

Identifying Barriers to Engagement in Participatory Culture

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Abstract: This paper addresses barriers to participatory culture by examining the activities and concerns of twenty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in a social media course. Analysis of self-reported activities related to four dimensions of participatory culture literacy as outlined by Jenkins et al. (2009) revealed that many do not fully engage in participatory culture. While the barriers identified included mention of access issues or a lack of knowledge, most of the concern was with affective issues, including privacy concerns and the perception that they have nothing useful to contribute (or that their contributions will not be welcomed). It is recommended that instructional activities focus on building affective competencies related to participatory culture.

Introduction

During the past decade, widespread deployment of mobile communications and the emergence of social media, with its focus on interactivity and collaboration, have transformed the ways that both designers and users use the Web. Key trends include the migration of user data into cloud-based services, a network model that thrives on large numbers of co-creators adding content, and the rapid growth of the mobile Internet and online video data. These changes have initiated what Jenkins (2006) calls a “participatory culture”. Jenkins et al. (2009) define a participatory culture as one with low barriers to creative expression and civic engagement, both formal and informal networks of support for creating and sharing content, and an informal mentoring system that enables more knowledgeable participants to share key information with novices. Furthermore, participatory culture requires that members feel that their own contributions are worthwhile and that they are socially connected to others and concerned with others’ perceptions of their work. Participatory culture is not merely about entertainment; it also relates to new literacies and work practices that will become increasingly common, and necessary, to function in both school and the workplace. Additionally, participatory media has the potential to channel civic engagement. It is important that learners become active in the shaping of participatory media networks, as at this early stage of participatory media,

the political, economic, social and cultural institutions that constrain and empower the way the new medium can be used, and which impose structures on flow of information and capital—is still unsettled...Because the unique power of

the new media regime is precisely its participatory potential, the number of people who participate in using it during its formative years, and the skill with which they attempt to take advantage of this potential, is particularly salient. (Rheingold, 2008, pp. 100-101)

A quick glance at news stories about today's teenagers and young adults seems to imply that these "digital natives" naturally acquire such skills as a product of access to ICTs and experience with informal communities. However, as Jenkins et al. (2009) note, the skills, knowledge, and opportunities needed to fully engage in participatory culture are not equally distributed. Thus, we must shift our attention as educators and policymakers from questions about technological access to questions about participation, cultural competencies, and social skills for involvement in participatory culture.

Participatory Culture Literacy

Jenkins et al. (2009) describes four forms of participatory culture: affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving, and circulations. *Affiliations* refer to memberships in online communities, including a variety of Social Networking Services (SNS), such as Facebook or MySpace, as well as asynchronous message boards (e.g., review sites, social forums) and synchronous discussion groups (e.g., AIM chat groups). Affiliations also include game clans or guilds, where individuals create in-game communities that often also extend outside of gamespace into additional forms such as discussion boards.

Expressions relates to the production of new creative forms using digital media, including music, video, images, or web content. Mash-ups involve taking existing digital content and combining it to create new content. For example, editing parts of a movie and creating a new audio background. Lessig (2008) refers to this as a new form of literacy, a "Read-Write Culture". Another aspect, skinning and modding, is the process of changing the functionality or appearance of existing software (e.g., creating an add-on for an online game). Fan fiction, both literary and visual, is also included.

Collaborative problem solving relates to teamwork employed to create new knowledge or achieve goals. This can be accomplished through discussion groups focusing on specific problem issues or via collaborative knowledge-building sites such as Wikipedia, what Benkler (2006) describes as "peer production of information, knowledge, and culture" (p. 5). Jenkins (2006) describes a related activity called spoiling in which an online community gathers and analyzes clues and forecasts the outcome of a reality television program.

Finally, *circulations* relates to actively shaping the flow of media by creating and sharing content, with tools such as blogging, podcasting, and microblogging (e.g., Twitter).

