for *individual* expression, however; it also taps into humans' basically *social* nature, using 'technology to foster unprecedented levels of collaboration and meaningful exchanges between people from every imaginable background in every imaginable geographical location' (Howe, 2009: 14). Thus, individual work becomes linked together in a community of peers who receive, evaluate, and

improve upon one another's contributions, transforming previously sacrosanct hierarchies around knowledge and culture in this collaborative production process.

And unlike in most occupations, one is not limited to a particular specialty; instead, crowdsourcing takes advantage of the 'far broader, more complex range of talents than we can currently express within current economic structures' (Howe, 2009: 13–14). By tapping into our diverse creative abilities and 'unleash[ing] the latent potential of the individual,' moreover, it may eventually render the notion of a vocation obsolete (Howe, 2009: 14). Ultimately, crowdsourcing is one example of the outmodedness of 'Fordism, the assembly-line mentality that dominated the industrial age,' and is thus part and parcel of a fundamental transformation of economy and society (Howe, 2009: 14). Claims for such a radical transformation, with varying accents, abound in these manifestoes.

Transformation – 'Capitalism 2.0'

Per the logic of these manifestoes, then, the rise of online participation and its aggregation via networks augur the emergence of basic transformations in business and society at large, or even a 'new mode of production.' Tapscott and Williams (2008: ix, 10) thus declare 'wikinomics' to be a 'new mode of production' relying on collaboration that is 'set to change every institution in society,' replacing hierarchical relations with collaborative self-organization. Leadbeater similarly argues for the far-reaching effects of the new model of participation on business, culture, and society. He points to the business implications of user participation, noting the 'low costs' associated with the phenomenon; for instance, 'the most successful games companies sustain communities of millions of players with at most a few thousand employees' – the players provide most of the innovation and labor (Leadbeater, 2009: 100). But he also makes larger claims with respect to the effects of the novel organizational logic of the web:

[P]eople can become organised in new ways, at low cost, without many of the paraphernalia of traditional, hierarchical organizations – head offices, layers of bureaucracy, departments, job titles and so on. That capacity for collective self-expression and self-organisation creates new options for us to become organised, to get things done together in new ways.

(Leadbeater, 2009: xviii)

Like Howe, Leadbeater develops a popularized variant of post-Fordist theory:

The factory encouraged us to see everything through the prism of the orderly production line delivering products to waiting consumers. The web will encourage us to see everyone as a potential participant in the creation of collaborative solutions through largely self-organising networks. (2009: 8)

In place of the Fordist model of ‘managerial capitalism’ might emerge a new organizational base for society that ‘encourages us to share more, to be more collaborative and participative, and in the process extends democracy, equality and freedom’ by incorporating this social dimension into capitalism (Leadbeater, 2009: 24). Leadbeater connects his claims for transformation, then, to a reformist critique of capitalism, and in this sense is the only one of these authors to consider at any length non-commodified potentialities that transcend capitalism.

Tapscott’s (2015) 20th-anniversary edition of *The Digital Economy*, by contrast, delineates the contours of what he calls ‘Capitalism 2.0,’ and thereby systematizes the argument for economic and social transformation more than the other manifestoes. While remaining sensitive to critiques of capitalist inequality leveled by the likes of the Occupy Movement and Piketty (2014), Tapscott suggests that the object of these criticisms is one particular form of capitalism, namely ‘industrial capitalism’ (analogous to Boltanski and Chiapello’s account of pre-1968 capitalism). That formation has become obsolete; in its stead is emerging the ‘social economy’ of Capitalism 2.0, i.e. capitalism

transformed by social media (though it retains such core features as private ownership and market exchange) (Tapscott, 2015: 4).

The changes have not been restricted to the economic arena. Accordingly, Tapscott views 'big government' bureaucracy in much the same way as he views the old vertically integrated corporation, i.e. as an outdated and ineffective organizational form. Thus, he calls for streamlining government and opening it up to social innovation and more continuous citizen feedback and input. This shrinking of government would not, he insists, mean the letting loose of 'completely unfettered market forces' (Tapscott, 2015: 6). Instead, business, for Tapscott, represents one of the four key 'pillars of society,' along with the government, the civic sector – by which he seems to mean civil society – and the individual citizen, newly enabled by the internet (2015: 8). To paraphrase Tapscott's tone and verbiage, business cannot succeed in a failing society; this amounts to the call for the incorporation of participation into capitalism.

The new type of governance Tapscott proposes in place of the old 'Industrial Age' representative democracy is a model in which traditional forms of governance and regulation are enhanced by transparency and active citizen participation, in a way that rides the tide of the new spirit of collaboration already permeating the economy and society. And the shift from industrial capitalism to 'Capitalism 2.0' is indeed epochal, on the order of the transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism (Tapscott, 2015: 8). The substance of this alleged shift, though, does not seem to match the grandness of the rhetoric, significant though some of the changes may be (Tapscott, [2015: 9] specifically cites as evidence for his proposition a number of widely successful companies that have sprung up in recent years, including Facebook, Twitter, Spotify, and Uber – all of these, which Thiel [2014] might refer to as 'zero to one' firms, have indeed shaken up existing industries and business models).

Tapscott argues that digital technology fundamentally alters economist Ronald Coase's transaction cost model of the firm. Specifically, the technology massively reduces transaction costs, thus opening up the firm to innovation from customers, partners, and other actors located outside of its formal boundaries, in an increasingly amorphous and porous business ecosystem. On the old Coasian model:

Amazon is a website with many employees shipping books. Looked at another way, however, Amazon.com is a vast ecosystem that includes authors, publishers, customers who write reviews for the site, delivery companies like UPS ... and tens of thousands of affiliates that market products and arrange fulfillment through the Amazon network. Hundreds of thousands of people are in the Amazon viral marketing network. (Tapscott, 2015: 52)

Instead of firms expanding until the transaction costs of a particular function are greater inside than outside their boundaries (Coase's prescription), they should instead *shrink* until the internal costs of a function are *lower* than the external costs – in line with the proliferation of a web of connections and contract relationships among smaller firms in the new capitalism.

Moreover, Tapscott trumpets social media as bringing about a new era of 'social business,' echoing *Wikinomics*' declaration of a new mode of production in which peers co-create value. By contrast to those who emphasize the collectivist, or even communist, potentialities of the internet, he emphasizes the fact that there are plenty of opportunities available for profit-making.

Accordingly, he presents a schema of seven new business models thrown up by the digital economy, including 'ideagoras' (when companies issue a call for consumers to contribute ideas); 'new Alexandrians' (participatory science); and the 'global plant floor' (the globalization and informatization of manufacturing) (Tapscott, 2015: 84). Moreover, digital technologies have transformed the old unidirectional model of one-to-many marketing to many-to-many 'social

marketing.’ In Capitalism 2.0, the brand amounts to a relationship that develops between a company and its customers, who are part of a firm’s broad ‘business web.’ This entails mass customization – think of how each customer’s experience differs on Netflix and Amazon.com, for example – as well as the integration of the physical and digital marketplace, inputs whereby customers can influence production and marketing, and ultimately, *relationship capital* developed with customers (e.g. Amazon’s recommendation system) (Tapscott, 2015: 89).

Tapscott argues, then, for social media’s transformative effects on business, society, politics, and culture. Just as Martin Luther called the invention of the printing press ‘God’s highest act of grace,’ new communications technology represents a ‘second great act of grace’ that affords us the opportunity to ‘rebuild business and the world’ (Tapscott, 2015: 357–8).

Conclusion

Web 2.0 manifestoes, this chapter has argued, are animated by discourses of engagement and horizontality that extend the management ideology associated with the new spirit of capitalism from the factory and the office to the informal workplace of the internet, and from the employee to the online prosumer. Penned by influential management thinkers, they center on three core frames: participation, network, and transformation. The shared discourse of the manifestoes links individual activity to collaborative networks that are seen as changing the rules of the game for business and society at large. Rather than representing a fundamentally new discourse arising with the web, then, these frames recapitulate and develop the prevailing ideology of ‘post-68,’ ‘networked,’ ‘informational’ capitalism, with its emphasis on the capture of participatory expressions of labor. Moreover, the discourses are bound up with the material practices of social media firms that are oriented around the appropriation of value generated by networked user activity. The new spirit of capitalism, both rhetorically and practically, reaches its apogee online.

With respect to a broader historical perspective on management, Web 2.0 manifestoes fit the coordinates of what Barley and Kunda (1992) term ‘normative’ discourse insofar as they emphasize the *moral* and *cultural* logics of user labor. The authors contrast this with the scientific management of ‘rational’ managerial discourse, positing a cyclical movement back-and-forth between these two logics through the long history of American management. A similar contrast appears in Web 2.0 discourse, as the normative utopian discourses outlined above coexist with more rational and scientific appeals to ‘cloud computing,’ ‘big data’ and ‘data analytics,’ in management literature that is less concerned with the qualitative dynamics of participation and more concerned with the quantitative capture and indexing of that participation. Jenkins et al. (2013: 175) describe this dynamic in terms of a distinction between ‘collective deliberation’ on the one hand and ‘aggregation of user data’ on the other, an analysis paralleled by Van Dijck’s (2013) discussion of the conflation of *connectedness* and *connectivity* online.

The findings of this study strongly suggest, however, that there has not been anything like a total shift to scientific and rational logics of management, given the durability in recent years of discourses characterizing the web as a platform for networked engagement. Social media may be sites for the harvesting of user data, but they also remain, in the language of Tapscott and other management thinkers, spaces of utopian possibility in an increasingly decentered, participatory capitalism.

Notes

1. From Tapscott and Williams (2008: 183).
2. Twentieth anniversary edition. All citations, apart from this one, are to sections of the book added in the 2015 edition.

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CHAPTER TWO

WRESTLING FANDOM AND THE CONTESTATION OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

Chapter Abstract

This chapter draws on work in communication and marketing studies to develop a theory of cultural participation as fundamentally *contested*, between cultural producers who aim to steer and manage the activity of participants via the brand community (*participation from above*) and participants who have the potential to resist and challenge the producers' direction (*participation from below*). It develops this theory empirically with reference to a cultural form in which audience participation plays a central part, professional wrestling. World Wrestling Entertainment aims to direct and contain participation within sanctioned parameters, both online and offline, while fans retain the capacity to develop and voice an effective critique of existing storylines through those same venues. By sampling and examining the key storylines building to World Wrestling Entertainment's marquee event, Wrestlemania, from 2014 to 2016, I show how the logics of participation from above and below interact, and how, ultimately, the production and reproduction of brand community are fundamentally contested.

Thousands of people gathered around a square last night and urged for change. They chanted in unison; they held signs; some of them even threatened to riot. This wasn't a political uprising, however. This was a live taping of WWE's Raw in Chicago and the crowd's cause was to make pro wrestling less dumb. – *Washington Post* (Payne, 2014)

Cultural participation, especially in the accounts given by the likes of Henry Jenkins, has been celebrated as opening up opportunities for ordinary people to engage with and make culture. On those accounts, such opportunities have been enhanced by the development of new media in general and social media in particular, as an increasingly egalitarian and participatory culture empowers the active user (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013). More specifically, these scholars have argued that a shift from the one-to-many logic of mass media to the many-to-many logic of social media has blurred the distinction between audience and content provider. New media, for Jenkins, are the harbinger of a 'more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined' (Jenkins et al., 2013: 2). Others have developed accounts of participatory culture in online fan communities oriented around television shows (Baym, 2000; Kirby-Diaz, 2009), sports teams and stars (Keaton et al., 2015; Liberman et al., 2015), and museums (Axelsson, 2011), among countless other cultural forms.

While Jenkins has widely been considered the biggest 'booster' of social media's participatory potential, his work also speaks in subtle ways of contradictions and tensions in participatory culture. As he stated recently, media producers 'also seek to shape and direct our participation into forms that they see as serving their own interests' (Jenkins et al., 2015: 14). In *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins et al. (2013) discuss this question with reference to Tim O'Reilly's (2005) foundational manifesto, 'What is

Web 2.0' (2005), arguing that that text conflates the collaborative and participatory dimensions of Web 2.0 on one hand with the opportunities it provides for the aggregation and monetization of user data on the other (also see Yeritsian, 2017).

