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Sounds from Utopia

Critical Reflections
on the Web 2.0 Perspective and
Web-based Communities

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Program

- n Web 2.0 and the rise of participatory media
- n Pretensions and assumptions behind Web 2.0
- n Four characteristics of three types of community
- n Who actually participates and with which activities?
- n Who controls the Internet/ online communities?
- n Do they constitute new forms of sociability?
- n Is online community language special?
- n Does peer-to-peer networking create 'wise crowds'?
- n What is the quality of user-generated content as compared to professional media and political content?
- n Are amateurs and professionals equal on the Internet?

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Pretensions behind Web 2.0 and the Internet as an *Empowering Medium*

1. It is supposed to be an alternative for institutional *politics* and for the gap between official politics and citizens: bottom-up politics and *participative politics*
2. It is supposed to be an alternative for the established *mass media* losing their monopolies of news production and programming : *civic journalism* en *on-demand media*
3. It is supposed to be an alternative for established *expertise*: *peer-to-peer networks* know more (*Smart Mobs*)

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Web 2.0 and the Rise of Participatory Media

This is already the fourth wave of the Internet defined as an *empowering medium*, bottom-up.

1. 1980-1990 The Athenian agora and Teledemocracy: the futurist perspectives of Toffler, Arterton a.o.
2. 1990-1995 Virtual community perspective of Rheingold and the Internet pioneers: recovering 'lost' community
3. 1995-2000 The Internet hype and the popularisation and commercialisation of the Internet as a democratic tool for citizens and consumers
4. 2000-2005 Web 2.0 and the Internet as a participatory, productive and creative medium

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Persistent Assumptions

- n The Internet is an *interactive* medium that departs from one-sided communication
- n The Internet foremost is an *active and creative* medium (users evolve from receivers to participants)
- n The Internet is a *direct* medium in which individual users are able to determine or create the centre of society (intermediaries are no longer necessary)
- n The Internet offers a platform where *everybody is equal*; presumed expertise has to prove itself
- n The Internet creates things in a *network*, not primarily by individuals or organizations
- n The Internet is a *compensation* for lost community and sociability (online communities and social networking)

ALL CONTAIN SOME TRUTH; ALL ARE CONTESTABLE

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Does Utopia become Reality this time?

1. On account of technological progress and the popularisation of the Internet the fourth wave has to be taken more seriously: the Internet is really changing: user-generated content is on the rise.
2. However, basic problems with this utopia (assumptions) remain
3. Let's take a look at the achievements and shortcomings of web-based communities in the perspective of Web 2.0

Four Characteristics of Three Types of Community

(Van Dijk (1995) *The Reality of Virtual Community, Trends in Communication 1*)

Type of Community Characteristic	Physical Community	Communities Online	Online (web-based) communities
1. Composition and Activities	Full population Several offline activities	Population with access and skills Several online and offline activities	Population with special access and skills Special(ized) online activities
2. Social Organization	Offline (known) Tied to space, time and physical reality	Offline + Online integration Less tied to space, time and physical reality (except for humans and infrastructures)	Online (new) Not tied to space, time and physical reality

Four Characteristics of Three Types of Community

Type of Community	Physical Community	Communities Online	Online (web-based) communities
3. Language and Social Interaction	FTF Organized Exchange (hierarchy, market, association)	FTF and CMC (Integration) Organized exchange and networking	CMC (multimedia) Peer-to-peer networking
4. Culture and Identity	Homogeneous (traditional) Differentiation (modern)	Heterogeneous (universal) Multicultural	Heterogeneous (specialized)

- ### Questions for the remainder of this speech
- Composition and Activities: Who actually participates and with which activities?
 - Social Organization: 1. Who controls the Internet/ the online communities? 2. Do they constitute new forms of sociability?
 - Language and Social Interaction: 1. Is online community language special? 2. Does peer-to-peer networking create 'wise crowds'?
 - Culture and Identity: 1. What is the quality of user-generated content as compared to professional media and political content? 2. Are amateurs and professionals equal on the Internet?

Who actually participates and with which activities?

Increasingly Internet users (mainly young and high-educated people) participate in Web 2.0 activities (social networking and profiling sites, video and music exchange sites, graphical virtual communities, blogging, wiki's etc.). However, with a low level of skill and effect.

