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Contents

- 1 Review
 - 1.1 Synopsis
 - 1.2 The Century of the Self
 - 1.2.1 The role of audiences
 - 1.3 Audiences' work on web2.0
 - 1.4 Work and Leisure

Review

Synopsis

This review departs from Adam Curtis' documentary 'The Century of the Self' in which beginnings of marketing, initiated at the debut of the 20th century, are portrayed. I will complement Curtis' portrait with the Dallas Smythe's notion of the work of audiences, and its role in marketing. Following Smythe's argument, I will steer the discussion towards the 21st century and attempt to explain how web2.0 is managing to put audiences to work with great productivity rates.

The Century of the Self

Adam Curtis' documentary series 'The Century of the Self' presents us an historical overview of the creation and development of marketing throughout the twentieth century. Curtis associates the genesis of marketing with the figure of Edward Bernays, Sigmund Freud's nephew. Bernays begins his career as public relations advisor, developing techniques for selling products to individuals, despite their lack of necessity. In order to succeed in such a mission Bernays makes use of his uncle's theories on human unconscious desires. One revealing examples of his first implementation of Freudian theories, and also one of his first assignments was to change the taboo associated with women smoking in public. On consulting a psychoanalyst about such a task, Bernays received the answer that cigarettes were a symbol of male power, and what he need to do was to bring cigarettes to challenge such image. With that in mind Bernays hired a group of society débutantes to dramatically light up cigarettes at a given moment during a New York parade. He also prepared press coverage, informing it in advance that a group of suffragettes were going to stage a protest by lighting up what they called *the torches freedom*. Taking such event to the newspaper headlines, the image of cigarettes inevitably changed among the general public. Cigarettes became

associated with women's rights. The image of a woman smoking in public became associated with the struggle for women's rights. As expected Mr. Bernays recipe work to perfection and cigarettes sells shoot up.

The role of audiences

In the documentary Curtis portraits consumers as a passive mass whom advertisers aim to seduce into buy their products. In his essay 'On the Audience Commodity and its Work' Dallas Smythe depicts a reverse image. Smythe sees audiences as active elements in marketing and the capitalist system. According to his argument audiences are put to work and their labor consists in creating demand for advertised goods, since they learned how to spend their income on these.

How do then individuals become audiences? According to Smythe's reasoning audiences are the product of mass-media. Mass-media are responsible for producing audience with predictable demographics, such as the number of individuals, the specific times when they devote their attention to, the medium who receives the attention, etc. Mass-media commodifies audiences' power, which becomes their main product, sold to advertisers. Advertisers, on the other hand, buy the services of audiences and put these to work for them, by inducing them to buy their product, as showed by Curtis.

One curious point referred by Smythe, is our common assumption of the content produced by media as being, say, a song, a news' article, a TV-series. When viewed through Smythe's argument's the nature of content is challenged. Content becomes no longer a product, but a stimulus for keeping audiences returning, and a mood generator which facilitates audiences' digestion of the displayed adverts. One very interesting example of how media can excel in creating the mood for an easier and unconscious absorption of ideologies is given by Smythe; in it he mentions the introduction of rock music in the Soviet Union as an effective strategy for disseminating capitalism ideology into the East block. Music created the disposition for the absorption of ideologies with otherwise blocked access, it became a catalyst.

Audiences' work on web2.0

Let me suggest we keep Smythe's argument in mind and jump cut to the twenty-first century. Let's move our discussion towards current highly popular and powerful web2.0 platforms such as Facebook or Youtube. As far as I can see these 21st century mass-media still base their profit on the creation of audiences, commodified and sold to advertisers. Adverts are as present on Facebook, Google, Youtube, as much as in any private TV-channel or magazine; they populate the screen space and mix smoothly with the contents of these platforms. The notions of audiences as a product, and the work of audiences have however made a quantum leap and gained a more visible character. Audiences work is no longer resumed to purchasing advertised products, on web2.0 audiences' work expanded to include both the production of data and contents.

Data is generated as a result of audiences' (or should I maybe 'each one of us?') activity within these platforms. Our choices, the information provided voluntarily, our peers allow such platforms to draw individual users' profiles. Such detailed profiling allows them to effective target each one of us, with the intention of further exploit our purchasing work force.