Similarly, in his earlier book *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins links this more managed form of user participation to the construction of brand communities (Jenkins, 2006: 20). These 'brand communities' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) consist of committed, active, and most importantly, loyal consumers. Media firms are no longer solely concerned with exposure, that is, the number of 'eyeballs' on a media product, but increasingly with engagement, that is, how actively consumers relate to the product, as when television viewers discuss a show on an officially branded social media page (Napoli, 2011). These shifts have gone hand-in-hand with the rise of marketing discourses and strategies oriented around 'cult' or 'emotional branding,' aiming to capture value via the management of consumers' desires and commitments (Jenkins, 2006: 61–63, 73).

Brand communities have been the focus of much academic research in recent years, especially in marketing studies – where they have been examined both from mainstream and critical perspectives, the former often combining theoretical and empirical analysis with a consideration of implications for business strategy (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Cova and Pace, 2006; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and Schau, 2005). In their foundational article on the subject, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001: 412) define a brand community as a 'specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand.'

More recent studies have addressed the relationship between brand communities and social media, which marketers have seen as prime space for the construction of brand communities given the enhanced opportunity for consumer engagement with the brand and the sharing of that engagement. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) discuss early uses of social media for the fostering of

brand community, though the cases they cite mostly feature those media as a distribution mechanism from firm to consumer: Warner Bros creating a Facebook site offering clips and trailers for an upcoming film release; Adidas sponsoring a MySpace community; 1-800 Flowers offering ‘virtual bouquet’ delivery. There is less emphasis on a dynamic, back-and-forth relationship between consumer and firm in these cases; instead the firm is using social media for advertising and/or distribution. De Vries et al. (2012) similarly focus on the effectiveness of brand posts (in terms of likes and responses they receive) on official brand fan pages. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012), by contrast, distinguish more traditional center-to-consumer ‘brand storytelling’ from consumers’ improvisatory ‘co-creation of brand performances’ via social media, while Bruhn et al. (2012) discuss the effects on brand equity of user-generated content relating to the brand via social media. These latter studies are examples of work in marketing that is increasingly thematizing a dynamic, back-and-forth relationship between consumer and brand, though they do not theorize this relationship very critically.

That is left to scholars like Arvidsson (2005, 2006), for whom contemporary branding captures the value generated by the autonomous sociality of consumers (as opposed to the older logic of brand messages being ‘dispensed’ to consumers via broadcast media). That sociality is more or less synonymous with Lazzarato’s (1996) ‘immaterial labor.’ For Lazzarato (1996), insofar as cultural consumers are the ‘addressee’ of the product, they play an indispensable role in ‘receiving’ it and interpreting it, thereby ‘[integrating] it into social communication’; their reception is therefore ‘*a creative act*’ (p. 144). The capitalist plays a relatively passive role vis-a-vis these circuits of immaterial labor, reduced to ‘managing and regulating’ the innovation generated by the public/consumer. Critical studies like these carry out the Marxian move of unearthing the social labor that underlies brand community and brand value.

Participation From Above and From Below

What emerges, more implicitly than explicitly, in work on audience and fan studies, considered in relation to the critical literature on marketing and branding, is a *logic of contestation* at the heart of cultural participation. The theoretical aim of this chapter is to examine this logic of contestation in terms of what I call participation *from above* and *from below*. On one hand, the brand aims to foster ‘from above’ forms of managed, controlled, and sanctioned engagement and participation. On the other hand, there exists the capacity ‘from below’ of members of the brand community to individually and collectively voice their own perspectives, develop a critique of the brand, and potentially affect the brand’s behavior and orientation.

This analysis is in line with existing studies that theorize ‘discordant fandom’ (Hewer et al., 2015) and fandom versus ‘brandom’ (Guschwan, 2012), but rather than stage a collision between ‘passions’ on one hand and ‘finance and branding strategies’ on the other, this chapter finds different forms of passion on both sides of the divide: the mobilization and management of passions from above, and their more autonomous emergence and expression from below. The latter, moreover, need not manifest itself in the form of alter or counter brands (Cova and White, 2010) that offer an alternative to the mainstream but rather focus on critiquing and changing the behavior of an existing ‘mainstream’ cultural brand. This arousal of popular passion vis-à-vis the brand also highlights the sociological dimension of emotions, the way in which collective consumer practices partake in shared affects associated with objects of consumption (Illouz, 2009).

Below, I develop this theory of cultural contestation empirically through an exploration of audience participation – in person and online, from above and below – through a case study of a cultural form in which such participation is crucial and is inscribed into the audiovisual text itself, professional wrestling. Wrestling has been a linchpin of American popular culture since the latter

half of the 20th century, with the largest company, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) – which effectively exercises a monopoly in the United States – valued by Wall Street at US\$5 B and drawing millions of television viewers and sellout crowds.

Professional wrestling represents a ‘strategic’ case study (see Merton, 1987) for a number of reasons. First, audience participation is central to this cultural form, insofar as it is incorporated directly into texts and performances. Shows are produced and scripted to arouse particular reactions from the audience at critical dramatic moments: enmity toward a villain who betrays a former friend, shock and excitement at a surprise return, triumph when the protagonist overcomes the odds, and bemusement in comedic moments of the presentation. The conventions of the genre are straightforward, featuring soap opera style narratives in which ‘babyfaces’ (protagonists) and ‘heels’ (antagonists) fight it out in simulated contests over either a personal issue or a championship title. Each storyline builds to the next, as there is no offseason and the fictional universe continues to function ceaselessly with fresh rivalries and matchups being created.

The presence of a live audience encouraged to react loudly and enthusiastically to the content thus makes wrestling more inherently participatory than other cultural forms. Television and film audiences may tweet or blog about their favorite shows but at a significant spatiotemporal distance from one another and from the performance. Contemporary theater audiences may laugh or gasp, but they are certainly not encouraged (or allowed) to react as dynamically as wrestling audiences. Sports audiences are perhaps the most comparable, insofar as they are boisterous and loudly engaged, but legitimate sporting events cannot be scripted to arouse particular kinds of reactions, and those reactions are less likely to affect the decisions of people in positions of managerial authority (a wrestling storyline is more likely to be altered due to fan reaction than a sports team’s roster).

The study will seek to build upon the modest but steadily growing academic literature on the genre. Existing studies have addressed a diverse array of questions regarding professional wrestling, including its Manichean spectacle of moral excess (Barthes, 1972), genre conventions (De Garis, 2005; Jenkins, 2005), racial politics (Rahmani, 2007; Roberts, 2015), constructions of masculinity (Oppliger, 2003), insider jargon (Kerrick, 1980), and the emotional labor of its performers (Smith, 2014). Several of these studies have dealt specifically with wrestling fans, including the 1950s female fan following (Dell, 2006); the complex enjoyment of reality and fakery experienced by ‘smart’ fans (Wrenn, 2007); the emotional engagement of independent wrestling audiences (Hill, 2015); and the online reappropriation of texts by female fans (Salmon and Clerc, 2005).

Scholars frequently comment upon the dynamic nature of fan participation in wrestling. Sammond (2005: 16) notes that wrestling affords fans the opportunity to ‘aggressively intercede in the narrative and aesthetic choices that producers make.’ Hill (2015: 184) highlights fans’ freedom to ‘spontaneously express themselves within the scripting and ritual elements of an event.’ Mazer (1998: 37) argues that wrestling events are structured to arouse and then satisfy particular audience expectations. Finally, Jenkins (2005b: 328) addresses the problem of managing audience reactions and links it to the growth of more savvy communities of fans on the Internet: ‘In the early 1980s, I’m not sure you could have gotten enough strangers together in one section of the crowd to create such a clamor against the grain of the show.’

Such comparatively informal observations, aside, however, none of these studies has theorized in anything like a systematic way the relationship between online and in-person forms of audience participation in wrestling, or the contested dynamic between sanctioned and unsanctioned participation.

Below, I argue that contemporary professional wrestling combines in person and online participation, thus marking an overlap between the two eras and forms of audience autonomy highlighted by Napoli (2011): 19th century theater and 21st century new media. In recent years, arena audiences have become increasingly autonomous, reacting to the product presented to them in unpredictable ways (e.g. booing a top ‘babyface,’ or protagonist, or vociferously cheering performers who they feel are talented but underutilized). This growth in autonomy, moreover, is seen by many observers (see Wrenn, 2007) to be an outcome of the development of a layer of ‘Internet fans’ or ‘smart marks,’ those with more discriminatory tastes who keep up with backstage goings-on via social media sites.

I further argue that this increased autonomy is part and parcel of the fundamentally contested dynamics of participation in the genre. Shows are built around ‘sanctioned’ forms of participation, as live audiences are supposed to cheer the protagonists, jeer the antagonists, and react enthusiastically to storyline surprises and climaxes. Moreover, with WWE developing an elaborate social media strategy, such sanctioned participation takes place online as well, as fans follow performers’ social media pages, tweet using official hashtags, and vote in polls via the company website. I aim to examine the two sides of this picture – how the WWE tries to control and manage audience participation, that is, participation from above, and how it sometimes finds itself caught off guard by an autonomous, unruly, and subversive audience, that is, participation from below (Table 2).

Table 2. Key examples of participation from above and below, online and offline.

	Participation from above	Participation from below
Online	Official social media/brand strategy	Fan critique through Twitter, other social media
Offline	Predictable crowd reactions	Crowds “hijacking” shows

Data and Method

This chapter draws primarily on the interpretive analysis of discursive data, mainly textual but also audiovisual. To understand *offline participation from above* in professional wrestling, I make reference to the basic conventions of the genre, based both on a number of academic articles (e.g. De Garis, 2005) and on my own experiences as a lifelong fan. With respect to the WWE's social media strategy, that is, *online participation from above*, I draw upon company statements and press releases, observations from viewing company content on television and via its streaming service and app, and media discussions of WWE strategy. To understand *participation from below*, both offline and online, I sample the main storyline leading into WWE's marquee event, Wrestlemania, for three successive years from 2014 to 2016, probing the extent to which its trajectory is impacted by fan response. This sampling strategy gets at whether fan response is significant in the *most important* narratives presented (rather than cherry picking marginal cases). In addition to discussing the basic features of the storylines, as evident in television content, I make frequent reference to Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, the leading publication on the industry, in which Meltzer reports not only on storyline developments but on audience reactions and behind-the-scenes happenings. To capture *online participation from below* in a more focused fashion, I cite mainstream media accounts of movements like the 'cancel WWE Network' initiative, and conduct a discourse analysis of posts in key discussions on the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* message board, a hub for hardcore wrestling fans who not only keep up with but are keen to offer their views of on-screen and behind-the-scenes developments. I sample those 'threads' (i.e. discussions) dealing with key events leading up to the Wrestlemania main event matches in the three successive years. Through the combination of these diverse strands of evidence, I develop an historical, interpretive, and 'netnographic' (Kozinets, 2015) account of this cultural form.

Participation From Above: WWE's Social Media and Brand Strategy

As a genre form, professional wrestling relies on arousing and satisfying particular sorts of audience expectations and reactions (Mazer, 1998). The moral logic of pitting the forces of good and evil against one another (Barthes, 1972) means that the audience is supposed to feel sympathy for the protagonist – as the antagonist gets the better of him in a storyline or a particular match – and to cheer on a comeback (convention dictates that both storylines and matches tend to be dominated by the antagonist). Channeling this fan support, the protagonist manages to overcome the obstacles in front of him and to triumph, before the cycle begins all over again when he is matched up with another dastardly opponent. Companies intend for fan response to take the form of the ‘rowdyism’ of 19th century theater audiences (Butsch, 2000), but a rowdyism that contains itself within the parameters of the storyline being presented. Thus, fan participation is an object of *management* and *control*. Management *failures* can take a number of forms. Fans can simply express boredom (often accompanied by chants of ‘boring’) and indifference. They can side with the heels against the babyfaces. They can get behind a lower card performer who is not placed in a featured role by the company. But most of the time, especially prior to the growth of savviness amongst the fanbase in the late 1990s – accompanied by the decline of ‘kayfabe,’ that is, the pretense that wrestling promoters were presenting authentic rather than simulated combat – management of audience reactions basically succeeds, and thus audience participation takes the form of participation ‘from above.’

