

## **Productive publics and transmedia participation**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the emerging reality of networked and productive publics in the increasingly complex environment of the transmediality of production, distribution and consumption of digital contents related to entertainment and information. In this context, storytelling becomes a transmedia platform for the attribution of meaning and the construction of a shared ethos; here, “productive publics” participate in different ways to create a new model for the circulation of narrative contents. In this paper, I consider some Italian examples of transmedia contents (which in this paper I refer to as “bonus track”) that circulate freely, and have been developed either by corporations or by authors, both as “productive publics,” in complex ways generating participatory practices that produce different possibilities of liberation and of exploitation.

**Key Words:** audience studies, networked publics, participatory culture, productive publics, transmedia.

The experience of cultural entertainment in the twentieth century has its roots, on the one hand, in the notion of the public/audience – which is the new “modern” collective subject – and, on the other hand, in the idea of a cultural industry whose professionals produce forms of representation working at enhancing the mechanisms of spectacularization into works that are built around single media, but that nonetheless are market-oriented for the *franchise*. This context appears to be changing both on the side of the transmedia reality and of the related public/audience, which characterize new forms of production and consumption through new and constantly evolving paths.

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I consider some Italian<sup>1</sup> examples of transmedia contents that circulate freely, and have been developed either by corporations or by authors, both as “productive publics,” in complex ways generating participatory practices that produce different possibilities of liberation and of exploitation. In this paper I call these transmedia forms “bonus tracks”.

These are extra contents that interrupt the theoretical flow. They are not only ways to exemplify what I am describing but also to continue the conversation to another level. They are transmedia contents of this paper itself and of the specific forms of transmedia production. Their interpretation should be placed at the level of social practices that resonate with those of the corporation and mechanisms of production. They constitute actual interruptions from another point of view of what I will discuss and provide a context of experience for what I will describe.

### **Transmedia connection: convergence culture and networked publics**

My framework for reflection is offered by an underlying mutation of the relationship between production and consumption that the term “convergent culture” summarizes (Jenkins 2006b). First of all, the development of a media convergence makes the flow of content almost inevitable across multiple media channels, pushing the logic of the franchise on which the modern industry of entertainment works to its extreme consequences: “it is becoming much more realistic to lower production costs by sharing assets across media. Everything about the structure of the modern entertainment industry was designed with this single idea in mind—the construction and enhancement of entertainment franchises” (Jenkins 2003).

However, the distinctive condition of convergent culture is given by the generation of circularity between corporate culture and grassroots culture, converging in forms that are not only made possible but also increasingly visible by the web and the social network sites. This happens both in the society of new technologies, in which the reality defined as Web 2.0<sup>2</sup> supports and stimulates a cultural convergence, and at the level of practices, which offer a new perspective on the relationship between the producer and the consumer, such as the growth of UGC shows.

We need to rethink the keyword “convergence culture” in a direction that goes beyond a simple encounter between cultures, in order to be open to differences and divergences, and to the various forms of circulation, re-circulation and cross-media culture (Pasquali et. al. 2010) in which user-generated content (UGC) moves from bottom-up but also circulates within the same audience. From a macro point of view we have strategic approaches to the production of corporations and the different forms of consumption/appropriation by audiences; from a micro point of view we only have texts/contents propelled into a flow that can be remixed and combined in a variety of ways, from being simply shared and re-propelled into the flow, to coming back enriched to their authors, who can modify them and put them back in circulation.

Changes in communication technologies are reconfiguring our lives, including new ways of enjoyment and creativity (Gemini 2009), thanks to an increasing state of connection (Boccia Artieri 2012) in which we interact and learn from each other. The diffusion and appropriation of new devices and software allow us, as public/consumers, to store, annotate and re-write media content, and put it back into circulation so that it can be re-employed; these technologies, through their dynamics of appropriation, have changed the ways in which we as public /consumers interact with the institutions and commerce. We are, in fact, networked publics.

The term “networked publics” refers to a diverse interrelation and co-evolution of cultural practices, social relations and the development of media technologies in the direction of a digital connection (Ito 2008). This concept is an alternative to the concept of audience (or to that of consumers), as it emphasizes the changing ways in which people are connected and mobilized today by the media and through them: “now publics are communicating more and more through complex networks that are bottom-up, top-down, as well as side-to-side. Publics can be reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception” (p. 3). Today we are facing a cultural shift characterized by the consolidation of an informational environment that configures a new stage of the information economy characterized by “decentralized individual action carried out through widely distributed, non-market means that do not depend on market strategies” (Benkler 2006, p.3).

In networked publics the passive attitude of being part of an audience – as the object of mass communication – becomes a new form of awareness: everyone is the potential subject of a mix between interpersonal and mass communication forms.

## **Audiences’ perception of changes of their positioning in communication**

Nowadays we are witnessing a mutation linked with the introduction of new possibilities for communication and “mass personal” connection (blogs, social networks sites, etc.) through the Net. This is both a qualitative and a quantitative change. Individuals feel they are not the object (as audience, users, voters, etc.) of a conversation anymore, but rather that they can be the subject of it. The entire experience of communication changes thanks to the awareness that individuals have of themselves as potential subjects of a conversation, rather than only as its objects. The way one thinks of being in continuous connection with others, even in a scalable way, also changes because of the new possibilities that individuals have to communicate with a wide and connected audience: this is the crucial shift from the idea of publics as audiences to that of networked publics.