Example: 2007 situation, population of the Netherlands:

Household access:	80%
Actual use:	67%
Sufficient operational skills ('button knowledge'):	54%
Sufficient formal Internet skills (navigating etc.):	48%
Sufficient information skills (searching, selecting...):	42%
Sufficient strategic skills (using the Internet as a means for a personal or professional goal)	17%


Van Deursen & Van Dijk (2008) *Measuring Digital Skills*

Contenders for Web 2.0 Activities

	% Internet Users USA	Activities	Survey PEW
Sharing	34	Get photos developed or display photos	sep 2005
	30	Rated a product, service or person	sep 2005
	27	Shared files from own computer with others	jun 2005
	26	Shared own creations: artwork, photos, stories or videos	dec 2005
Creating	18	Remixed material into own creations	jan 2005
	14	Created or worked on own webpage	dec 2005
	13	Created or worked on webpages or blogs for others	dec 2005
	11	Used social or professional networking sites	Sep 2005
	8	Created or worked on own online journal or blog	Apr 2006

Online Video Gets Social: % Internet users (Pew, 2007)


	TOT	Male	Female	19-29	30-49	50-64
Receive video links	75	75	75	76	77	71
Send video links to others	57	59	54	67	55	45
Watch video with others	57	58	57	73	58	34
Rate video	13	15	10	23	11	4
Post comments about video	13	15	19	25	9	5
Upload video	13	16	9	20	12	5
Post video links online	10	12	9	22	7	2
Pay for video	7	8	6	10	7	3



Bloggers (most active 'Web 2.0 application') are relatively higher educated and professional

Percentage of all American adults with a college degree	27%
Percentage of bloggers with a college degree	37%
Percentage of all American adults who are knowledge-based professional workers	13%
Percentage of bloggers who are knowledge-based professional workers	38%
Percentage of all American adults who are students	16%
Percentage of all bloggers who are students	38%

Pew Internet & American Life Project Surveys (2006)



Signs of a Usage Gap

Van Dijk (2003,2005,2006) argues with statistical data that a usage gap (similar to the *knowledge gap*) appears between higher and lower educated users:


The higher educated use the advanced (information and communication) applications of the new media for career and study, while the lower educated use the simple ones (video and music sites, electronic shopping, paying, simple messaging etc.)

This also goes for 'web 2.0 applications': the higher educated are blogging and participate in civic journalism or knowledge communities, while the lower educated exchange video or music and profiles in social networking



Who actually participates and with which activities? Conclusions

- n The most 'active' and serious Web 2.0 applications are used by less than 20% of Internet users in the advanced countries
- n Downloading and sharing are at least three times as popular as compared to creating, uploading and contributing
- n Web 2.0 applications are used much more by higher educated and the young people
- n A gap appears between higher and lower educated in using 'serious' (information and business) applications as compared to entertainment, contacting and shopping
- n Web-based communities are an 'elite phenomenon' with the exception of hobby and entertainment sites



Who controls the Internet/online communities?

1. Governments (with laws and regulations)
2. The Internet community of users and representatives (IETF, ICANN, Internet Society, ISPs)
3. Business world/the market
4. Technology: 'code' (Lessig)

-1980-2008: Shift from 2. to 3 and 4, while 1. tries to survey and control the Internet

-Web 2.0 perspective: comeback of the Internet community with participatory media




Who controls the Internet/ online communities?

A. Internet use has become massive, widespread and relatively more productive/active. So, users altogether in principle have become more powerful than in the 1980s and 1990s

B. However, inequality of users has equally risen.

Three arguments against Internet community ('grassroot') power (Hindman, 2007):

1. Investment in Web 2.0 applications comes from *traditional players* (the Google's, Yahoo's, Microsoft's, Murdoch's etc.)
2. Winner takes all patterns appear (power laws): a handful of *big players*, bloggers, popular communities etc dominate a vast majority of small ones
3. *Elite professionals* dominate open source innovations, knowledge communities etc.




Do online communities/communities online constitute new forms of sociability?

A vast majority of studies shows that the Internet and mobile phone increase connectivity and (new forms of) sociability.

However: mostly they emphasize the forms of connections (a.o. quantity); what about their substance (a.o. quality)?

eg.: Do social-networking sites really bring 'new friends'?




Do online communities/communities online constitute new forms of sociability?

The Putnam problematic (*Bowling Alone*): the death of community

Versus

New interpretations: a.o. *network individualization* (Wellman, van Dijk) as a new type of sociability with new types of community

What appears as isolated from the view of traditional mass society can be fully social from the view of the network society: forms of sociability are changing.




Is online community language special?

The FIF of physical communities is verbal and non-verbal, while the CMC of online communities used to be verbal, if not only textual.

Now online communities have become multi-mediated including representations of non-verbal language.

A birds-eye view on the way the Internet is seen in the last decades:


1980s: CMC replaces FIF
 1990s: CMC supplements FIF
 2000s: CMC and FIF are fully integrating



Is online community language special?