With the rise of social media, this management of audience participation from above has extended to the management of an online brand community, something which WWE has systematized and made a core part of its business strategy. The company integrates into its presentation frequent references to Twitter, with every show featuring official hashtags in the corner of the screen that the

company encourages fans to tweet, as well as the Twitter usernames of each performer as he or she is being introduced. These hashtags are specific to the current match or segment being presented, and any hashtag or phrase that becomes a leading worldwide Twitter ‘trend’ – which means that it is mentioned frequently in a limited period of time – is highlighted on the show. The company has even used Twitter at points as a medium through which fans can vote on particular match stipulations. In addition, the official WWE Twitter often posts polls to gauge customer satisfaction after major shows.

The WWE also operates an official mobile app that runs live content during its major TV presentations—this app features photos, historical background on performers, polls, and trivia questions. The company refers to use of the app as a ‘second screen experience’ and notes on its streaming service (‘WWE Network’) whether this live app functionality is available for a particular program. The app is aimed at getting viewers engaged, both affectively and *haptically* (see Barris, 2014), with the company’s storylines and performers.

Executive Stephanie McMahon, daughter of owner Vince McMahon, has trumpeted WWE’s primary social media objective as not disseminating content outwards but rather engaging fans, and ‘listening and responding’ to their engagement (Yakowicz, 2014). The company’s performers use social media to ‘drive story line and engagement,’ extending their onscreen stories online, as it were, and generating a 24/7 fictional environment in which fans can immerse themselves: ‘They are never disconnected from WWE, it’s an opportunity to keep our fans engaged with our brand’ (Yakowicz, 2014). Temporally, then, the company’s social media strategy works to ‘colonize’ more and more of a fan’s leisure time; rather than simply watch a 2- or 3-hour show, fans are encouraged to remain connected to WWE’s fictional universe continuously. According to entertainment news site

TheWrap.com, the logic of the company's strategy is to *extend* the brand temporally and spatially, quoting a WWE executive in charge of digital and social media content:

We're listening to our fans and creating content that they want on a platform that they want ... And we're creating that authentic experience where you're getting to see backstage content with our Superstars – seeing them in their personal lives – it really extends the WWE brand. (Otterson, 2015)

Social media allow for storylines to bleed into the texture of 'real life': 'You probably won't be seeing characters on 'CSI' spark a Twitter fight that bleeds into an upcoming episode' (Otterson, 2015).

In press releases and communication to its investors, the WWE trumpets its huge combined numbers of social media followers. For example, in a July 2016 document touting 'key performance indicators' to stockholders, the company highlights its continuously increasing followers on Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms (an overlapping figure totaling 672 million) and social media 'engagement' as measured in likes and shares, a figure that has also shown consistent growth (WWE, 2016a). In spite of recently declining television ratings, executives argue in public statements and conference calls with stockholders that these social media metrics are increasingly salient (even though they are not immediately monetizable; see Rueter, 2016).

Moreover, the company insists via its official outlets (television, social media, and so forth) on a number of 'branded,' copyrighted terms to which most fans tend to be resistant. Professional wrestling becomes 'sports entertainment.' Wrestlers are 'superstars' or 'divas' (female wrestlers). Fans are the 'WWE Universe' (or sometimes 'WWE fans,' but never just 'fans,' 'crowd,' 'audience,' 'people,' or 'wrestling fans'). Belts are 'titles' or 'championships.' In general, the brandspeak is quite heavy handed and artificial sounding, and few fans seem to internalize it or reproduce it. The aim of

these terms is to brand fandom itself, to bound any discussion of the entertainment form to the brand (see Guschwan, 2012).

These points all speak to an overall strategy of steering, managing, and incorporating the various forms of sociality and participation engaged in by the company's audience, both online and offline, within the logic of brand community.

Participation From Below: Fan Contestation

Wrestling fans resist these efforts to corral and incorporate them into a loyal brand community in part by identifying as fans of the genre rather than WWE fans. Thus, they claim an affinity with professional wrestling – a cultural form the history of which extends back to the late 1800s – as opposed to the WWE's efforts to monopolize the cultural form and that history, and discuss alternate historical and contemporary wrestling promotions on genre specific fora.

Moreover, while WWE views social media as a mechanism both to 'get its message out' and to encourage sanctioned and integrated forms of participation, fans can use those same media – most notably Twitter – to critique the direction of existing storylines and offer alternatives. Such unsanctioned participation would likely have much less impact if it did not have a relationship to more visible and audible forms of protest. These unsanctioned forms of participation manifest themselves in the arenas, with increasingly unruly groups of hardcore fans who are more difficult to inscribe into official narratives and storylines.

It is crucial to note here the central role that fans play in the audiovisual narrative of professional wrestling. They are in no way incidental, but are part of the show and thus expected to react in relatively predictable ways in order for the performance to hold together. If fans are sitting on their hands during a major main event match, engaging in irreverent chanting, or becoming inordinately

enthusiastic about a lower card performer whom the company is not keen on promoting in a more featured role, then the coherence of the performance breaks down, in the sense of Goffman's (1959) 'working consensus.' This fear of fans' 'hijacking' shows is bound up with conceptions of 'Internet fans' or the 'Internet wrestling community,' that is, those most engaged on social media and message boards, as representing the vanguard of the unruly fanbase at arenas (see Wrenn, 2007). Unsanctioned participation online leads to unsanctioned participation in the arenas, and both threaten the control exercised by the brand over the fan community.

In recent years, the company's key storylines – those building to the main events of the company's annual big event, Wrestlemania – have been impacted in crucial ways by forms of unsanctioned audience participation that have forced the WWE to change direction. In 2014, fan protest forced the company to insert Daniel Bryan, an immensely popular though undersized former independent wrestler whom the company did not view as a top attraction into the main event of WWE's biggest show of the year, Wrestlemania.

Below, I present a historical account of the process by reference to Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* and key threads from the *Wrestling Observer* subscriber message board. Sampling messages in those threads allows me to develop an account of the response of hardcore fans online to storylines; in the process I link messages on the board with other online resistance campaigns (e.g. 'cancel WWE Network'), thus demonstrating the breadth and coherence of fan critique online, and also to fan response on the part of live audiences, demonstrating that what is at stake is not a tiny minority of the fanbase but a segment large enough to be very audible (even the predominant voice) at live events.

The company's two biggest pay-per-view events every year are the Royal Rumble, in late January, and Wrestlemania, in late March or early April. The Royal Rumble features a massive 30-person

elimination match the winner of which enters the Wrestlemania main event. In 2014, fans largely anticipated that Daniel Bryan would be the Royal Rumble winner; he was immensely popular and riding a wave of momentum. However, WWE had different plans. When Daniel Bryan turned out not even to be a participant in the Royal Rumble match, the fans turned on it, booing the rest of the way, especially vociferously when the company's handpicked favorite, 'Batista,' was declared the victor.

In his February 3, 2014 newsletter, Meltzer pointed out that fans were irate when the company presented them a narrative in which they had no interest, one distinct from what they had collectively anticipated. The fans had written the story themselves, given that a Daniel Bryan victory made storyline sense and that he was receiving by far the most boisterous live reactions of any performer. Meltzer noted,

What they [the company] didn't count on was the Bryan fans turning on the show ... outwardly attempting to kill the Orton vs. Cena [world championship] title match ... and hat[ing] Batista, who they deep down knew was the only guy except Bryan who could actually [win] the Rumble.

The message board associated with the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* website served as a hub for online participation from below in the aftermath of the event, with fans using the forum as a space to vent their disillusionment and to develop an autonomous critique of storyline direction. One user wrote,

I know there are some out there that defend WWE and their shitty booking to the nth degree, but can we all now say that Daniel Bryan has 'played itself out' and WWE fucked it up almost every step of the way?

Another poster pointed to the potential disaster of the company proceeding with the main event plans it had in place for Wrestlemania: 'They're in for a real treat if they go ahead with Batista/Orton at WM and really I don't think they, the ones in charge, even care.' A third member

spoke of the sense of disillusionment amongst fans who were giving up on the company ever being genuinely responsive to their preferences: 'I was enjoying the Rumble match for a while, but by the end I just felt deflated like I usually tend to feel after WWE shows these days. WWE just isn't all that fun anymore.'

Faced with the intensely negative fan response online and offline, the company found itself having to change course. It inserted Daniel Bryan into the main event match at Wrestlemania, even rewriting the show entirely around him. In the March 17, 2014 issue of the *Observer*, Meltzer commented on the fundamental changes made in the interim to the company's Wrestlemania plans (forced by the negative fan reaction): 'As far as [Bryan] being added to the title match, that decision likely came at the exact moment the promotion decided to turn Batista heel, as an admission that the people weren't cheering him like a top babyface.' Wrestlemania was completely built around Bryan, who wrestled in the opening and closing matches and triumphantly captured the company's championship in the main event.

The show received a hugely positive response both from the live crowd and online. In Meltzer's April 14 recap of the show, he wrote, 'it was among the best Wrestlemanias in history, ending with Bryan overcoming the odds amid a sea of "Yes" chants.' *Observer* message board users were thrilled by the show, with one post typical of the euphoria in the threads dedicated to the event, 'What (*sic*) phenomenal show, I'm exhausted and need to lie down. A night for the ages.' Fans, both in the arena and online, felt that their voices had been heard in the fundamental rescripting of the biggest show of the year. Participation from below had succeeded in radically altering creative direction.

In 2015, a similar creative disaster to the one that had occurred 1 year earlier took place at the Royal Rumble, as Daniel Bryan participated in the match but was scripted to be eliminated early on, while

another performer chosen by company executives to be their next megastar, Roman Reigns, was scripted to win. Again, the win was met with a chorus of dismissive boos from the audience.

Meltzer commented on the live reaction in the February 2, 2015 *Observer*, again pointing up the savviness of the audience and its ability to anticipate match finishes:

A major issue is that it was clear to most fans that there were only two people who really could win the Rumble, Bryan and Reigns. The crowd completely figured it out, and as soon as Bryan was thrown out—early—to make sure he was gone before Reigns even arrived, the crowd turned on the match.

The fans, having succeeded in changing the creative direction 1 year prior, ‘set out to do it again. And Vince McMahon wasn’t going to let it happen again because he knew better. In his mind, Bryan was not the guy.’ This draws out the question of the management of the audience, and McMahon’s development of this storyline became a case of failure to successfully anticipate and manage an audience reaction – and thereby to get his chosen star ‘over,’ or popular with the fans.

Fans expressed their displeasure on the *Observer* message board, specifically targeting the ‘booking’ (i.e. the writing and storytelling). Wrote one user: ‘Terrible booking by WWE, eliminating Bryan that early made EVERYONE look bad.’ Many compared it with the previous year’s Royal Rumble event: ‘They managed to fuck up the Royal Rumble 2 years in a row. And made Reigns, your hand-picked guy, ... look dumb and uncool in the process. Well done, WWE.’ Another wrote, ‘Last year I was angry. This year I am shocked by the WWE’s arrogance and stupidity.’ One user summarized the frustration and anticipated a disaster of a main event to come at Wrestlemania: ‘The whole deal was so cringey. Reigns is going to get booted out of the stadium vs Lesnar.’ Here the reference was to the

main event of Wrestlemania, with Reigns slated to take on returning megastar and mixed martial artist Brock Lesnar.

Beyond the wrestling specific forums, the negative online reaction manifested itself as a campaign to ‘cancel WWE Network’ (including a trending Twitter hashtag), and while this was unsuccessful in threatening the streaming service’s subscriber numbers (which in fact were trending upward), it was part of a broad-based fan response that pressured the WWE into altering the direction of the storyline. The movement gained quite substantial mainstream press attention, with *Time Magazine* reporting that the Twitter hashtag had become a worldwide trending topic (Stout, 2015). However, the company initially ignored the outcry of some of its fans online (as well as the fans present at the Royal Rumble) in the immediate aftermath of the event, suggesting a failure of participation from below to affect creative direction.

As in the previous year, though, the company began to waver on the issue of the Wrestlemania main event, considering again inserting Bryan into the picture—but this time, McMahon would ultimately stand firm. However, Brock Lesnar was scripted to dominate Reigns in the matchup, and rather than serving as the coronation of the company’s next handpicked star, WWE decided to create a complex ending to the match whereby the championship belt ended up in the hands of another rising star, Seth Rollins (who, like Daniel Bryan, was a former independent wrestler), thrilling the live Wrestlemania crowd. The company sensed that the fans simply would not accept the imposition of Reigns in the top position on the card.

