

From Prosumer to Producer: Understanding User-Led Content Creation

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Alvin Toffler's image of the prosumer continues to influence in a significant way our understanding of the user-led, collaborative processes of content creation which are today labelled "social media" or "Web 2.0". A closer look at Toffler's own description of his prosumer model reveals, however, that it remains firmly grounded in the mass media age: the prosumer is clearly not the self-driven creative originator and developer of new content which can today be observed in projects ranging from open source software through *Wikipedia* to *Second Life*, but simply a particularly well-informed, and therefore both particularly critical and particularly active, consumer. The highly specialised, high end consumers which exist in areas such as hi-fi or car culture are far more representative of the ideal prosumer than the participants in non-commercial (or *as yet* non-commercial) collaborative projects. At the same time, for Toffler's 1970s model of the prosumer to describe these 21st-century phenomena may be an unrealistic expectation.

The problem does not lie with Toffler, then, but rather in the industrial-age model of a process which is clearly delineated into production, distribution, and consumption upon which he had to build. This trichotomy was necessary for the creation of material as well as immaterial goods within an industrial framework – it applies even to the mass media industries, where content production was just as concentrated in a handful of major institutions as had been the case for the production of other mass goods for consumption. In the emerging information age, however, characterised by decentralised media networks and widespread and low-cost access to the means of production, the situation is different. What happens when distribution is automatically taken care of by the network itself, and when virtually any consumer can also become a producer – instead of a small group of commercial producers who are supported at best by a handful of near-professional prosumers? What happens, when the number of 'lead users' (as Eric von Hippel has described them) is increased massively – if, as the *Wikipedia* slogan has it, 'anyone can edit', if any user can potentially participate in content creation?

To describe the creative and collaborative participation which today characterises user-led projects such as *Wikipedia*, terms such as 'production' and 'consumption' are no longer

particularly useful – even in laboured constructions such as ‘commons-based peer-production’ (Benkler) or ‘p2p production’ (Bauwens). In the user communities participating in such forms of content creation, roles as consumers and users have long begun to be inextricably interwoven with those as producer and creator: users are always already also able to be producers of the shared information collection, regardless of whether they are aware of that fact – they have taken on a new, hybrid role which may be best described as that of a *produser*. Projects which build on such produsage can be found in areas from open source software development through citizen journalism to *Wikipedia*, and beyond this also in multi-user online computer games, filesharing, and even in communities collaborating on the design of material goods. While addressing a range of different challenges, they nonetheless build on a small number of universal key principles. This paper documents these principles and indicates the possible implications of this transition from production and prosumption to produsage.

Bio:

Dr Axel Bruns is the author of *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008 – see <http://produsage.org/>). He is a Senior Lecturer in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, and also authored *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (2005), and edited *Uses of Blogs* with Joanne Jacobs (2006; all released by Peter Lang, New York). He is a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (<http://cci.edu.au/>), and a Senior Researcher in the Smart Services Collaborative Research Centre (<http://www.smartservicescrc.com.au/>); he was a co-founder and continues to serve as General Editor of *M/C – Media and Culture* (<http://www.media-culture.org.au/>). His personal blog is at <http://snurb.info/> and contains many of his articles and talks, and he contributes to the *Gatewatching.org* citizen journalism research group blog with Jason Wilson and Barry Saunders.