# Editorial

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> The television viewer cannot write anything on the screen of his set. He has
> been dislodged from the product; he plays no role in its apparition. He loses
> his author's rights and becomes, or so it seems, a pure receiver, the mirror of a
> multiform and narcissistic actor.
> -- Michel de Certeau[1]

When de Certeau first published *The Practice of Everyday Life* in 1980, the potential for consumers to participate or collaborate in the creation of a cultural text, image or product was limited. The users of cultural products, de Certeau (1984) argues, "appropriate" and "adapt" the "language" imposed on them by the dominant culture for their own ends; not the other way around. Today, however, the conventional boundaries between "users" and "producers" are fast eroding. The traditional models of production, broadcasting, and publishing are being challenged by a networked culture of users whose blogs, music, fan art, video mashups, online communities, videogame mods, and virtual property now exist alongside, and often compete with, those of the dominant entertainment industries.

The dissemination of cheap, easily accessible tools and software for creating media content, along with the rapid rollout of digital networks has undoubtedly destabilised the traditional hierarchies of media production. In turn, it opens up a range of crucial theoretical debates about the potential for new models of media production to emerge, and what their potential consequences may be for existing media platforms. Theorists like Chris Anderson, Yochai Benkler, Henry Jenkins, Eric von Hippel and many others have argued that the emergence of a networked, "participatory" or "convergence" culture has the potential to radically transform everyday life by reshaping the economic models, flows of information, and communities and social structures which determine media production. As a result, they posit, the relationship between the creators and users of content has been turned on its head.

With the dissolution of the traditional user/producer paradigm, however, the ability for the dominant media industry to appropriate and exploit the products created by users of these technologies increases. The content created by modders of computer games like *Half-Life* or *Halo*, the efforts of designers of apps for the iPhone, and the vast volumes of personal information stored on FaceBook profiles all quickly become reappropriated and absorbed back into the

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systems which created them, and potentially used for purposes beyond their authors' intent. Further, the formal and informal rules which govern the production of this new content gives rise to uneasy tensions over issues of ownership and the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure: To what extent do the individuals or groups who invest the time and effort in creating or modifying software claim ownership of the final product? And to what extent, in turn, do the producers of the networks or technological platforms which made their creation possible exploit the labour of others for their own purposes?

These issues feed into the growing concern and anxiety over the rise of "free labour" and its increasing dominance as an informal mode of production in the digital era. As Tiziana Terranova writes,

> voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labor on the Net includes the activity of building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces on MUDs and MOOs… the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value that is completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large (2004).

The existence of this hugely profitable and largely untapped market of commercial production sits uneasily with the optimistic and celebratory accounts proffered by the proponents of participatory culture such as Jenkins and Anderson. The designers of *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* and the corporate owners of user-generated advertising campaigns and social networking websites now profit from the innovation and "co-creative labour" of their participants (Banks and Deuze, 2009). In the process, de Certeau's (1984, p. xix) dichotomy of strategies vs. tactics has been radically reconfigured and problematised as the dynamic between user/producer and labour/leisure becomes increasingly complicated.

It has therefore become necessary to develop a deeper critique of participation in the increasingly networked, collaborative culture of today. While the still nascent effects of networked technologies continue to reshape the media landscape, theoretical discussions on the issue of participation in these networks remain fraught with tensions over the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure, user and producer. It is with this in mind that this special issue of *PLATFORM: Journal of Media and Communication* sets out to explore some of the complications and challenges involved in the practice of participating within contemporary networked cultures. In this issue, we pay critical attention to some of the new technologies and platforms –Wikipedia, digital photo archives, crowdsourcing, among others – that have emerged over the past decade or so with the advent of Web 2.0 and pervasive networking. In the process, the articles in this issue explore what it means to participate in these networks and the forms of collaboration they enable.

### Networked Media, Collaboration and Participation

In his book *The Creation of the Media*, Paul Starr describes the historical development of the modern media industry as being entangled and closely embedded in political institutions and relations of power. Tracing the early political origins of media and communications, Starr writes that "technology and economics alone cannot explain the system of communications we have inherited or the one we are creating", but that "constitutive choices", or decisions

"about how things are built and how they work – their design and rules of operation", play a crucial role in the formation of media technologies and their ongoing economic restructuring and dissemination in society at large (2004, p.1-4). Much the same argument can be made for networked media. While networked practices have a direct impact on our everyday lives and the way communicate and interact with one another, they remain firmly embedded in the devices, technologies and physical infrastructure that make them possible.

As theorists like Castells (2000) and Sassen (2008) have demonstrated, these same material objects remain subject to forms of regulation and control imposed on them at both the local and global, physical and immaterial levels. Russell et al make this argument in relation to collaborative technologies and projects, writing that "the specificities of how networked culture plays out in particular arenas is [sic] highly dependent on media type, industry make up, infrastructures, geopolitics, and cultures of consumption and production" (2008, p. 70). Critiques of new media technologies, and collaborative production in particular, must therefore take into account the conditions and forces which shape media production and the often hidden or invisible dynamics at play in the modification of an open source software program or the sharing of video and photo files on YouTube or Flickr. Such an approach implies a much more complex relationship between networks and the users of networks than the often celebratory accounts of new media culture.