Response to the 2015 Wrestlemania show by *Observer* message board members was a combination of surprise and satisfaction. One user wrote, ‘It doesn’t excuse the poor booking over the past 3 months, but Wrestlemania 31 was a great show.’ Referring to the surprise ending that had Rollins leave with the title, another interpreted it, like Meltzer, as the company cooling down on its

handpicked favorite, Reigns: ‘Thank God for the ... out clause [Rollins] they left themselves when Roman became such a dud.’

2016 would be the year of Reigns’ crowning in the main event, as he defeated aging veteran (and heir to the corporate throne) Paul ‘Triple H’ Levesque in a match that was largely booed by the live audience. However, sensing that Reigns was going to be received negatively and that the match lacked the necessary ‘heat’ (or buzz) to serve as the main attraction on the card, the company brought back Vince McMahon’s son Shane to wrestle the Undertaker in a more widely promoted match that generated more audience attention in the buildup to the show. In some sense, the company ultimately got its wish, forcing its handpicked star down the fans’ throats, but it did so amidst persistent fan outcry to which it found itself having to respond for a third year in a row.

Through the course of 2016, Reigns held and lost the championship, and while the company still positioned him as their long-term top star, they moved him down the card in response to widespread fan resistance. Ultimately, the company has largely failed to elevate its handpicked attraction, forced to make critical concessions to its audience’s preferences as it struggles to anticipate, manage, and get ahead of fan participation.

Discussion

The contrasting and interacting logics of cultural participation from above and from below have played out dynamically in professional wrestling’s marquee storylines over an extended period. In 2014, the WWE’s efforts to manage participation from above failed, as fan outcry on social media and in the arenas forced the company to reorganize Wrestlemania around fan favorite Daniel Bryan. In 2015, a similar fan outcry arose, including an initiative to encourage subscribers to cancel WWE’s over the top network; though it was less successful, it did force a partial reshuffling of the

Wrestlemania matches and results. 2016 represented management's most successful effort to elevate and feature its handpicked star, Roman Reigns, though even this success seems to have been only partial. Given that wrestling is often described in popular media as male soap opera, its narratives are ongoing. Not only will the 'good' and 'evil' characters continue to battle one another indefinitely, so will management and the fans, over the creative direction of the stories being presented. Knowing they have had a marked impact in the past, fan communities online and offline will likely retain their partial autonomy from management and press their influence when they disagree with the imperatives of the latter.

Thus, the WWE strategy of brand community relies, in the logic of Arvidsson (2005), on the semi-autonomous sociality of consumers engaging dynamically with the brand. WWE fans play the role of Lazzarato's (1996) immaterial laborers, creatively incorporating the text into social communication and action, just as they themselves are incorporated into the audiovisual text itself. Management is left with the task of attempting to 'regulate,' control, and direct these flows of sociality, and it is often forced to respond to fans' rebellion against the content presented to them. Wrestling fans demand a significant measure of control in shaping this cultural form over which they feel a sense of ownership, taking pride in their capacity to organize their own spontaneous and autonomous participation and to contest management's imposition of participation from above. While Arvidsson (2005) makes reference to the possibility of collaborative social labor bringing about new forms of egalitarian cultural production and participation, his primary emphasis is on the valorization of the work of the crowd and its recuperation as profit. In this sense, this study suggests he underestimates the autonomous potential of the crowd toward participation from below, that is, forms of popular activity that *challenge* cultural producers.

Insofar as they mount such challenges, WWE's fans are engaging in what Hewer et al. (2015: 602) term 'discordant fandom,' as they 'contest and resist such language [imposed by the official brand community] as a mechanism to preserve their own particular enclaves of community spirit,' and reclaiming what Guschwan (2012) calls 'fandom' in opposition to 'brandom.' While both of those studies place some form of contestation between brands and fans at the center of their analysis, the story they tell tends toward Manicheanism: fandom comes into conflict with the 'brute forces of economics, branding and marketing strategy' in Hewer et al. (2015: 612), while the vibrancy of fan culture characterized by 'deeply felt emotions, relationships and identities' is contrasted with a consumer culture that 'constantly quantifies, monetizes and leverages human impulses' in Guschwan (2012: 35). This study has problematized that narrative, showing how the participatory crowd can actually be activated from above by cultural producers but then 'go rogue' in ways that escape the control of the latter. It is not a simple story of dead commodification versus vibrant passion; popular passions are central to both the 'from above' and 'from below' dynamics of a participatory culture that is oriented so centrally around an active, engaged audience.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the ways in which professional wrestling, as a cultural form, combines the logics of participation 'from above' and 'from below,' and how these logics manifest themselves online and offline. On one hand, WWE attempts to manage audience productivity and participation and contain them within the bounds of its brand community, labeled the 'WWE Universe.' This participation from above includes both predictable reactions from live crowds and sanctioned forms of online participation like following performers' Twitter accounts and tweeting using official hashtags. On the other hand, fans engage in participation from below both offline and online,

reacting in resistant and rowdy ways in live venues and developing a sustained and often effective critique of storyline direction in online forums like the *Wrestling Observer* message board.

Ultimately, the chapter has used these examples to illustrate the fundamentally contested nature of cultural participation, thus bridging those perspectives which view it as basically democratic and egalitarian and those which view it as a form of quasi-Foucauldian incorporation or capitalist prosumption (see Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), that is, the ‘empowerment analysis’ and the ‘incorporation analysis’ (Ekström et al., 2012: 7). Rather cultural participation contains within it both sets of potentialities.

A crucial question is the extent to which conclusions derived from this case study can be generalized to cultural forms besides professional wrestling. After all, I have argued in part for the *uniqueness* of wrestling as a hybridized cultural form, combining elements of theater and sport. With that said, the broad model of participation from above and below would seem to hold with respect to most cultural industries in which audience participation is an important feature. It is increasingly the case, in the era of many-to-many new media that all audiences participate in some way or another (Napoli, 2011). Generally, cultural producers and brands – whether they be television or film companies, sports teams, nonprofit cultural organizations, or social media platforms – aim to inspire and manage participation within sanctioned parameters. With respect to television, this sort of participation from above is measured through such means as Nielsen Social’s (n.d.) analytics, which track social media engagement relating to particular television programs.

Insofar as such engagement and participation become more important to the contemporary cultural industries, efforts to activate audiences risk encouraging potential ‘rowdiness’ (Butsch, 2000) and rebellion on the part of those audiences, taking the form of critiques of television storylines or of the management decisions of a local sports team, for example. In relation to the former, *Family Guy* fans

successfully campaigned to bring back a major character by setting up online petitions and posting thousands of critical messages on social media (Denham, 2013). In relation to the latter, recent initiatives on the part of Liverpool soccer fans point to the unpredictability of the active audience, with supporters staging a 10,000-strong walkout to protest rising ticket prices (Press Association, 2016).

It would seem that the powerful *effectiveness* of participation from below in professional wrestling is less broadly generalizable with respect to cultural forms besides sports. The *Family Guy* example aside, because television and social media audiences and users are rarely if ever in direct *offline* proximity to one another, they have difficulty exerting the kind of sustained collective impact that WWE fans have. After all, in many cases, participatory culture is a somewhat niche or marginal phenomenon, as with the wrestling fan fiction Salmon and Clerc (2005) analyze or the forms of fan reappropriation of television content that Jenkins (2012) examines; in such instances, participation from below manifests itself as subcultural play, having little impact on the *mainstream* fans of those genres or on the content producers.

In light of these considerations, then, it is crucial that analysts of media and communication pay careful attention to the particular forms and effects of audience participation in whatever case they examine. In all cases, however, they should avoid the trap of considering cultural participation either as totally autonomous or under control – analogous to a purely structural or purely voluntarist analysis – instead interrogating the *contestation* that tends to arise between these two sets of forces, as popular passions are mobilized from above and from below.

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CHAPTER THREE

HOME VIDEO GAMES AND THE EMERGENCE OF PROSUMPTION

Chapter Abstract

This chapter explores the rise of home video game consoles in the United States during the 1970s as an early instance of ‘prosumption’ (productive consumption). Drawing on game manuals and patents, dozens of newspaper articles and advertisements, and eleven semi-structured interviews, it argues that the Magnavox Odyssey and Atari Video Computer System altered ordinary people’s relationship to television from one characterized by spectatorship and absorption to one characterized by interactivity and participation, generating a new form of technologically co-constituted subjectivity in the process. This mode of prosumer subjectivity, moreover, was deepened and extended with the subsequent emergence of personal computing – and indeed, it can be understood as part of a trajectory that culminates in the ubiquity of the hyper-interactive smartphones of the present.

Introduction

A 1972 magazine advertisement for the Magnavox Odyssey, the first mass market home video game system in the United States, proclaims, ‘With ODYSSEY you participate in television, you’re not just a spectator. The fascinating casino action of Monte Carlo, the excitement of Wimbledon, the eerie quiet of a prehistoric hunt, can all be duplicated right in your own living room’ (Magnavox, 1972). Like much of the discourse around these early video games, the advertisement makes an appeal to the active, participatory dimension of this new media form, its potential to render the television interactive rather than merely a one-to-many broadcast medium.

In this sense, the home video game system marked an important moment in the historical development of what has been termed ‘prosumption,’ a neologism combining the words ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ that signals the increasingly active position of the consumer in advanced capitalist countries. The term has its origins in ‘futurist’ Alvin Toffler’s 1980 book, *The Third Wave*. Toffler presents a grand theory of social development, progressing through three waves – the first dominated by production for use (essentially an early form of prosumption), i.e., in largely agricultural contexts; the second dominated by production for market exchange; and the third (coming) wave marking a return to the prevalence of prosumption. As examples of this trend Toffler cites the rise of home medical devices, self-serve gas stations and supermarkets, electronic banking, do-it-yourself home repair, the incorporation of consumer ideas into manufacturing (a precursor to ‘crowdsourcing’), and the blurring of the boundary between work and leisure.

The concept was later picked up in sociology, most notably by George Ritzer who, in a more empirically and historically sensitive way than Toffler, develops a three part developmental schema of western economies: production, consumption, and prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

Consumption refers to the rise of consumer society, followed by the increasing tendency of

prosumption to put consumers to work, a tendency enhanced by the rise of Web 2.0. The regimes of production and consumption co-existed, with the former declining in the 1970s (through economic and energy crises) and the latter expanding through the rise of suburbia and the shopping mall.

Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) date the beginnings of prosumption to the emergence of the fast food restaurant in the 1950s and connect it to many of the examples cited by Toffler, including self-service kiosks, electronic checkouts, branded consumer experiences at places like DisneyWorld and Starbucks, radio call in shows, and eventually, reality television, amateur pornography, and the social web. Note that much of the rise in prosumption, on this account, has been bound up with changing roles for the *media* consumer, as previously passive forms of media consumption, like television, radio, and journalism, have increasingly invited input and participation from consumers.

Having traveled through both popular and academic sociology, then, the concept of prosumption has also become quite prominent in business and management circles, most notably those associated with consumer technology. It has been championed by management gurus Tapscott and Williams (2008) as being at the heart of ‘wkinomics,’ which they deem to be a new mode of production based upon prosumption. Youtube and other social media platforms have sought to engage and activate the user – ‘user experience’ having become a tech cliché – and have marketed themselves to advertisers accordingly (as the engaged user sheds crucial and specific data about their preferences with each click, like, and share). Similarly, the Nielsen rating company (Nielsen Social, n.d.) has begun collecting ‘social’ ratings, based on engagement rather than exposure metrics, i.e., rather than simply concerning themselves with how many viewers and listeners are tuning in, content producers are also centrally concerned with how many of those users actively engage with content via social media (these more involved consumers are more likely to purchase advertised products and services associated with their favorite content) (Napoli, 2011). ‘Crowdsourcing’ has proliferated, ranging

from design companies outsourcing idea generation to consumers via design contests (e.g., new logos or fashion lines) to open source software to the company Innocentive's network of math and science 'solvers' (Howe, 2009). In sum, organizations of all sorts – for profit, non-profit, and governmental – are increasingly conscious of the problem of motivating active involvement on the part of their user, customer, and client base. Prosumption has become a watchword of contemporary culture.