Content became also another audience duty. Audience were given the possibility to contribute and participate in web2.0 by generating media contents, which they loved and fiercely engaged with. The media democracy utopias of audience participation, not only became true, but turned into web2.0 entrepreneurs' wet dream (the only being them being awake). The participatory possibility turned into an extremely profitable formula for the corporation behind web2.0 platforms. A companies like Google or Facebook no longer need to worry about paying skilled directors, script-writers, photography directors, cameramen, sound engineers, set designers, electricians, makeup artists, and a whole lot more of skilled people necessary to run a television channel. All they need is to provide the infrastructure where we, the consumers, can upload our creations. And we seem happy to do such work and are satisfied to be given user generated content, such as videos of our friends' cats and babies.

Work and Leisure

The popularity of user generated content makes me ask why are we willing to put up with the work necessary for creating a Youtube video, while being assign by a client, boss, or teacher to come up with a product seems like a chore? The reason, and I will be borrowing most of my from arguments Hito Steyerl's 'Art as Occupation', can be attributed to the possibility which is offered to all of us to become creative artists in web2.0. When engaging with creative processes we are given to taste artistic autonomy, the dissociation from efficiency, from the pressure for being productive and completing a work once initiated. Furthermore, artistic creation generates gratification out of its own act, and the lack of monetary remuneration for it is a commonly accepted. Such exhilarating feelings resulting from artistic work are wisely exploited on web2.0 content generation. Rather than putting us to work under an efficiency and routine paradigm, we are given freedom and autonomy, as a response we become the efficient, passionate, creative, and free labor of web2.0.

Does this mean that audiences' work is inherently exploitative? I will argue it doesn't. My critic goes towards the fact that in most web2.0 commercial participatory platforms, audiences are removed from the possession of their work. (Isn't this also Marx's critic to the industrial capitalist production? The product of workers' labor is taken from them, and the profit resulting from their sales goes not to them, but to the owner of the factory infrastructure). If for example I post a video on Youtube it can disappear in 24 hours, simply because someone "flagged it" as not suitable. A blind bot will make it vanish within 24 hours, without any fuss. Youtube (Google) is the owner of the machinery that moves Youtube, as the owner it is entitled to do no matter what with the fruit of our labor, and there is nothing wrong with it. I was the one choosing to host my video on Youtube, to give the product of my work to this platform in exchange for its hosting space and transmission capacity. I must understand that such platform belongs to a corporations, whose goal is nothing more but profit. Once in their territory there is little I can do, but to work according to their rules. It is of their interest to keep audiences unaware of the rules by which they structure and run their platforms. If I'd be aware of the possibility of flagging, I would look into alternative online spaces to host my video, where I would have more control over its infrastructure. Such awareness and informed users' behavior would result in web2.0 corporations having slightly less power and control over their users, and consequently become less profitable, and smaller profits is something I suspect not many corporation would like for themselves.

The depicted scenario might look pretty bleak, if I however make a small effort I can see beyond it. I can see another scenario, in which web2.0 platforms foster not only creation and communication between users, but also

cooperation, sharing of knowledge and reflection. Such processes could not only take place in reference to contents, but also in relation to the platform infrastructure and the processes that supports it. Such scenario might seem Utopian, but I will argue it is not. If we look to our current online landscape we easily come across examples of non-profit oriented platforms where such processes are already taking place. Take the example of wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>) , wikionary (<http://www.wiktionary.org/>) , open street map (<http://www.openstreetmap.org/>) or stack-overflow (<http://stackexchange.com/sites>) . All these platforms live from users' work, however they also have in place mechanisms that allow for a deeper insight into the processes in place within each of the platform, collaborative production, discussion over the produced contents, and participation on structural decisions.

Taking these examples as points of departure is not difficult to imagine more interesting ways to create, communicate and reflect upon online content than what is currently given to use by Facebook or Youtube. I believe it to be our - the users' - responsibility to start imagining, prototyping, supporting, and collaboration in projects that don't subordinate audiences' creative impulses into the logic of capital.

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