Audiences, Publics, and Digital Media

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Abstract

In the early 21st century, participation, rather than use, characterizes engagement with digital media. In recent work, my colleagues and I have found Michael Warner's notion of "publics" particularly useful. I outline this perspective and its contributions to work on social media as an example of this broader focus on participation.

Introduction

Contemporary trends in digital media – and, most particularly, in so-called "Web 2.0" technologies grounded in user-generated content – pose many puzzles. Researchers have long been concerned with the privacy issues that surround blogs, locative technologies, and related media, asking "why would you want everyone to read your dialry?" (Nardi et al, 2004); often, their conclusion has been that youth "don't care about privacy" (e.g. Barkhuus et al., 2008), a conclusion that significant contradicts much published research on teen practices around secrets and sharing (e.g Merten, 1999). From another perspective, many have dismissed the content of microblogs and related systems as "pointless" and "meaningless" (e.g. Pear Analytics, 2009) and have questioned why anyone would want to read this material.

On the face of it, these are sensible questions, and yet, the fact that they persist reflects a problem. On the one

hand, they reflect a set of assumptions– people want to keep information private, communication provides information and illumination, people want to find informative sources – that underpin a traditional analytic perspective on social media that focuses on informational accounts of communication. However, digital media seem to confound these assumptions and yet continue to grow.

If we turn to media theory, though, we can find an alternative perspective that helps to address the conundrum. In recent work in my research group, we have found it useful to examine social media from the perspective of Michael Warner's concept of "publics." Warner's work has been very influential not only in media theory but also in anthropology and cultural studies, where it provides a basis for understanding the constitution of social collectives through their collective engagement with "mediascapes" (Appadurai, 1996).

Publics

In writing of "a public," Warner explicitly contrasts his reading with two other ideas of public – first, the notion of the public at large, a social totality, and second, a specific concrete audience for a particular performance or media event. Thus, when he describes the public as constituted by some particular publication – Mother Jones, for example, or the Wall Street Journal – he is concerned neither with the public-at-large (that is, everyone who might conceivably be able to read a copy of the Wall Street Journal, including the entire citizenry of the countries in which it is sold), nor of the concrete public which might include every individual who has read a particular issue. Instead, his concern is with the social body that is brought into being through a relationship between a media production and its reception. People who read an issue of Mother Jones or the Wall Street Journal recognize themselves as the sorts of people who are being addressed by those publications (largely disjoint sets, in these cases); they say, "this is aimed at people like me." In that notion of "people like me" lies the core of a public. To say "people like me" is to recognize that "I am not the only one" – that is, one imagines or recognizes oneself as part of a larger group.

There are infinitely many publics, then, because there are myriad media objects and events, but also because there are many responses. It is these responses that publics are constituted. To use a well-worn example most familiar to readers of Henry Jenkins (1992), the television broadcasts of Star Trek in the late 1960s elicited many different sorts of fan responses. One of these was amongst those who saw, in the plotting and acting, hints of a homoerotic relationship between two of the principal characters. What became known as "slash" fiction – so named for the punctuation mark in the common abbreviation "K/S" for Kirk and Spock – is a form of fan fiction in which this alternative reading of the canonical material is explored. Thus, in this example, Star Trek brings into being many publics – not just one that includes those who recognize themselves as united by a common vision of interstellar travel, racial harmony and universal federation, but also one made up of those who see different messages in the programs. Despite these differences, all of the people in these publics identify with the messages they perceive in the media and recognize that others also identify with these positions, thereby constituting a public in the process. Warner's emphasis, therefore, is on many publics rather than a single public and on the

ways those who witness or encounter media collectively imagine belonging thereby bringing publics into being.

This particular example usefully underscores how a public may be constituted precisely in resistance to a dominant position or interpretation. That is, the constitution of a public – or, more particularly, of a "counterpublic" – may lie in one's ability not simply to say "this is aimed at people like me," but rather "I/we, unlike most, can see what is really happening here." This focus of attention on counterpublics draws attention to the fact that the constitution of a public might be an act of resistance even as it is an act of allegiance, but counterpublics are not opposed to publics; the term "public" encapsulates both.

Warner sets out a series of premises for his notion of public. First, *a public is self-organized*; it is not formally brought about, and it exists only with respect to a particular sphere of communication and discourse. Second, *a public is a relation between strangers*; the essence of public lies not in the relation between media producer and consumer, but rather in the imaginative relations between consumers themselves. In this model, consumers are actively involved in the appropriation and interpretation of the materials that they encounter. Third, *the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal*; utterances and media productions speak to us, personally, and yet we know that they were not addressed to us specifically but to a public, which did not exist until it was called into existence by the event. Fourth, *a public is constituted through mere attention*; all that is required for the public to be brought into existence is that people attend and recognize themselves as "the sort of people" addressed. Fifth, *a public is the social space created by*

the reflexive circulation of discourse; that is, it is in the transmission of, retransmission of, and reflection upon media objects that a public and its conditions of possibility arise. Sixth, *publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation*; in other words, the dynamics of the media are critically important in shaping of a public. Although Warner originally focused primarily on print and visual media in his conception of publics, this question of temporality is especially relevant to digital media. Seventh and finally, here, *a public is poetic world making*; that is, this is a form of conjuring new worlds – or new publics – into existence not through political action or institutional entrepreneurism but purely through discourse and the creation and experience of media.

Kelty (2008) has fruitfully used the notion of public to examine the culture of free software, both its production and use, demonstrating the relevance of Warner's publics to everyday technological practice. Kelty extends Warner's conception by noting that free software culture is a recursive public; that is to say, it is a public whose primary concern is with the means of its own production (the Internet and its software). This example is particularly interesting in how Kelty treats what happens when technologies become sufficiently embedded into everyday life and thereby become media through which people act. Similarly, social media technologies link people together directly and indirectly in such a way that notions of public might be usefully applied to understand how people see themselves constituted as publics through the circulation of media objects and the collective witnessing of performance and discourse.

Social Media and Participation

We find Warner's concept of publics particularly productive because it reframes the problem of communication. Instead of framing social media in terms of information flows and content evaluation, it allows us to approach these technologies in terms of participation and identity. Media – both in terms of content but also in terms of historicity and temporarlity, as Warner underscores – are sites at which collective identity is imagined and produced. Social media, then, provide platforms for these productions.

For instance, in a recent paper (Lintner et al., 2009) we discuss a study in which this concept provides a useful analytic frame. In our deployment of a situated, mobile photo-sharing application, we came to recognize the ways that people imagined themselves as participants in a broader collective of media consumers and producers, generalized but still localized, with emergent norms of aesthetics and interpretation that they were collectively involved in shaping as both contributors and consumers. Photo sharing is a case of just this sort of public production. In our study, participants found themselves grappling with questions of who they were as an audience, what sorts of things might reasonably be shared and why, and what sorts of things "people like them" might be interesting in seeing – all while immersed in the system as users. Thus, they explored and addressed these questions through their interactions with their own and others' photographs through the system.

Warner's theory in particular, and cultural theory in general, provides a framework for an important move in HCI away from a purely instrumental account of technologically-mediated action. When computer systems were rare artifacts, approached cautiously, encountered as new and puzzling, it was appropriate that we think in terms of their instrumental effects, their functions as tools, and give the human a voice through a focus on usability and design. Usability, though, does not explain the computers that we carry about with us, nor the things that we do with them; usability does not explain the fascinations and fetishes surrounding contemporary information practice. Cultural theory provides a means to move from a focus on use to a focus on participation.

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Paul Dourish 1/11/10 8:24 AM
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