This chapter aims to explore the early history of prosumption through an analysis of the rise of home video games in the 1970s, as exemplified most notably by the Magnavox Odyssey and Atari Video Computer System consoles. These devices brought gaming into the domestic environment, allowing and encouraging consumers to organize and control their own gameplay, both individually and collectively. Gaming became integrated into the fabric of everyday life in a way that the arcade never could be (with the exception of hardcore players who spent massive amounts of their leisure time in arcades). In this sense, I aim to further the insights developed in Carly Kocurek's study, *Coin-Operated Americans* (2015), of how the rise of arcades created the new 'gamer identity' among the adolescent boys who frequented them. But where she tends to focus on the 'gamer athletes' associated with arcade competition, I am interested in how ordinary consumers came increasingly to play games as part of their daily routines, in a lineage that culminates in the hyper-mediatized smartphone users of today, who are always and everywhere enjoined to engage with digital media. Such contemporary media forms, moreover, blur the lines between work and play, as theorists Hardt and Negri note in *Declaration* (2012):

With your smart phone and your wireless connections, you can go anywhere and still be on the job, which you realize quickly means that anywhere you go you are still working!

Mediatization is a major factor in the increasingly blurred divisions between work and life.

This is in line with the increasing *gamification* of both work and leisure in the knowledge economy (Dewinter et al., 2014).

Centrally, the rise of prosumption should be understood not only as a *structural* development but one that gave rise to a new *subject position*, the prosumer. In Althusser's (1970) sense, the structural reality was bound up with the 'interpellation' of the subject (reflected within the game world in the identification of the player with his avatar [Rehak, 2003; also see Garite, 2003]). This mode of subjectivity is fundamentally co-constituted by technology, in this case televisions and video game consoles. The rise of home video game consoles marked an important moment in the deepening of the technological 'texturing' of everyday life in the American home. As Schüll (2012: 174) writes of slot machine players, an 'embodied relation' develops between human and technology, in which 'a person feels that a technological object is an extension of his own cognitive and even motor capacities, [replacing] a sense of the machine's alterity.' Similarly, Ihde (1990: 74) notes of technologies designed to promote a sense of embodiment that the 'machine is perfected along a bodily vector, molded to the perceptions and actions of humans.' Both Schull and Ihde operate in the tradition of Latour (1999) in thinking through the agentic and determinative properties of technological objects, and of the imbrication of the human and non-human.

Viewed through this theoretical lens, the prosumer can be read as a technologically co-constituted form of subjectivity, arising as human actors interacted with the non-human 'actants' (Latour, 2004) of televisions, controllers, cartridges and computers. In Ihde's words, human existence has become more deeply 'technologically textured' (1990: 1), as forms of entertainment have become more diverse, fragmented, mobile, and privatized. The contemporary ubiquity of smartphones represents a kind of apotheosis of the historical and sociological trends of which early video games were exemplary. The blips and paddles of early versions of Pong and tennis have become the hundreds of

thousands of pixels capable of rendering high definition images on smartphone displays. Following Latour's notion of 'assemblage' (2004), technology has been increasingly subjected and contoured to human control, while the category of the human has itself been shaped fundamentally by technological developments.

Here, then, I explore the inception of this technologically co-constituted prosumer subjectivity, first through a review of the basic material features of the two consoles in question, and then through an exploration of how they were received and experienced by people of the time – the latter deriving from a review of contemporaneous newspaper accounts and eleven semi-structured interviews with subjects who played the Odyssey and/or VCS.

Magnavox Odyssey (1972) and Atari Video Computer System (1977)

Examining the players' manual for the original Magnavox Odyssey provides a window into the nature of gameplay and the coordinates of the material operation of the platform (Magnavox, 1972b). The manual announces that the device is a 'Total Play and Learning Experience For All Ages' and depicts a nuclear family gathered around a television playing a tennis game. The subsequent instructions make frequent use of the second person possessive pronoun, emphasizing the control exercised by the user over the platform: 'Your master control unit,' 'your Odyssey,' etc. The controls of the unit are quite basic, given that the games are all variants of Pong-style table tennis: vertical, horizontal, reset, and 'English' (to put rotation on the ball). Before offering specific instructions for the games themselves, the manual offers a series of directives for training, instructing players to adjust the speed to slow and then learn to apply the controls one by one. Each game requires that a physical overlay be affixed to the screen, such that it creates a new graphic environment for the game. Moreover, the manual offers maintenance instructions, carefully explaining how the player should keep track of the box, overlays, master and player controls,

individual game cards, and game cord. What follows is a series of individualized instructions for each game that is included, and a set of troubleshooting instructions for when any part of the platform malfunctions.

The two basic patents for the device, invented by Ralph Baer and referred to respectively as ‘Television Gaming Apparatus and Method’ (Baer et al., 1972) and ‘Television Gaming and Training Apparatus’ (Baer, 1973), underline these basic sociotechnical features of the platform (‘sociotechnical’ insofar as the setup of the technical apparatus prestructures a particular type of human-machine interaction and human-human interaction that develops in relation to it). The abstract to the (Baer et al.) 1972 patent reads,

Apparatus and methods are herein disclosed for use in conjunction with standard monochrome and color television receivers, for the generation, display and manipulation of symbols upon the screen of the television receivers for the purpose of playing games, training simulation and for engaging in other activities by one or more participants.

The ‘control unit’ of the invention ‘includes the control means, switches and electronic circuitry for the generation, manipulation and control of video signals representing symbols which are to be displayed on the television screen... Control units may be provided for each of the participants’ (Baer et al., 1972) This dry technical passage notably highlights the *participatory* dimension of the video game, its reliance on the ‘manipulation of symbols’ via a ‘control unit’ with fellow players.

While the earliest mass marketed platform of its kind, the Odyssey achieved relatively limited commercial success and soon fell out of favor. It was left to its successor, the Atari Video Computer System (VCS), to truly popularize the home video game system. Atari’s initial success came with the release of *Pong* in 1973 – leading to a series of patent-related lawsuits with Baer over whether this was a copycat of the original Odyssey tennis game – but the VCS was its first broadly popular and

successful multigame platform, selling ten million units over the next five years. Montfort and Bogost's book-length study, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (2009), offers an historical and material analysis of the platform and several of its most popular games. (In the case of the Atari, a close examination of its manual would yield little interest as the more detailed play instructions are to be found in the dedicated manuals of its game cartridges.)

The authors justify their use of the concept of platform – typically associated with more recent technology, like Web 2.0 (Gillespie, 2010) – by noting that the VCS like all platforms ‘is an abstraction, a particular standard or specification before any particular implementation of it’ (Montfort and Bogost, 2009: 2). Like Web 2.0 platforms, then, the Atari represents a potentiality rather than a finished product, a means for the engagement of the active user, who can put it to dynamic and creative ends. More specifically, it serves as a platform for the many cartridge games that can be inserted into it and thereby activated: ‘In general, platforms are layered—from hardware through operating system and into other software layers—and they relate to modular components, such as optional controllers and cards’ (Montfort and Bogost, 2009: 3).

Crucially, the platform represents a structure, in a very material sense, and like Giddens' (1979) notion of sociological structure, it both enables and constrains, or as Montfort and Bogost put it, the combination of hardware and software ‘influences, facilitates, or constrains particular forms of computational expression’ (2009: 3) In an Althusserian sense, the platform interpellates the user, and the VCS was particularly historically important in this regard insofar as it ‘helped introduce computing to a popular audience and to the home’ (Montfort and Bogost, 2009:3). The VCS ultimately gave rise to about one thousand games, accounting for three quarters of console sales in 1981, and establishing conventions and tropes that would remain central to the medium in the coming decades.

Most of the VCS cartridges were adaptations of previous arcade games, most notably the coin-operated *Pong* and *Tank*, and many were also film adaptations (including the now-infamous *ET*, based on Steven Spielberg's film of the same name). These cartridges thus brought the arcade game into the domestic space and rendered an older, more passive form of media – the cinema – available for interactive engagement. Montfort and Bogost (2009: 15) note also the immense 'representational flexibility' of the platform, offering such examples as 'dogfighting, bridge, hockey, treasure hunting, lassoing, slot car racing, dental care, and even sex acts.' Manifold imaginative and spatial possibilities – indeed, *subject positions* – were made available to the user, all through the exceedingly simple building blocks of 'drawing a few movable objects on the screen one line at a time while uttering sounds using square waves and noise' (Montfort and Bogost, 2009: 15).

How, then, was this new mode of *mediatized subjectivity* understood and experienced during its emergence? To answer this question, I conducted an empirical analysis of articles published between 1972 and 1979 in five major American newspapers: the *Chicago Tribune*; the *New York Times*; the *Washington Post*; the *Los Angeles Times*; and the *Wall Street Journal*. I examined every article that made reference to the Magnavox Odyssey or to Atari, and treated the newspapers as an archival source that would shed insight on the sociocultural reception of home video games. I supplemented that historical analysis with eleven semi-structured interviews, conducted with individuals I identified through the online *Atari Age* forum (atariage.com) who had played the Magnavox Odyssey (or 'Odyssey²') or Atari VCS in their youth (all respondent names have been changed). In those interviews, I drew upon the methodological principles outlined by Weiss in *Learning from Strangers* (1994), aiming to pose questions that encouraged lengthy and rich narration by respondents about their own experiences. The analysis of both sets of data followed the principles of 'thematic analysis'

(Guest et al., 2011) to draw out the shared central frames of understanding and experience. Below I present the findings of this analysis.

Sociocultural Reception and Experience of Early Home Video Games

The key frames constituting the core of the discourse and reported experience of these consoles were *participation*, *imagination*, and *computerization*. Firstly, the consoles were understood and experienced as bringing about a much more dynamic and interactive relationship between consumers and television. There was a widespread sense that television and television consumption were changing from a logic of spectatorship to one of participation, in which the individual was able to control the screen and be more deeply and sensorially engaged with its sights and sounds.

Television was now something that could be played, not only watched. While this was of course part of the marketing strategy of video game producers, it also clearly pointed to new ludic and ‘prosumptive’ possibilities afforded by the technology and experienced by its users.

Secondly, given the graphical limitations of the technology, consumers supplemented the visual presentation with their imagination – as spurred by the cover art and backstories in game manuals – to turn the few pixels on their screens into evolved science fiction gameworlds.

Finally, historically, these consoles prefigured the rise in the late 1970s and early 1980s of personal computing devices, a reality underlined in the media accounts and reinforced by my informants.

Games companies released early versions of home computers, capable of other tasks such as calculation and drawing. Utopian and dystopian possibilities were in the air, as fears of the loss of the human were combined with visions of the newly automated, leisure-filled home. The computational ‘programmability’ of the more sophisticated systems, which allowed users to input many different cartridge-based games into the platform, was a crucial development, as

programmability meant more agency and variety for the consumer-user, and was a direct bridge to personal computing.

The initial reception of the Magnavox Odyssey console placed a central emphasis on its interactive possibilities. A July, 1972 *Chicago Tribune* article stressed that Magnavox's 'game simulator' was oriented around dynamic movement and interactivity ('self-moving or player-movable images on the TV screen') (Douglas, 1972: B14). Further, the link to other home electronics, most notably the color video recorder, underlined the more active relationship consumers were developing with television technology. Interactivity also featured centrally in a later *Tribune* article from that year: 'Little white squares promptly show up on the screen – and by manipulating the various controls you can move these squares up, down, and sideways' (Verhulst, 1972: A1). The author underlines the 'profound satisfaction in being able, for a change, to control what appears on the TV screen' rather than being subject to prepackaged content and advertising ('without any words at all from our sponsor') (Verhulst, 1972: A1).

