The Work of Audiences in the Age of Clicktivism: On the Ins and Outs of Distributed Participation

Simon Lindgren

It has long been the fashionable thing to do in critical research on the network society to bash your “techno-optimist” of choice. One of the most popular and easy targets is Clay Shirky, author of Here Comes Everybody: How Change Happens When People Come Together. The very title of his book gives a set of opportunities for snarky questions: What is meant by “everybody”? What about the Third World? What about race, class and gender? Who are “the people” coming together, and how can we be so very sure that “change” will “happen”? The perspective of the believers is obvious: We now have a global digital infrastructure in place, where people are interconnected in dense social networks where democratic mobilization and transformative and participatory communication can happen in the wink of an eye. The grumpy skeptics, on their part, argue that ever-present power structures of capitalism, exclusion, racism, and misogyny will come out on top.

This tug of war boils down to the distinction between what Hans Magnus Enzensberger describes as repressive and emancipatory use of media. Enzensberger notes that new media have become “the pacemaker for the social and economic development of societies in the late industrial age.” He claims that all new forms of emerging media are constantly making new connections with each other as well as with older media. Presaging the more recent theorizations of media convergence, he writes that all media “are clearly coming together to form a universal system.”

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Enzensberger expressed an optimistic view of the new electronic media and distanced himself from what he felt to the non-productive media criticisms of the socialist left. For this he was criticized by, amongst others, Jean Baudrillard, who argued that even though Enzensberger “attempts to develop an optimistic and offensive position, the media are monopolized by the dominant classes, which divert them to their own advantage.”

Enzensberger’s argument is that the media are fundamentally egalitarian and that it is simply up to its users to unleash their potential. Baudrillard agreed that the media can be liberating, “but it is necessary to liberate them.” He goes on to write that “[t]he mass media are anti-mediatory and intransitive. They fabricate non-communication—this is what characterizes them.”

Douglas Kellner dismisses Baudrillard’s argument as an expression of “technophobia and a nostalgia for face-to-face conversation.” We are caught in a familiar deadlock: new electronic/digital media surely have the potential to set us free, but we can be optimistic or skeptical as regards to the realization of this potential. Enzensberger’s 1970 typology of emancipatory and repressive media summarizes the debate rather well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emancipatory use of media</th>
<th>Repressive use of media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decentralized program</td>
<td>Centrally controlled program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each receiver a potential transmitter</td>
<td>One transmitter, many receivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilization of the masses</td>
<td>Immobilization of isolated individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of those involved, feedback</td>
<td>Passive consumer behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A political learning process</td>
<td>Depoliticization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective production</td>
<td>Production by specialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social control by self-organization</td>
<td>Control by property owners or bureaucracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Enzensberger’s typology of emancipatory and repressive use of media

Today, in the shadow of surveillance scandals, big data, targeted advertising, and online hate speech, it is easy to be pessimistic. It may seem that the internet and social media turned out to be more prone to repressive than emancipatory uses. However, as Morozov points out, the reality is quite complex:

The good news is that we are not rushing toward a globalized nirvana where everyone eats at McDonald’s and watches the same
Hollywood films, as feared by some early critics of globalization. The bad news is that, under the pressure of religious, nationalist, and cultural forces reigned by the Internet, global politics is poised to become even more complex, contentious, and fragmented.¹⁰

Sure, the internet is (just) a tool. It can be used for both good and bad purposes, but this does not mean that technology is neutral. Its effects may be very hard to predict. Morozov writes that the great irony of the internet is it never delivered on its über-utopian promises while still delivering more other good stuff than any radical optimist could have wished for. How can we grasp the duality of opportunities created and destroyed through the digitization of the social? This question is accentuated in the debate over “clicktivism,” which questions how we should conceive of the large numbers of low-threshold acts of solidarity or support that continuously occur online. What does activism and participation mean when all you have to do to express your engagement is click a mouse? Do the clicks make a difference, or are they just producing an illusion of civil society? Are they simply meaningless, or are they a valid new form of participation that challenge normative notions of democracy and participation? Are they signaling the death of collective action, or are they pointing to future ways of engaging?