Both Paul Caplan and Nathaniel Tkacz's articles in this issue take up these debates from quite different perspectives. In "Wikipedia and the Politics of Mass Collaboration", Tkacz uses the discussion over the Wikipedia entry for Muhammad as a case study in order to unravel some of the processes and practical conditions behind the creation of collaborative projects. Tkacz critiques what he terms the "discourse of collaboration", pointing out inherent contradictions in the language and rhetoric used by proponents of Web 2.0 and "participatory culture". He notes that, often, definitions of collaboration are defined by "negation", or what it claims to be opposed to (capitalism, centralisation, hierarchical organisation) rather than what it actually is or what participating in the production of co-created or collaborative tools and programs entails. His discussion of the controversy over the inclusion of several historical depictions of Muhammad in the English-language entry on Wikipedia highlights the conflicts and tensions that arise in the mass collaborative production of online content, be it a Wikipedia article or open-source software. Building on the theories of Chantal Mouffe, Christoph Spehr and Mark Elliott, Tkacz makes substantial headway towards addressing what he terms the "failure" of scholarship on the issue to conceptualise the political dimensions of collaboration. He argues that open projects can be seen as "zones of conflict" with their own "ecologies" of production and set of power relations and struggles between co-creators which circumscribe how they are produced and distributed.

Issues of participation in networks also come into play in relation to debates around digital photography and archiving in Caplan's article, "London 2012: Distributed Imag(in)ings and Exploiting Protocol". By analysing the "protocols" or algorithmic code which govern the operation of networks and the way we engage with them, Caplan argues that we can view code as an "actant" or non-human actor in networks. Protocol thus explicitly and implicitly reinforces the ideologies imposed on users by the powerful corporations and institutions that have a vested interest in their operation – in this case, the organisers of the mass media event that is the London 2012 Olympic Games. Drawing on a vast repertoire of critical theory, from Baudrillard and Foucault to Galloway and Latour and ending with Walter Benjamin, Caplan applies these theoretical discussions to the network of photographic practices entangled around the act of "imag(in)ing" London 2012. In doing so, he observes that, following Galloway (2004), if we are

to critically engage with the discourse surrounding contemporary networks, an analysis of, and critical intervention within, the protocols of these technologies is necessary. As he posits, it will be necessary to use these protocols "to create an exploit, to make the actants redraw the power relations and re-structure the spaces of possibility for imag(in)ing 2012." It is no coincidence that both Tkacz and Caplan tackle the "discourse" which surrounds these technologies, as they contribute to an understanding of networked culture which engages with the gap between the rhetoric and practice of participation.

In a similar vein, Jeff Biggar's article "Crowdsourcing for the Environment: The Case of Brighter Planet" takes as its case study the model of crowdsourcing, used by businesses and organisations to "outsource projects to networks of individuals". Coined by *Wired* magazine writer Jeff Howe, crowdsourcing offers the potential for greater participation in the creation of media content, commercial products and solutions to problems and issues. In doing so, it mobilises a dispersed and decentralised network of users to work collectively together toward a common goal. As Biggar demonstrates through his analysis of one such model, the online environmental community [Brighter Planet](#), crowdsourcing is a powerful tool for raising awareness of environmental issues around pollution and carbon reduction. However, he argues, it is not without shortcomings: crowdsourcing is potentially exclusionary and often caters to a "homogenous and privileged crowd", thus widening the gap between the digitally literate and information poor. Biggar, following the work of Terranova (2004) and others on free labour, thus makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of crowdsourcing and its position within the new media economy. As he writes, "crowdsourcing can be seen as an extension of communicative capitalism's restructuring of leisure, consumption, and production as it represents the collapse of waged and un-waged labour and erasure of work/life boundaries."

Also in this issue, Sherry S. Yu and Daniel Ahadi's general article on "Promoting Civic Engagement Through Ethnic Media" explores some of these debates around inclusion and marginalisation in relation to the traditional media. Their article uses as its case study the mainstream English and ethnic Korean media's newspaper coverage of the 2008 Canadian federal election, in order to empirically analyse the role ethnic media outlets play in migrant's civic integration in multicultural societies. Building on existing studies of minority participation in the public sphere, Yu and Ahadi apply these debates within the specific context of Canada and the relatively recent issues around minority political rights that have emerged over the past few decades. Their study shows that, consistent with existing studies on the issue, ethnic media outlets tended to cover minority issues in a way that was specifically tailored to issues of interest to Korean voters, in contrast to the mainstream press. However, this distinction was considerably heightened in the case of the 2008 election, where "visible minorities were nearly invisible in English media, either as voters or candidates." Their article raises crucial issues about the extent to which ethnic media are connected to and supplement the broader public sphere, or whether they exist as autonomous "sphericules" largely ignored by broader communication infrastructures. They argue that with greater political and economic support, "ethnic media can work towards becoming recognised as 'new options' of the larger public sphere, and operate in such a way as to change the dynamics and power relations within the mainstream."

As the contributions to this special issue of *PLATFORM* demonstrate, the numerous, multifarious manifestations of networked and collaborative media technologies create new possibilities for distributed and decentralised forms of media production that exist in opposition to the mainstream media industries. At the same time, they are entangled and enmeshed within a complex politics of participation that sometimes clashes with the celebratory accounts of new media and Web 2.0 technologies. Issues of control, conflict, inclusiveness and marginalisation

all come into play, underlining the still contentious nature of these networks. To return to de Certeau, current debates around these technologies will need to move beyond the conventional dichotomy of user and producer and build on the existing work of theorists in digital media studies to explore the complex process of networked participation. It is hoped that the articles in this issue of *PLATFORM* make a modest contribution towards exploring the nature of participation – both in new forms of collaborative media, as well as traditional media platforms.

Endnotes

1 Epigraph: de Certeau, 1984, p. 31

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