These frames were also part of how Magnavox aimed to market its new product. A *New York Times* article cited a Magnavox executive claiming that the Odyssey 'transfers television from passive to an active medium' and links its entertainment dimensions to its educational ones (New York Times, 1972: 69). In more contemporary tech parlance, the company aimed to 'disrupt' television, specifically the twenty-eight million televisions then in circulation in the country. The Odyssey print advertisements placed in newspapers in the later months of 1972 stress its connectivity with the television, and the way in which it transforms the latter: 'use your own TV to create an instant closed circuit electronic playground' (Magnavox, 1972c: A7). Per another ad, 'Odyssey lets you participate in television, you're not just a spectator (Magnavox, 1972d: I7). The consumer can control the 'speed of the game,' and the movement and spin of the cursor: 'It's thought, action, and reaction'

(Magnavox, 1972d: I7). The ad trumpets the range of the device, producing challenging ‘mind benders’ for adults as well as more simple educational experiences for children. The twelve games included cover sports (e.g., ‘All the excitement of Wimbledon...’ ‘maneuver the puck... goal!’), logic puzzles, geography, and an optional extra shooting game with an ‘electronic rifle’ included (Magnavox, 1972d: I7). By 1974, Magnavox had signed a contract with baseball player Hank Aaron to promote the Odyssey as well as other products, especially emphasizing the potential of players to step into Aaron’s shoes: “‘It’s nice to watch a game, but playing it is where it’s at... there is nothing to stop you from establishing a few of your own records’” (Hank Aaron, quoted in Heath, 1975: 6).

One of my interviewees, Nathan, noted the sense of euphoria at his family acquiring a second hand Odyssey console when he was seven years old, and his recollection underlines that this participatory dimension of the console was more than just a marketing claim: ‘I thought it was the greatest thing ever invented. We would play for hours, pretending we were big time sports stars.’ Even though there was no onscreen scoring, Nathan and his brother would score the games themselves, with the winner being the first to ten points. In spite of the relatively primitive (by contemporary standards) graphical interface, ‘We were awe-struck. Our young minds had all these images of being on the court, or the ice. It was the closest to Wimbledon or the Stanley Cup that we knew we would ever get.’ In this sense, Nathan’s experience meshed with Magnavox’s marketing discourse, as he felt playing this game put him in the shoes of sports stars, in a way his otherwise unathletic nature prevented him from realizing: ‘to my mind, it didn’t matter that it was just a few glowing lines and a tiny square.’ This was the case, even though the second hand version they played on did not have the overlays to identify particular games as tennis, hockey, or otherwise – they were essentially playing Pong.

Moreover, the Odyssey afforded consumers the opportunity to take the arcade experience home. Per a 1974 *New York Times* article, the home video game phenomenon was intimately connected to the proliferation of arcade games, which had spread at bars, airports, and arcades. The Odyssey transposed this experience into the domestic environment: ‘Odyssey ... is simple enough for the average consumer to attach to the back of his TV set, transforming the otherwise passive box in his living room into a game screen with two “player” blips and a “ball” blip’ (Range, 1974: 332). The feature article notes the greater sophistication of the Odyssey controls compared to large arcade games, including greater possibilities of movement, the ‘English’ swerve function, and speed options.

Magnavox was itself expanding its array of Odyssey products (eventually releasing three more in 1976) and other home entertainment devices. A 1976 *Chicago Tribune* article describes some of the new features: ‘The top model offers playing fields and stylized character players in full color... All models have onscreen digital scoring, automatic serve and ball rebound, and horizontal player action, and English and speed controls’ (Douglas, 1976: A3). The emphasis on user control extends to the company’s new ‘all-electronic tuning’ technology. As opposed to the ‘clunk, clunk’ of manual tuning, the user need not go through each channel, instead directly inputting the desired channel number, and can adjust sound and color (Douglas, 1976: A3).

Thus, later in the decade, the company released a much more technically sophisticated console, the Odyssey². One interviewee, Cliff, recalled the superiority of this platform vis-à-vis the original, which was ‘essentially dressed up Pong.’ The Odyssey² included a keyboard, voice unit, and educational titles that included spelling and math functions. While he was passionate about arcade games – noting their addictiveness, sharp graphics, thrilling competition, and tactile joystick controls, all of which home consoles could not directly compete with – he still found the Odyssey²

to be an engaging experience, especially given that many of its games, including its Pacman knockoff, were superior to their Atari counterparts. The auxiliary keyboard was not integrated into most of the games, but it could be used in certain functions, like one ‘Wall Street’ themed game that taught the player about investment decisions. Moreover, the keyboard allowed the user to program in an original maze – Cliff recalls programming one in which a Pacman-style ghost was stuck in a central square. This keyboard function enhanced the participatory and active dimension of the console.

The growing appeal of video games illustrated, for many commentators, the new ways in which consumers engage with television: ‘More and more, the TV screen is being used to display information originating from computers and news wires, rather than the usual TV sources, and as a playing field for a rapidly growing variety of video games’ (Shales, 1976: 109). Such uses, notes that article, radically disrupt the original intentions of the commercial television industry, as the consumer is exposed neither to advertising nor to the ‘meretricious bilge’ represented by much current content: ‘Increasing numbers of TV viewers can be expected to switch their allegiance from “Charlie’s Angels” and “Happy Days” to a little white dot that bleeps and boops around on a field of black’ (Shales, 1976: 109). Rather than the consumer remaining ‘defenseless to the television,’ these companies’ products allow them to, in the words of a Hollywood editor who is quoted, ‘get involved... actually physically manipulating the image on the screen’ (in Shales, 1976: 109). This is a deeper level of involvement than quick ‘channel-switching’ in response to the growing channel options available, or the anecdotal examples cited by the author of angry viewers kicking, breaking, or even shooting (!) their television sets. Video games represented, then, greater possibilities of control on the part of a more active consumer.

This theme is elaborated by a psychologist quoted in the *LA Times* (Kilgore, 1977: H1):

There's something about the whole sense of power and magic control by electronics that may be intriguing to people... And there are so few things that people can control in their lives anymore that automated game playing probably gives them a sense of power.

Thus the video game has the potential to open up an avenue of engagement and participation in what is otherwise a bureaucratically dominated and alienating society.

Per a longer 1977 feature in the *Tribune* (Verhulst: D1), "Today, more and more people are inviting their neighbors in to *play* television, often in full color' – by contrast to the black and white, small screens of the past. The feature notes the increasing versatility and decreasing price of the new games when compared to the original Magnavox Odyssey. The improvements described in Atari's home version of Pong, by contrast with the Odyssey's original tennis game, included the sound of impact of the 'ball,' on-screen scoring, and color. New options spreading more broadly in video games included four-player participation, more varied skill level selections, automatic speedup of play over time, and increasing 'programmability' – i.e., add-on games available as plug-in cartridges:

A programmable video unit, with its ability to create virtually any imaginable kind of visual display has the potential to offer much more than just entertainment. It could be the first step toward a true home computer, useful as an instructional tool and as an information storage and retrieval device. (Verhulst, 1977: D1)

(The connection to early computing technology, to be detailed below, is underlined by the fact that Steve Jobs of Apple fame began as a video game designer at Atari, after its purchase by Warner Communications [Dorfman, 1978: D8].) Programmability, then, went hand in hand with an evolution beyond simple ball and paddle mechanics: 'New games can show graphic figures, as in coin-operated arcade video games, and allow complex strategy' (Wiener, 1977: G9).

The Atari Video Computer System, released in the summer of 1977, was the most prominent example of this sort of programmability (Douglas, 1977: B11): ‘The system comes complete with a 27-game variation cartridge, with five other cartridges offering 10 to 50 game variations also available.’ The excitement and novelty of the experience of playing these new ‘programmables’ was captured in a description of the game play in Atari’s ‘Starship’ (Herman, 1977: D3):

Then he placed the new player in the cockpit of a star on an intergalactic mission, left her alone to fight off the pink space monsters and blue enemy ships... But all the player could do was stare in horror at the huge orange asteroid that seemed to be hurtling toward her at an incredible speed.

A higher level of virtuosity and skill was now possible on these games, as the play became in equal turns more challenging and frustrating. For example, in a war game, a player reportedly set himself a handicap, meaning his bullets traveled half as far: ‘On went the investigation, through a world of blinking colors, varooming race cars, and machine guns that went rat-a-tat-tat’ (Herman, 1977: D3).

One interview respondent, Edmond, noted that with the Atari, ‘the TV was no longer just an output. It was both an output *and* an input box.’ The sense of control over the image felt by the player was the core of the fun of the game, with little concern for the simplicity of the graphics. Sure, there were readily available arcades where Edmond lived, and these did feature superior graphics, but the Atari allowed him to play whenever he wanted, and without having to deposit a quarter for each turn. What is more, the complexity of the experience improved over time, with more developed games like *Space Invaders* and *Adventure* offering longer gameplay with no time limit, by contrast to many earlier games which ran in roughly three-minute loops. A social dimension was added by video game magazines, in which Edmond could compare his scores against the high scores

of other players nationwide (verified by photographs they took of their television screens), resembling the more competitive logic of arcade play.

Other players were less sanguine about the arcade comparison, with Peter likening the Atari and other home consoles to ‘methodone’ by contrast with the heroin of the arcade – games on the former were comparatively shallow and simplistic, with sometimes ‘clunky graphics.’ Nonetheless, it was a pleasure to be able to play the games ‘for free’ (without quarters), akin to being able to watch movies on television rather than having to go to a theater.

The increased sense of engagement and technological control was indeed central to the marketing strategy and discourse of Atari, as it had been with Magnavox, with the company’s chairman stating,

I think it’s the first time people have been able to talk back to their television set, and make it do what they want it to do. It gives you a sense of control, whereas before all you could do was sit and switch channels. (Klemesrud, 1978: 463)

By mid-1978, the company had released fifteen cartridge games, each priced at twenty dollars, to accompany its \$189 platform. It made a point in its advertising to promote the variations available in each cartridge game itself, based on adjustable options and rules (Atari, 1977). The appeal to adventurous and fantasmatic forms of identification was also central: ‘Be a flying ace, a race car champion, a tennis star and a space pioneer all in one afternoon...’ (Atari, 1977b: A24). The emphasis on skill and difficulty represented an effort to brand the device as more than a ‘mere’ toy: ‘This Atari video computer system is no toy. It’s the most challenging home video game you can buy’ (Atari, 1977c: A6).

As with the Odyssey, data from both the newspaper articles and interviews strongly suggests that this was more than marketing buzz, as players generally experienced gameplay as more participatory

and engaging that watching television. Stanley, for example, underlined the increasingly active relationship with television and linked it to the development of VCR technology:

Atari changed what TV represented to me; instead of just a passive, 'what's on the big three networks,' the Atari redefined what you could do with a TV. You weren't chained to what was being presented to you. With A VCR you could watch whatever movie you wanted.

With an Atari, you could play any game you wanted.

Thus, Stanley experienced new home consumer technologies as enabling agency by comparison to the constraining temporal and content structure of traditional television.

Kieran, unlike most of my respondents, did not report his traditional television viewing habits changing, but he did, like Stanley, underline the contrasting temporal logic of video games. While not prepared to

miss the adventures of my heroes on TV... videogames were more versatile because I could play at any time... TV had a rigid schedule written by powerful nameless men high up in the transmission tower ... So my gaming time worked around what they said and did.

Moreover, video games more deeply engaged his curiosity and imagination, as when he took apart consoles to investigate their inner workings ('I was totally surprised about the microscopic maze of circuitry in them'), and played the games as a way to bring to life in his mind popular cultural images of science fiction: 'rocket ships, radar dishes, flying saucers, the Space Shuttle, and Space Colonies.'

Geoffrey noted the relationship between television and video game schedules, with each complementing the other:

We only had 3 TV channels then, so there was never anything on in the morning or early afternoons that I wanted to watch. So it was pretty much play Atari in the morning and watch TV when 'Flintstones' came on at 3:00, and 'Gilligan's Island' came on at 3:30.

Imagination was a crucial supplement to the participatory dimension of the games. Per one interviewee, Lewis, the elaborate artwork and manuals provided with Atari games were crucial spurs to the player's imagination, supplements rendered necessary by the simplicity of the graphical interface:

Those games shipped in boxes decorated with elaborate artwork, and the manuals provided a backstory that set the context for the game, so I remember looking at the pictures and reading the stories and superimposing that onto the game in my imagination as I played.

Nonetheless, Lewis did indeed find the games genuinely involving and participatory, most notably the game based on the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: 'I remember looking at the clues offered in the manual and working for hours to solve the puzzles in the game. It was very exciting to overcome those obstacles and make it to the end on my own.' The 'puzzles' in the game were numerous and quite sophisticated, and Lewis made a point of avoiding the 'spoilers' section of the accompanying manual and solving them himself:

There is a 'raving lunatic' in the game who will kill you if you try to pass him unless you bribe him with money (the money must be collected in a certain room in the hidden temple). You also ... need to obtain a shovel and travel to the right place on the map, obtain a parachute so you can access a cave in a hillside, etc.