Enter the Grassroots Intermediaries

Henry Jenkins, another favorite target of cyber-optimism bashing, is one of the authors of *Spreadable Media*, which puts forward an interesting perspective on how the myriad clicks, links, likes, and shares might be seen from a perspective that goes beyond the clicktivism critique.¹¹ The authors use the notion of spreadability to move past the dichotomy of cyber-utopianism and cyber-pessimism. On the one hand, there are all of the notions of an audience set free from any restraining power structures or systems that sort speaking subjects into hierarchical categories with different degrees of freedom to maneuver. On the other, there is the dystopia of Orwellian and panoptical surveillance, of digital divides and black holes in the network society, and of capitalist exploitation on digital steroids. In reality, things are by necessity more complicated. It is not really about who “just clicks” or who “actually produces content.” Rather, spreadability points to a transformation of the entire media system, where less dramatic and visible modes of production may be just as important as others that are seemingly more mundane. As every video view and mouse click are logged, even the “lurkers” generate vast amounts of data that ultimately have a large economic as well as cultural impact. This is all about the power of
circulation, but not in the traditional broadcast media sense of the word. Rather, it is about what it means, and what happens, when people make all of these micro-decisions to share or pass along content to exponentially sprawling social networks.

The most interesting thing about the notion of spreadable media is that it highlights how activities such as linking and passing along content can be of great cultural, social, and economic value, in spite of the seemingly low level of commitment and effort that they require. The very choice to spread certain content involves a series of small but very real decisions, all of which are socially embedded. The “spreader” deems the content to be worthy of being watched, shared, and interesting, and evaluates which is the proper channel to do so. Attaching a message to the shared content is another way to be active when passing stuff along. Even if no message is attached, the very experience of getting something sent to you renders several new potential meanings for the content, Jenkins et al. claim. The consumer of the content will not only think about what the original producer might have wanted to say, but also about what the person passing it along wants to communicate. This is the mechanism by which self-appointed unauthorized parties—what Jenkins et. al term grassroots intermediaries—actively shape the flow of meaning and content.

**Lifting the veil**

What happens if we apply Walter Benjamin’s thinking on the work of art in the age of its reproducibility to the logic of distributed participation through grassroots intermediation? In his classic essay, Benjamin wrote that the process he described was “symptomatic,” that “its significance extends far beyond the realm of art.”\(^\text{12}\) So maybe the distributed forms of participation, the clicking and linking, can also be seen as a form of technological reproduction. And as reproduction it lacks one key thing: the here and now. Distributed participation changes the physical and material structure of what participation and activism means, demanding a reappraisal of what “authentic” participation is. Much like Jenkins et al. argue, Benjamin stated that the power of reproduction has to do with the fact that “technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain.”\(^\text{13}\) So while jeopardizing the original authority and weight of the content through substituting “a mass existence for a unique existence,” the reproduction can “reach the recipient in his or her own situation [actualizing] that which is reproduced.”\(^\text{14}\)
So is what we call clicktivism actually a tragedy of democracy, or is it just the stripping of the veil—the destruction of the aura—of traditional notions of what participation should look like? Benjamin writes on technological reproductions that their function is in fact to “establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus” by expanding space and extending movement.15 For the matter of this argument, we should now conceive of links, shares, likes, and clicks as such reproductions. They have the power to bring to light new structures of matter. Ringing similar to Jenkins’ et al.’s writing on spreadability, Benjamin contends that “quantity has been transformed into quality: the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation.”16 This, amazingly, he wrote in 1936.

Notes

3. I am thinking of news satellites, color television, cable relay television, cassettes, videotape, videotape recorders, video-phones, stereophony, laser techniques, electrostatic reproduction processes, electronic high-speed printing, composing and learning machines, microfiches with electronic access, printing by radio, time-sharing computers, data banks.
5. Enzensberger, “ Constituents,” 14
7. Ibid
8. Ibid. 169
13. Ibid, 103
14. Ibid, 104
15. Ibid, 107
16. Ibid., 109
Simon Lindgren is a Professor of Sociology at Umeå University in Sweden. His research is about how people interact and organize on the Internet and through social media. He is the author of *New Noise* (2013) and the editor of *Hybrid Media Culture* (2013). He analyzes and writes about things like Internet activism, digital piracy, social support online, subcultural creativity and learning, popular culture and visual politics. He is also interested in developing mixed-methods strategies and tools for analyzing discursive and social network dimensions of people’s uses of digital media.