

## FLIP SIDES OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

**Book:** *Bastard Culture! User Participation and the extension of cultural industries*

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Has celebrating users' generated content become a dominant 'grand' narrative of web entrepreneurs, scholars and online businesses? What is hidden behind the participatory buzz of Web 2.0? In *Bastard Culture! User Participation and the extension of cultural industries* Mirko Tobias Schaefer demystifies this framework by critically exploring the network of discourses that constitute 'participatory culture'. Unlike other researches in the field, Schaefer does not rely on 'romanticizing' users' participation. Instead, he brings multidisciplinary theories to form an analytical grid through which he reveals socio-political factors that have played an important role in the creation and development of participatory technological platforms.

Have we been told that social progress is achieved through technology? Does design influence interaction? What are the dominant scholarly approaches and users' appropriations? All in all, what constitutes the emerging digital participatory culture, and what are its implications for the organization of cultural production? These are the questions Schaefer aims to answer through his research by developing cohesive theoretical, methodological and analytical frameworks. He conceptualizes three domains within participatory culture: **discourses, people and social use** and **technology** and a constellation of relations among them. Schaefer maps the interactions within and between the three domains using Foucault's notion of *dispositif*, Latour's *Actor-Network Theory* and management's *socio-technical ecosystems*: "The *dispositif of participation* sketches a macro-level of formations between discourses, users and technologies. *Actor-networks* constitute specific constellations within the *dispositif of participation*. *Socio-technical ecosystems* describe the interaction of large groups of users and information systems" (Schaefer 2008:25). This is brought to outline the complexity of relations between the various 'agents' in the participatory culture.

The book begins with tracing the popular discourses that associate technology with the 'high' promises of progress, freedom, democracy, etc. by referring to 'key' scholarly texts ("Communications, Computers, Networks", special edition of *Scientific American*, 1991), political agendas (the *Information Highway* of Clinton/Gore's administration) and technology dedicated platforms (*Wired* magazine). Schaefer crafty weaves a case study of Cisco Systems' advertising campaigns of 1998 and 2005 to explicate the socio-political back-up (sometimes paradoxical) of the Web's development. The company was promoting itself, the Internet and the need to participate

online as a mean to achieve economical prosperity, social progress and global democratization while was involved in allegations for conducting surveillance and censorship (Microsoft, Yahoo, Cisco systems, and Google created the “Great Firewall of China”, which separated the Chinese Internet from the world’s information infrastructure; see Schaefer: 57 footnote). Schafer continues with conceptualization of ‘participation’ from a cultural studies perspective (Benjamin and Brecht / Adorno and Horkheimer presenting the both sides of participation: seeing opportunity in technology to initiate socio-political change and being suspicious of the technological corporate and ownership structures that appropriate users’ activities).

Participation is further coined through the scholarly work of new media researchers as Henry Jenkins, Burns and Clay Shirky that are criticized for assuming that it is: only explicit/motivated; brings social good; do not refer to power structures and do not consider the implementation of users’ participation in software design. Building upon the gaps in the scholarly theory, Schaefer further distinguishes three domains of participation: Accumulation, Archiving/Organizing and Construction (that can overlap in the light of Web 2.0 applications) and two types of users’ participatory activity: explicit and implicit. While explicit one is driven by motivation, the implicit one is channeled through design-‘easy-to-use interfaces’. Schaefer relates participatory culture to the material aspects of computer technology, software, and the Web. He provides concise history of computing (through the works of the pioneers - Turing, Bush, Engelbart, Nelson, Kay, Goldberg, etc.), conceptualizes software as in-material, modular, tentative and crucial for the participatory culture and traces the ‘evolution’ of the Web in terms of technical standards, applications and services. For the third domain of participation (the *socio-technical ecosystem*), Schaefer brings up two sets of case studies: one that examines how software products can be used in ways not envisioned by their designers (the case of Xbox and Xbox-Linux project, the hacking of Sony’s electronic robotic dog AIBO). The other set of cases show how users can constructively participate in the software design, enabling higher participation through constructing easy-to-use applications/platforms for users’ content (*Xbox Media Center*). In terms of online participation, Schaefer gives examples with peer-to-peer file sharing and social networking services (*Napster, The Pirate Bay, Flickr, Facebook, etc.* ) that incorporate implicit participation in their design. This benefits the online platform: “The more people participate in a peer-to-peer file sharing network, the more files become available and the faster the distribution....The more people store and tag their photos on Flickr, the more accurately the search can cluster and retrieve according to search requests”, i.e. improves Yahoo’s (Flicker’s owner) pictures search (Schaefer 2008: 206).

At the end, the participatory research turns to the effects of users’ generated content and practices in relation to the established conventions of media production. Schaefer outlines three types:

confrontation (preserve the old media conditions and practices-the 'revenge' of the music industry on the torrent sites); implementation (when new media practice gets implemented into software design-Xbox 360 and all the platforms for self-representation, social networking and publishing); integration ("strategy that arguably aims at responsibly employing user activities", Schaefer: 273, the cases of Google Maps, Last.fm and Wikipedia).

In *Bastard Culture! User Participation and the extension of cultural industries* Schaefer provides rich analysis of participation and participatory culture, accumulating various theories and interesting case studies (some of them autobiographically nuanced). The book is disciplinarily structured and conceived in the fine spirit of serious doctoral dissertation aimed to bring awareness to the so far underestimated 'flip side' of users' generated content/activities by revealing numerous socio-political and technological agents of influence. Schaefer highlights that participation is a complex and dynamic phenomenon; a cross point of many discourses and power relations. It can be explicit or implicit, channeled through the specificities of the computer, software and the Web. Even the users' practices are heterogeneous: "in their status within the various stages of the production process, as their respective use of tools is heterogeneous with regard to licensing or unlicensed use" (Schaefer 2008: 177). Moreover, Schaefer insists on bringing more critical scholarly approach toward participatory culture since it can actively participate in the online regulation. However, it seems to me that toward the end of the book, even Schaefer loses a part of his criticism, especially analyzing the platforms where users' activities are integrated (Google Maps, Last.fm and Wikipedia). It would have been interesting to see, how this crafty built framework can be tested on 'difficult' case studies that are well facilitating participation, given the fact that the three platforms most likely deploy 'dubious' practices and disguised power relations. This has led me to reconsider the methodology that Schaefer uses for his research. While bringing together theories from different fields (cultural studies, science, and management) and providing hermeneutic analysis is creative approach, does it reveal enough of the online phenomenon? While Latour's *Actor-Network Theory* enhances mapping the agents of influence, can it also estimate the relations among them? Recently, at a lecture given by Elizabeth Losh<sup>1</sup>, Richard Rogers made a remark that there is already a software tool that analyzes whether the comments (a form of users generated content) are 'genuine' or generated by lobbyist or other commercial structures. Even though I constrain myself of discussing here the methodological debates about how the Web is/should be analyzed, I would consider that using online tools to reveal and evaluate 'actors' relations among the participants would have been beneficial for Schaefer's research. On the other side, it is always encouraging to consider that the

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<sup>1</sup> "DIY Authentication Digital Rhetoric and the Subversive Potential of Information Culture", lecture given by Elizabeth Losh on 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2009, in front of New Media Master students

critical agenda set by *Bastard Culture!* will be expanded and developed further in the field of participatory culture.