As for the comparison with television, Lewis notes that both involved staring at a CRT, but I enjoyed the games more because of the interactive element... you were being given an entertainment experience in which your actions could directly affect the results, and the duration of that experience depended largely on your level of skill; the better player you were, the more fun you could have and the further you could push the game into unexplored areas ... Each new revelation was a built in reward which encouraged me to keep playing.

Andrew, like Lewis, spoke to the centrality of the manuals for gameplay, given the ways in which they provided both instruction and backstory: ‘Instead of just seeing some blocky lumps on the screen, I could say, “OK, there’s a Zorlon Cannon.”’ He found a similar level of complexity to the one Lewis found in *Raiders*, in the game *Adventure*, which was full of secret ‘easter eggs’ hidden by the programmers. This dynamic relationship to media continued with his engagement with the Commodore VIC-20 computer, which included choose-your-own-adventure style text adventure games like *Dracula*, in which the player had to navigate through the game universe to locate the vampire. Nonetheless, Andrew differed with my other informants in not seeing a basic difference between video games and computers on the one hand and traditional television on the other: ‘Atari or television, either way it was entertainment, a diversion.’

The disruptive effect of these games, along with the home entertainment and video recorder technology that accompanied them, a frequent topic of commentary: ‘[I]t has the network television moguls worried: They can’t be sure when you sit down in front of your television set these days, you’re actually watching a program they’re broadcasting’ (Knoblauch, 1978: C3). A sense of utopian possibility characterized much of the discourse around the new uses of the television: ‘The individual is the receiver, the tuner, the volume controller, the picture selector, the power user. The equipment merely responds to each level of sophistication’ (Fox, 1978: N14).

This utopian feeling is echoed by Marcus, for whom, as a youthful science fiction fan, ‘it felt like the future was arriving... you were amazed by the fact you could interact with something on a TV and even play against a friend.’ As with other respondents, imagination allowed him to compensate for graphical limitations: ‘it was a mixture of graphics and imagination. Whatever was on the screen was just a representation and my brain filled the gaps ... Even Pac-man was amazing to me (though everyone complains about it now).’ The ornate box art helped facilitate this process, as it ‘would

trigger what the programmers were aiming for but couldn't quite get to.' Over time, game worlds became more complex and involving, with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Superman* featuring multiple screens and ever more complex gameplay.

While the video game industry was broadly successful through the course of the 1970s, growth did not meet projections as of the end of the decade. The overproduction brought on by the entrance of dozens of companies in 1976-1977 led to many of them abandoning their video game operations ('too many games on the market, too few buyers, too much competition') (Verhulst, 1979: F1). Some commentators blamed the boredom of unprogrammable 'dedicated' games, for which gameplay became predictable and repetitive. This was precisely the concern which led Atari to refocus from its dedicated game Pong to its programmable Video Computer System. Dedicated games came increasingly to be associated with the toy market, rather than the more prestigious home entertainment and home computing markets. One article carefully describes the VCS's capabilities:

Its console, looking rather like a multistation intercom base, boasts half a dozen toggle switches and up to eight remote control units. Four-position joysticks enable players to manipulate on-screen characters in all directions ... Twelve-button keyboards are used in several challenging brain games, while paddle controls take over when switch to one of the many varieties of hit-and-return diversion. (Verhulst, 1979: F1)

Twenty additional cartridges were available, including a premium racing game with special add-on steering controllers. Programmability, then, was seen as the solution to market stagnation and customer boredom, precisely because of the way in which it more actively engaged the consumer. Television advertising for the VCS centered on this programmability, emphasizing that the system came with twenty-seven games with a total of 187 available (Atari, 1977d). Another ad highlights

‘twenty cartridges with 1300 game variations’ (Atari, 1978), while also pairing real world people and images with their virtual counterparts (analogous to the Hank Aaron example discussed earlier): baseball player Pete Rose with *Home Run* (followed by a real life referee emerging from behind the television and exclaiming, ‘You’re out, Rose!’); soccer player Pele (‘I quit soccer to play Atari’) with, strangely, a shooter game called *Air Sea Battle*; and an actor playing a prisoner with the game *Breakout* (followed by an image of an escape hole in the prisoner’s cell). In each of these couplets, the ‘virtual’ is sandwiched in between images of the ‘real’; the games are presented as opportunities to enact a diverse array of subject positions available to the player: baseball player, soccer star, prisoner. As Sheila Murphy writes in ‘This is Intelligent Television’ (2009: 207), ‘The athletes’ endorsement of the games and encouragement to play rather than watch TV re-imagines both the set and its viewers as part of an interactive entertainment discourse.’

Computerization and the Deepening of Prosumption

This programmability and the sort of prosumer subjectivity it interpellated would only deepen with the rise of personal computing, with which video games were closely connected technologically and sociologically. More specifically, video games facilitated the spread of computer technology and its entry into the home. As a 1976 *New York Times* article reviewing early microchip technology envisioned, citing a senior figure at the National Semiconductor company, ‘The user could sit on a couch with a hand-held device containing both a programmable pocket calculator and an electronic set-tuner’ (McElheny, 1976: 97). The latter would allow him to ‘[translate] the beamed instructions into visual displays,’ to go along with the capacity to play games, prepare documents, or create architectural drawings on his calculator (McElheny, 1976: 97). The article emphasizes that the mass market potential of microprocessor technology is anticipated by the recent popularity of home video consoles, including Atari’s Pong and Magnavox’s Odyssey.

A 1977 *Los Angeles Times* article cites Odyssey inventor Ralph Baer, who suggests that the computerization inherent in gameplay would also have practical applications, such as doing grocery shopping or completing homework, which ‘should free people from the mundane tasks of life and create more time for work and play’ (Kilgore, 1977: H1) – though he failed to anticipate that the latter two categories may themselves be blurred with the proliferation of technology, with work taking on ludic qualities and leisure becoming colonized by new forms of labor and rationalized activity (as noted by Hardt and Negri, 2002). In a brief article from later that year, the same newspaper describes a Santa Monica store called ‘Mission Control,’ the slogan of which is ‘Smart Machines for Thinking People’: “‘Everything we carry responds to the users [sic] actions, from our personal computers and calculators to the newest programmable video games and entertainment systems’” (Los Angeles Times, 1977: WS14). This store, then, marketed itself as a veritable epicenter of media prosumption!

The growth of the home computer market signaled a deepening of the imbrication of the human and the technological: ‘Like a video game, a home computer will provide intimate contact with a television screen – much different from the relationship with the set when watering the plants by watching the news’ (Kron, 1978: C1). This came amid predictions of the eventual total automation of all household activities, precursors of today’s ‘smart home.’ The author of the *New York Times* feature comments on the effects these developments will have on the home, as the 19th-century bourgeois private sphere, based as it was on the ‘fireplace, the bookcase and conversation,’ transforms into the ‘movie-theater-cum-operational-computer-center’ of the present and future (Kron, 1978: C1).

Utopian hopes combined with dystopian apprehensions vis-à-vis this automation and computerization of the home. Per a 1979 feature in the *Chicago Tribune*, the ‘evolution of many video

games into personal computers is the big news on the electronics front this year' (Winter, 1979: D1). The author muses on the term 'personal computer,' wary of the *impersonal* character of those 'nonhuman "brains"' that seem to be so adept at outthinking their own creations' (Winter, 1979: D1). For marketers, the challenge was, as with any new consumer technology, to attract potentially skeptical first adopters. Per one of Atari's developers who specialized in the company's computer products,

High prices and consumer fear of the unknown is what's making it hard to put a personal computer in every home right now. We're hoping we can break even until computers become a more pervasive part of everyday life... it will take half a generation to really get everybody to accept them. You have to be algorithmically literate, and that means teaching kids computer languages in school. (Winter, 1979: D1)

A knowledge of computer language would allow consumers to perform their own programming, but given the specialization required, companies focused on selling computers 'based on the functions you can do by buying programmed cassettes' (Winter, 1979: D1). Functions envisioned included practical tasks such as finances and taxes, drawing, gameplay, educational quizzes, personal fitness, document filing, and control of home appliances.

Along these lines, one interview respondent, Raymond, moved from video game consoles to the Atari 800 home computer, on which he played games, used the word processor, and experimented with music composition packages. From his perspective, video games got people used to computers within the home, comfortable with them as something they could handle and control:

It was amazingly cool to have this device in the house that was a computer that I could make do whatever I wanted. I know what this thing does. I know what it's capable of... Even if it's a game, I still had the option of being able to program it and do whatever I wanted.

The sense of control, then, intensified with the rise of computing. Even with the increasing engagement and autonomy afforded by video games and video recorders, computers allowed the user to program the machine and tailor it much more to personal preference.

Program listings were available in magazines and by mail, as noted by Lewis, who attempted to program games into his early computers, though their hardware sometimes limited the speed of gameplay. Like Raymond, Lewis found video games to be ‘an easy-to-use, approachable, and fun type of computer optimized specifically for playing games... Their popularity helped to make people comfortable with computers,’ whereas previously they had seen machines as being *outside of human control* (potentially having, as it were, a mind of their own). Moreover, the simplicity of those computers made programming them straightforward, even for relative novices: ‘They were a technical challenge, a creative outlet, and a puzzle waiting to be solved all rolled into one.’ Video games, then, helped to usher in an era of computerized subjectivity as prosumption deepened in its sophistication and level of engagement, and as the lives of the new prosumers became increasingly technologically textured.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the sociocultural reception and experience of the earliest ‘programmable’ home video game consoles in the U.S., the Magnavox Odyssey and Atari Video Computer System. These systems brought into being a more dynamic and *participatory* mode of media consumption – one whose graphical limitations were supplemented by players’ *imagination* – and which deepened with the emergence of *computerization*. The rise of ‘prosumption’ of which these consoles were a part, moreover, brought about new forms of materially co-constituted subjectivity, and an intensification of the technological texturing of American domestic life.

Theoretically, a central objective has been to integrate the literature on prosumption – derived from popular accounts (Toffler, 1980), sociological analysis (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), and management discourse (Tapscott and Williams, 2008) – with Althusserian and especially Latourian accounts of the interpellative and technological dimensions of subjectivity. As a mode of subjectivity, the prosumer is both interpellated and technologically co-constituted.

Historically, while I suggest placing this historical moment along a trajectory that culminates with the smartphones and 24/7 interactivity of contemporary media culture, that is a story only the outlines of which I have sketched. Further research needs to be done into the continuing technological development of both video games and computer technology into the 1980s and 1990s to explore the shifting sociohistorical contours of this mode of subjectivity and its relation to the broader ‘mediascape.’ In what ways is the more ‘sophisticated’ prosumer of 2019 comparable to the incipient prosumer of the 1970s, and how have our understanding and engagement with participatory media changed in the interim? These are questions that are ripe for further exploration on the part of sociologists, historians, and media scholars.

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CONCLUSION

BEYOND VOLUNTARISM AND STRUCTURALISM

This dissertation has encompassed three studies of the dynamics of audience participation in media. The first chapter argued that the ideology and organization of Web 2.0 platforms represents an extension of the ‘new spirit of capitalism.’ The second chapter explored the contestation that arises within wrestling fan culture, between managers who aim to evoke controlled participation, and fans who seek to collectively shape the direction of storylines. The final chapter explored early home video games as an important historical moment in the emergence of participatory ‘prosumption,’ one which anticipated the contemporary ubiquity of technological interactivity. Here I offer reflections on each chapter in turn, particularly in light of the overarching framework of participation ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’

With respect to the opening chapter, Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2007) new spirit of capitalism thesis a key point of reference not only here but for the entire dissertation. On the surface it can appear as a totalizing, hyper-structuralist account of contemporary capitalism. According to this view,

capitalism has completely ‘endogenized’ (Budgen, 2000) the critique of alienation, reorganizing itself such that its hegemony over the working class is secured and deepened. A capitalism this powerful, moreover, seems to leave little room for resistance, given its capacity to swallow up opposition.

However, this is a one-sided reading. It ignores the key insight that the new spirit of capitalism involves a *tradeoff*, of increased autonomy for decreased security. The welfare state and lifelong careers of the postwar boom have given way to the ‘flexible specialization’ (Piore and Sabel, 1984) of the new economy. Moreover, while the new spirit is a modality of managerial power ‘from above,’ workers genuinely experience greater autonomy ‘from below’ in many workplaces.