Methods

In 2010, the Department of Communication at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa implemented a new curriculum, providing opportunity to redesign our ICTs track and our course that addresses information and communication technology (ICT) services. This

combined lecture-discussion course explores the situated use of ICTs in various personal and institutional settings and focuses on web-enabled services, social media, and the emerging mobile web. No previous technical experience is required, and there is typically a wide range of experience and skills levels.¹ Twenty-eight students in this undergraduate communications course completed a written assignment that asked them to consider the four dimensions of participatory culture – affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving, and circulations – outlined by Jenkins et al. (2009) while reflecting on their own activities and experiences using social media. The assignment was discussed at length in class, and each of the terms used was defined.

Student responses were analyzed to identify their engagement with participatory media in each of the four categories, as well as well as perceived barriers to their involvement.

Results and Discussion

All twenty-eight participants reported affiliations. The most commonly reported activity was the use of SNS, particularly Facebook. The majority also reported that they were members of content-specific forum communities, such as Amazon, Yelp, or Netflix, as well as a number of smaller content-specific sites. Two students noted that they were members of game clans that met both within a game and in online discussion forums. *Table 1* indicates the distribution for each of the participatory culture forms, based on students' self-report of engaging in at least one related activity.

When asked about expressions, fifteen of the twenty-eight reported that they had engaged in such activities. The most common response (six) was involvement in creating video content for YouTube, and four of those had actively remixed content found online for their videos. One student noted, "I have filmed a couple of videos with my friends and classmates that bring in the use of video, sound and effects. These short films have mashed up different music with images that match the song conceptually. We have posted these videos onto Youtube which makes it more of a shared culture." Additional expressions included game modding, fan fiction, sampling of digital audio files, and remix of photographs. Another student stated, "I posted some of my stories onto fanfiction.net and to my surprise the feedback I received seemed to share my enthusiasm for the subject."

Just over half (fifteen) of the students reported engaging in collaborative problem-solving activity. The most common form was in the context of online multiplayer games, where seven students had grouped with other players to address complex problems. One student noted,

Collaborative problem solving and team strategy is a part of my everyday life. Oftentimes I daydream about potential strategies for multiplayer games. These daydreams usually turn into written essays that I can share with my partners or other people who share my interests in strategy building.

¹ During the first week of class, students were asked to assess their own knowledge about a variety of topics covered in the course. This revealed a large variance in both familiarity and skills related to participatory media.

McGonigal (2011) has noted that this aspect of participatory culture has great potential to be harnessed for real-world causes. Four students reported collaboration via tools such as Google Documents, often in a classroom setting. Others had experiences with online problem solving through forums. For example, one person explained that he had worked with other members of a photography discussion forum to solve technical problems others had posed. Wikipedia was frequently mentioned as an example of collaborative problem solving, but no student reported an effort to contribute content. In each of these cases, students stated that they did not feel that they had enough knowledge to make worthwhile contributions.

Circulations were the least reported participatory activity. Although fifteen students had created blogs or Twitter accounts with the intent to add content, only three were actively using these channels at the time of writing. Four noted that the creation of these accounts had been a class requirement and that they had not maintained it since. Five students reported that they intended to create blogs or podcasts in the future but were not sure what to talk about. A number of students noted that they had abandoned content tools such as blogs for SNS such as Facebook, which now integrate blogs, status updates, and other content. It appears that the ability to post short status updates via Facebook or similar services has led to a decline in the use of other services. Interestingly, the Pew Internet Life Project reported that there was a dramatic drop in young adults who blog (from 28% in December 2007 to 14% in late 2009). During this same period, there was a rise in the number of 18-24 years olds that microblog or review others' posts on sites like Twitter (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

Table 1. Distribution of participatory culture activities

<i>Student</i>	Affiliations	Expressions	Collaborative	Circulations
1	X	X		X
2	X	X	X	X
3	X	X		X
4	X	X		
5	X			X
6	X	X		
7	X			
8	X			X
9	X	X	X	X
10	X	X	X	X
11	X			X
12	X		X	
13	X		X	X
14	X			X
15	X	X	X	
16	X	X	X	X
17	X	X	X	
18	X	X	X	
19	X		X	X
20	X		X	
21	X	X	X	
22	X	X	X	X
23	X			X
24	X		X	
25	X	X		
26	X			
27	X		X	
28	X	X		

