

Correcting an Historical Error:
On Production, Consumption and Prosumption

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This paper will contest the idea, explicit and implicit in work on this topic, that prosumption, user-generation, or co-creation, are relatively new phenomena. This erroneous view is traceable to the tendency, historically, to distinguish between producer and consumer; production and consumption. In fact, they have always been intertwined (it is impossible to have production without consumption and vice versa) and, as a result, prosumption has not only always been with us, but it has been preeminent.

Prosumption is the broader category that subsumes both production and consumption. This was especially clear in the pre-industrial world where, to a large degree, farmers produced what they consumed. However, the heyday of the Industrial Revolution led to the creation of a clear, but erroneous, distinction between producer and consumer, as well as to the privileging of the producer (both capitalist and worker) over the consumer. This was the case even though, as Marx well-recognized, producers consumed all sorts of things, as well as the fact that all industries depended on the consumers of what they produced. This privileging of the producer has continued to this day, long after the preeminence of industry, at least in the West, has receded. Also lingering is the tendency to distinguish between producers and consumers. In general, the tendency to tear production and consumption apart was an unfortunate byproduct of the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, contemporary trends- especially the movement toward the immaterial and the virtual- make it clear that that the distinction will grow even more irrelevant to understanding the dynamics of the economy.

With the prosumer now reclaiming its rightful place at the center of analysis of the economy, this essay will differentiate among major types of prosumers. While the types will be discussed discretely, there is significant overlap among them. Among those to be discussed are the following:

1. The *embodied prosumer*, an actor in the material world who engages, more or less simultaneously, in both the acts of consumption and production (e.g., the employee in an auto factory, the diner in a fast food restaurant, DIY).
2. The *virtual prosumer*, that is, the user who generates content on the Internet, especially Web 2.0 (e.g. Wikipedia, Second Life, blogs). In contrast to the first type, the prosumer in this case is both disembodied and non-material.
3. The *prosumer of advertising, brands and branding*. The consumer of advertisements and brands is, and *always has been*, simultaneously the producer of those ads and brands. Of course, ads and brands are in the main created (and eventually consumed), in their original and basic forms, by those who work in marketing, advertising, and the like. However, once the ad or brand exists, what it means, whether it is successful, and whether it takes off is determined by the consumers of those ads and brands and

their productive work on them (e.g. defining them differently than intended by their creators); in other words, ads and brands are always the product of prosumption.

4. The *prosumer of experience and of experience economy*". More and more of our encounters with the economy have to do with experiences of one kind or another and not simply with our relationship to goods of various kinds. While there is even a strong element of prosumption involved in our relationship with goods (producing the taste of a particular food, the image associated with some article of clothing), this is much more the case with experiences. For example, a visit to any of the major cathedrals of consumption- Disney World, Vegas-type casinos, cruise ships, etc.- requires that visitors (and those who work there, e.g. the "cast members" at Disney) produce, materially and immaterially, their own experiences. The prosumers (producer/consumers) who create and operate these cathedrals play a key role in creating their basic structure and environment, but to be successful the experiences in them must be co-created, and in a pleasurable way, by the prosumers (consumers/producers).

The above are merely suggestive of some types of prosumers and dimensions of prosumption. Assuming that prosumption will now take its place at the heart of analyses of *both* production and consumption, we can expect more types to be delineated and increasingly nuanced analyses of the process of prosumption. However, the last example makes it clear that we may need to distinguish between two main types of prosumers- those who are producers first (producers/consumers) and those who are consumers first (consumers/producers). While this is an important distinction, the danger lies in repeating in other terms the false distinction between producers and consumers.