Multimedia and integration cause that:

- increasingly the same language is used in all communities (so the answer is NO)
- every type of community develops its own particular language: e.g. IM/chat, avatars, intelligent agents etc. (so the answer is YES)
 A source for innovation and creativity and a potential basis for Web 2.0 active participation.




Does peer-to-peer networking create 'wise crowds' or 'stupid mobs'?

Collective intelligence and the *consensus theory of truth* are the points of departure for those who claim that peer-to-peer networking creates 'wise crowds': the *'Wikipedia movement'*

Empirical observation shows that 'stupid mobs' equally result from peer-to-peer networking: gossip, hypes, pedophile hunts and mania on the web, yoyo movements on the stock exchange

The network logic of exchange is similar; so, it all depends on the substance of exchange and its organization.



Does peer-to-peer networking create 'wise crowds' or 'stupid mobs'?

Jaron Lanier (2006) *DIGITAL MAOISM: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism*:


A combination of collective and individual intelligence is required.

The idea of the 'wisdom of crowds' is similar to the ideas that:

- The invisible hand of the market in itself solves economic problems
- Google's page rank algorithms work: deliver the best search result
- The Delphi method of collective expertise brings scientific truth
- Direct democracy brings the best and most democratic decisions

Lanier: "The collective is good at solving problems which demand results that can be evaluated by uncontroversial performance parameters, but it is bad when taste and judgment matter."

Think about collective and individual creative designs. Which work?



Does peer-to-peer networking create 'wise crowds' or 'stupid mobs'?

Necessary requirements for collective intelligence are:

- The collective should NOT define its own questions (insulation)
- Answers can be evaluated by a simple result (no complexity)
- The information system which informs the collective is filtered by a quality control mechanism (with individual, independent reviewers and editors).

Next to *Wikipedia(s)* online encyclopedia's such as *Citizendium* (with the same mechanisms as Wikipedia but with undisputed experts as editors) will be offered.

Social organization of knowledge communities (moderation, editorships, rules for exchange) are required.

What is the quality of user-generated as compared to professional content?

People bring all their (offline) 'social and intellectual baggage' into the online community world. Social identity is even stressed (social-psychological SIDE model). Many self-obsessed people.

User-generated content is a reflection of everything society has to offer, from genius to stupidity and rubbish.

Who/what is to decide about quality?

Debate between utopians (eg. Charles Leadbeater (2008) *We-think: the Power of Mass Creativity* and distopians (eg. Andrew Keen (2008) *The Cult of the Amateur. How today's internet is killing our culture and assaulting our economy.*

What is the quality of user-generated as compared to professional content?

Leadbeater: mass creativity is able to bring the media to a higher level and to make politics and services more participatory

Keen: "In theory, Web gives amateurs a voice. But in reality 't's often those with the loudest, most convincing message, and the most money to spread it, who are being heard"

"Opinion is sold as fact, rumor as reportage, and insinuations as information" "on the Net differences between information, advertising and sheer nonsense are blurring"

My opinion: the mass media and institutional politics are integrating voices of the public, but mainly as illustrations, anecdotes and scoops, not as a defining voice

What is the quality of user-generated as compared to professional content?

Research shows that Internet users are very bad in finding, selecting and evaluating information. What about producing information????

Producing quality information requires effort and training. It is a profession: journalists, scientists, teachers, librarians....

Effective web-based communities also need some professionalism, procedures for producing and filtering information and for communication.

Anyway, the need and the demand for quality media on the Internet will increase sharply in the future.

Are Amateurs and Professionals Equal on the Internet?

It is a strange *paradox* that while society gets ever more complex, divisions of labour are increasing and higher education flourishes, user-generated web content would have to become more simple, specialism denied and equality in knowledge production a viable norm

Every voter is equal, every member of an organization might have the same rights, every participant in a web-based community might be given the same voice, but denying professionalism, expertise and meritocracy is simply nonsense in contemporary society.

However, increasingly expertise and professionalism will *have to prove themselves* in front of lay audiences, and not only for peers.

They will have to listen to the voice of the lay audience.

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Main Conclusions

- Internet users are ever more (inter)active and creative, but reception, consumption and simply chating remain dominant .
- The Internet is a direct medium, but intermediaries, professional media and expertise remain necessary and in demand
- Equal access to the Internet tends to turn into rising inequalities of participation in practice. A large part of community participation is an elite phenomenon, with the exception of entertainment.
- Internet communities will not compensate for 'lost community'. They will bring new forms of sociability on the basis of network individualization.

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