Barriers to Participatory Culture

When asked to reflect on why they had not participated as much as they might desire, only one student noted that a lack of access to ICTs had posed a problem.² In this case, he was interested in using a smartphone to post Twitter content, but could not afford a monthly data plan. Two students noted that expensive software would be required for them to fully explore their creative interests, but this had not hindered them from participation in other activities. Similarly, a lack of skills was not noted as a major problem. Although several students noted that they did not know how to do something they were interested in, they also mentioned that the information was readily available

² This is not to suggest that access to ICTs and services is not a barrier for some individuals. Rather, it is to acknowledge focus must also be placed on other factors that are not yet as widely addressed.

online or that they had friends who could show them how to do it. Other barriers, largely affective, emerged as reasons they had not participated.

Affective skills, rather than access issues or cognitive constraints, emerged as a major reason students were reluctant to engage in participatory culture. Privacy concerns were noted by seven students. One stated, "I just do not like much personal information being shared with the public, so that's why I don't like to blog or do video blogs." This is not surprising considering that major news outlets, as well as protests within SNS sites such as Facebook, have uncovered a variety of privacy concerns. Students are likely aware that social media sites are now linking information across the web and that, in the United States, there is no comprehensive privacy law to govern the collection and use of our personal data. For example, just prior to the assignment, a major news story revealed that Facebook had temporarily halted its plan to disclose users' home address and phone information to third-party services and *The Wall Street Journal* had recently published an investigation of mobile applications and found that many of the most popular "leak data", often deliberately, to third-party sources (Thurm & Kane, 2010). In addition, there has been increasing publicity and awareness of the privacy risks associated with location-based services such as Facebook Places or Foursquare. Many mobile applications can gather, and sell, information about your location and online activities. Thus, despite Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's claim that the expectation of privacy is no longer a social norm (Shiels, 2010) it appears that concerns about privacy may be at least partly responsible for apprehension about engaging in participatory media activities. Effective strategies for providing students with an understanding of privacy risks and how mitigate them while using web-based services is an area requiring further exploration.

Another barrier that emerged was students' concern about lacking the knowledge to contribute to discussion or media shaping. One student confessed, "I don't think I am 'shaping the flow of media'; rather, I think the media shapes me". She appreciates participatory media but sees herself as a consumer and not a producer. Another wrote,

The most important thing holding me back is that I am really not too sure about what to have my blog about. I'm a little timid because I want to post things that people will actually be interested in. I have not decided on what interests myself and other people enough to actively participate.

Other students mentioned that they had created blogs or Twitter accounts but struggled to find useful content. Similarly, a number noted that they would like to contribute to collaborative sites such as Wikipedia but felt they did not have knowledge needed to do so. A related concern was audience reaction. Students felt embarrassed or anticipated that their work would receive hostile response. For example, one student said, "I feel that anything I would say would only be replied to with a 'So what?' or 'Nobody cares!' All of my years on the Internet has taught me that not many are willing to be as polite as once would be during a face-to-face conversation." Although this might be interpreted as a need to enhance their cognitive competencies, I believe this also emphasizes the need to focus on affective skills. As stated above, the definition of participatory culture outlined by Jenkins et al. (2009) emphasizes that students must feel their contributions are worthwhile and that they are part of a community. Helping students to identify issues that they

feel genuine passion about and finding ways to articulate these across different participatory media to a larger audience is essential. For example, Rheingold (1998) describes a variety of techniques designed to encourage learners to engage in critical public discourse. Further experimentation and evaluation of techniques focusing on affective competencies should be a goal for educators.

Conclusion

This paper addressed barriers to participatory culture by examining the activities and concerns of twenty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in a social media course. Analysis of self-reported activities related to four dimensions of participatory culture literacy as outlined by Jenkins et al. (2009) revealed that many did not engage fully in participatory culture. While the barriers identified included mention of access issues or a lack of knowledge, most of the concern was with affective issues, including privacy concerns and the perceptions that they have nothing useful to contribute, or that their contributions would not be welcomed. It is recommended that instructional activities focus on building affective competencies.

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