The application of the theory to the case of ‘digital labor’ preserves this dialectic. On the one hand platforms and managers steer, direct, and capture the value of user participation. On the other hand people can make use of these platforms for self expression, creative collaboration, and political organization. The fact that the latter activities are bound up with the commodified structure of most platforms does not necessarily render them meaningless or ‘co-opted.’

This is in contrast to Foucauldian accounts of power that take on a functionalist hue in negating all agentic possibilities within historically shifting schemes of domination (Foucault, 1991). The new spirit of capitalism, rather than constituting an all-embracing totality, contains within it contradictions, ruptures, and openings to future historical possibility. These contradictions, moreover, obtain not only at the level of ‘micro-power’ and ‘micro-politics’ but more broadly in terms of collective struggles for economic security and social equality, not least among creative workers (Lazzarato, 2007). The new spirit itself arose as a response to mass disaffection among skilled workers in the advanced capitalist countries who were alienated by prevailing institutions of education, work, and government. In the process it eclipsed the second spirit of organized welfare capitalism, itself a response to the Communist critiques of and movements against deregulated *laissez*

faire capitalism. Boltanski and Chiapello succeed in preserving this non-teleological dialectic of movement in their analysis, highlighting the possibilities of collective contestation and transformation vis-a-vis prevailing systems of social domination.

These dynamics also hold with respect to the case study of Web 2.0 platforms. For one thing, a range of non-commodified platforms exists online, representing a different model of online sociality and participation. Erik Olin Wright (2010: 3) has even classified one such site, *Wikipedia*, as among the ‘real utopias’ pointing toward post-capitalist modes of social organization:

Wikipedia is a profoundly anti-capitalist way of producing and disseminating knowledge. It is based on the principle ‘to each according to need, from each according to ability.’ No one gets paid for editing, no one gets charged for access. It is egalitarian and produced on the basis of horizontal reciprocities rather than hierarchical control.

Moreover, there have been organizing efforts on the part of ‘digital laborers’ to claim greater control over their work and its compensation. The 2011 sale of Huffington Post to AOL earned Arianna Huffington \$315 million dollars, while its bloggers, whose labor was the source of all of the site’s content, and therefore its value, were left completely uncompensated. While some might maintain that having one’s work featured on a high-profile platform already constitutes a form of compensation in the currency of the ‘attention economy,’ it would be difficult to argue that the huge value generated by the site’s contributors merited no monetary remuneration. Many contributors certainly felt this way, organizing an ‘e-strike’/boycott of HuffPo, as well as filing a class action lawsuit that charged Huffington with ‘unjust enrichment’ (Ross, 2013).

Apart from these examples of collective production and self-organization, social media platforms open up very real possibilities to individuals for novel forms of expression and creativity. While somewhat static and reified, the distinction between the one-to-many logic of old media in contrast

to the many-to-many logic of new media touches upon important economic and cultural shifts that have taken place in the digital age. Certainly, inequalities in participation and remuneration are significant, and managerial and capitalist power are still very much at play, but platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter provide new outlets for aesthetic production and the construction and performance of self – these in turn are bound up with new and interesting modes of sociality. Commodification and managerial power are not mutually exclusive with individual creativity and online community.

Contestation between manager and participatory consumer is the central theme of the study of professional wrestling fan culture. There I focus on the ways in which cultural producers aim to steer and manage ‘brand communities.’ I find that World Wrestling Entertainment strives to do this both online and offline, as it encourages its consumers to engage and participate within prescribed parameters on social media and at live shows. Both, in turn, become sites of consumer resistance, as fans influence the direction of storylines and the promotion of their own favored stars.

The link here between online and offline participation offers important historical insight into the development of audience engagement. As Napoli (2011) points out, the ‘audience autonomy’ made possible by digital media calls forth association with the fundamentally participatory nature of 19th century live performance, most notably vaudeville. These two eras bookend the 20th century, marked by the rise of broadcast media and a comparatively passive audience. Professional wrestling represents a unique combination of these two modes of engagement, one in which online and offline activity feed off one another, and ‘old’ and ‘new’ media forms come together.

One question that arises in considering this case is the extent to which the fan initiatives described constitute ‘genuine’ resistance. If fans are still paying for tickets to come to arenas and jeer the company favorites, or if they are still watching the show on television only to tweet critically about

it, are they not still engaged broadly in ‘participation from above’? I would argue that is not the case, given that they view themselves as defending a purer or more authentic version of the genre of professional wrestling, vis-à-vis the overly sanitized, mainstream, and corporate branding imposed upon them by the company. This is another instance in which commodification and ‘authentic’ participation need not be mutually exclusive. Whenever the company is forced to give in to fan demands and alter its storylines, certainly those fans are then buying tickets or video subscriptions to view an event like Wrestlemania – but they are also watching the unfolding of a narrative that they shaped and influenced, even co-authored.

In this sense there is an overly apocalyptic tone and line of argument in some of the autonomist Marxist writings, as with Arvidsson’s (2005: 252) account of capital’s vampiric nature:

Brands, British branding guru John Grant [argues,] satisfy consumers’ desire for stable elements to be used in the construction of an identity that the social environment no longer provides. He forgets to add that the process of identity production is subsequently subsumed as a source of surplus value. In the form of the brand, the unstable and reflexive nature of post-modern social relations works as a precondition for the self-valorization of immaterial capital. Capital feeds directly off life itself.

There is a tendentiousness to this line of thinking, treating consumers as helpless victims and dupes of postmodern capitalism.

A useful supplement to this structuralism is to view culture as a ‘toolkit,’ a set of resources on which consumers draw to construct their identities and organize their social lives (Swidler, 1986). Swidler’s (1986: 273) approach treats culture firstly as an array of ‘symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems. Second ... it focuses on “strategies of action,” persistent ways of ordering action through time.’ A branded

entertainment form like professional wrestling provides just such a set of symbols, stories, and rituals – including the characters, narratives, and genre conventions – and fans make use of them in their interactions and ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman, 1959). This remains the case even if those resources are integrated into the production of commodified spectacle ‘from above.’

The dialectic at play here recalls de Certeau’s critique of Foucault. De Certeau (1984) recognized panopticism as a social reality, reflecting the prevailing regime of spatial organization. As he writes (De Certeau, 1984: 95), ‘The language of power is in itself “urbanizing,” but the city is left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power.’ In particular de Certeau is interested in creative ways through which people walk through urban space, often ‘side-stepping’ the imperatives of panoptic urban administration. An analogous contestation between management and autonomy obtains in wrestling fandom, as well as other cultural fields like sports, television, and music.

As with Arvidsson’s structuralist conception of brands, some have argued that a kind of top-down, even ‘totalitarian’ logic characterizes ostensibly ‘interactive’ media like video games. This is based on a strongly Althusserian account of subjectivity (while I reference Althusser in the discussion of video games, this is not to be taken as a full-throated endorsement of his framework, as should be clear from the thrust of the argument). Althusser, of course, famously dismissed the possibility of human freedom in his formulation of history as a ‘process without a subject’ (1976: 99); moreover, in *Reading Capital*, he writes that ‘biological men are only the *supports* or bearers of the guises ... assigned to them by the structure of relations in the social formation’ (Althusser, 2015: 402).

From one perspective, video games seem to enact the essential coordinates of Althusser’s theory of ‘interpellation,’ by the logic of which he attempted to account for the ideological reproduction of capitalism. For Althusser, capitalism addresses individuals as ‘subjects’ in a dual sense – ‘subjected

to' the existing social-structural apparatus, and identifying with this subjection as the locus of free subjectivity, the authorship of one's own actions. As he writes,

the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself.' *There are no subjects except by and for their subjection.* That is why they 'work all by themselves' (Althusser, 1970: 182).

This paradoxical combination of structural constraint and a subjective sense of freedom and identification are to be found even in the most basic of video games. Note the experience of playing a simple arcade classic like Pacman – the user zigs and zags around the maze, avoiding ghosts and consuming pellets to advance to increasingly challenging levels. One finds oneself moving with this pizza-shaped avatar, identifying with it in a visceral fashion, desperately evading the ghosts and experiencing a rush of enjoyment upon making it to the next level. All the while, what the player tends to forget is the constraining apparatus of rules and restrictions that not only act upon the avatar but pre-constitute it in the first place. In an Althusserian sense, Pacman, like all video games, is ideological, offering the illusion of freedom and agency within an entirely pre-structured field.

In this vein, Matt Garite contends in his article, 'The Ideology of Interactivity,' 'interpellation' rather than 'interactivity' seems to better capture the relationship between player and interface: 'this "interactive" feature of video games tends to manifest itself as a relentless series of demands, or a way of disciplining player behavior' (2003: 1). Discipline is presented as its opposite, freedom and limitless possibility, in what Lev Manovich (2001) calls a kind of 'totalitarian interactivity': 'Players are made to feel like these decisions matter or have consequence, since the imprisoning code that determines such options always remains hidden from sight' (Garite, 2003: 6).

However, there is a narrow dystopianism about this line of analysis. For one thing, in the context of increasing media fragmentation, consumers can ostensibly ‘choose’ which form of ‘interpellation’ to be subjected to, whether television, video games, books, or other media. My interview respondents pointed to this, noting the ways in which they structured their video game consumption around, say, television programming schedules. Moreover, all media are interpellative, pre-constituting the experience of the consumer spatially and temporally. In spite of this interpellation, however, possibilities remain to make use of media in ‘unsanctioned’ and creative ways. Computer systems can be hacked, music can be remixed, and books can be read out of order. A la de Certeau, there is space for agentic possibility vis-à-vis a dominant scheme of management or interpellation.

These questions all ultimately point toward one of the foundational problems of social theory, namely the relationship between structure and agency, macro and micro. I follow Levine (et al., 1987) in refusing a reduction of one into the other. On their account, ‘Anti-reductionism acknowledges the importance of micro-level accounts in explaining social phenomena, while allowing for the irreducibility of macro-level accounts to these micro-level explanations’ (Levine et al., 1987: 75). By contrast methodological individualism looks at all large scale social phenomena as emergent aggregates of micro-level processes, and structuralism views the micro as utterly epiphenomenal.

The framework of participation from above and below aims to avoid these two traps, both of which would fail to account for the dynamics observable in my case studies. Per an overly macro account, participation is simply the output of large scale structures like ‘communicative capitalism,’ ‘Empire,’ the ‘panopticon,’ and so forth. This view has trouble making sense of action ‘on the ground,’ especially action that runs counter to dominant entities and interests like media corporations. Per an overly micro analysis, though, those large scale realities recede into the distant background and all

one is left with are patterns of action, without clear explanation as to their origins, influences, and determinants. Put more empirically, participatory consumers are neither dupes of producers nor utterly sovereign in relation to them.

To an important extent, the binaristic separation of these two sets of phenomena constitutes a pure abstraction, more useful methodologically than it is sound ontologically. This puts one squarely in the terrain of Giddens' conception of the 'duality of structure,' according to which 'rules and resources are drawn upon by actors in the production of interaction, but are thereby also reconstituted through such interaction. Structure is thus the mode in which the relation between moment and totality expresses itself in social reproduction' (1979: 71). Macro and micro, then, are mutually co-constituting, insofar as actors draw upon and are shaped by structure on the one hand, and their action shapes and reconstitutes it on the other.

Finally, this kind of dialectical approach to the study of media, culture and society, should put to bed the hugely influential but analytically dubious perspective expressed by Horkheimer and Adorno, most notably in the 'Culture Industry' chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002). Media are not solely mechanisms of domination, ensuring conformity with prevailing values and systems of class rule. Media consumers are not mindless drones, caught up in a totalitarian prison that is all the more effective for the fact that it is invisible. Certainly media are bound up with processes of social reproduction, including the reinforcement of hierarchies of class, race, and gender. Much of the media in advanced capitalist societies are commodified and subject to hugely unequal ownership and control. And cultural participation is a new modality of commodified and managed consumption. But this entire logic of domination comes up against a very different one, of autonomy, creativity, and collaboration from below. Scholars would be well advised to take account of both of these tendencies, and, crucially, the *interrelation* between them, in their studies of media and culture.

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