A few things change: (1) the audience’s perception of its positioning in communication – the perception we have as individuals of our communicative role in society and (2) the ways they listen, watch and/or elaborate on what is happening. What we

thought of as private is no longer considered private and can therefore become a subject for public communication.

We are facing an accumulation of occasions in which individuals “play” with self-representation forms, thanks to a) the diffusion of reproduction and production technologies in daily life, from digital photo cameras to editing software, which allow people to give life to media forms similar to the ones we find in mainstream media; b) the growth of systems of disintermediation (or, the removal of intermediaries in a supply chain) and content-sharing, from web platforms to social networking systems; c) the diffused awareness of a logic of the construction of contents and languages which are very similar to those of the mass media, used however, in an environment in which individuals are connected to each other.

This is the general feeling we sense behind the revolution introduced by blogs and social networking platforms. People are more or less aware of exposing their individuality to the general audience and turning their lived experience into a chance to communicate with other people, whose lives will be connected to theirs from that moment on. This perceptual shifting, which is happening in daily communications, emerges with incredible strength, and it is clearly visible even in environments that seem distant from each other – let us note, incidentally, that conversational places on the Net have become more and more important especially for companies/corporations (because they are places in which other consumers’ opinions steer and guide purchases, tastes, etc.).

### **Storytelling as a transmedia platform for meaning**

The twentieth-century cultural industry has been built around professional and commercial media that have cornered all the grassroots, amateur and interpersonal productions, confining them in a domestic environment or within cultural niches. This has rendered many of the cultural forms peripheral for the experience of individuals and their imaginary: forms that have historically been central for their lives, such as diaries, correspondence, everyday conversations, etc., with the aim of building a shared and public arena having a translocal and spectacular nature.

Many forms of individual production of those people that are conceived and experienced as public/consumers have survived in marginal and underground languages, translating into an ability to reshape the mass media products of the mainstream or to give life to genuine cultural artifacts. From self-produced music and literature to the fanzine and all the different forms of fandom: people, who have been represented in the languages of mass media, have been able to create narratives that can provide meaning to their communicative, aesthetic and imaginary needs and desires (Boccia Artieri 2008).

On the one hand, there are the original ways through which the audiences/consumers, usually considered as more or less passive subjects by media culture, institutions and the mass market, produce and give shape to new forms of meaning that enter into conversation with the mainstream.

And on the other hand, we can see that it is producing a flow of content across multiple platforms as a result of a closer cooperation between various sectors of the media industry, even in the face of a mutant public which migrates to new experiences and information and entertainment. The logics and languages of production change, and the production and consumption/fruition of narrative content, of storytelling, become transmedia platforms for meaning.

### **Revisiting participatory culture**

Today we are confronted with the reality of networked publics that process their connection in public and activate mechanisms of collective reflexivity (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994; BocciaArtieri2012). Networked publics produce, put in circulation and consume symbolic forms, culturally recognizing themselves inside these processes. Networked publics are not simply a form of a participatory community, but rather they are participatory cultures that generate symbolic forms in which the participation is structured around the logic of sharing, free, open, non-utilitarian contents, and so forth. This means that we need to change the concepts of virtual communities or communities of practice via the web in the concept of widespread forms of "productive publics".

Henry Jenkins formulated the concept of participatory culture to underline a conscious form of interaction between users in order to produce collaborative contents (Jenkins et al. 2006). This approach was built through analyzing fan communities, and their forms of social interaction, mediated by technologies within the boundaries of a voluntary production-related content, through rules implicitly accepted by the community, that participates and sometimes also has the possibility to critically react to media contents. The risk is that participation becomes a rhetorical form used by the market and by cultural studies to underline a promise of interaction and a critical practice (Schäfer 2008).

However, nowadays participation seems to characterize a logic including a semantic continuum between commitment and amateurish contents. This logic also considers different levels of participation and differently signifies this sense of participation – *from reader to leader*, to paraphrase Shneiderman & Preece (2009). Different technological platforms feature different "interaction" methods – people can just read, or also be more active, expressing a "like" for what they have just read. They can also share contents, comment and answer posts by other users or coordinate offline actions. What has really changed today is the media environment; this highly networked place exposes people's lives and makes each different form of interaction, even the slightest ones, clearer and more visible. Think about what happens when you are on Facebook – your homepage shows every action you perform, from accepting a friendship to the subscription to a group, from writing a note to tagging a photo or a video.

These different participating levels, showing all this information both to you and other users, increase the transparency of every participation method, committed or amateurish. Participation in blog networks, social networking sites and sharing systems, is

an emerging quality for individuals' active and passive actions (writing a note is not the same as accepting to subscribe to a group after being invited by someone else), but also for the *affordance* in the technology used. It is the environment itself that changes according to a higher level of participation, because the key for the success of "social" Internet applications – their rhetoric – is participation itself. Every application is interested in stimulating and giving visibility to each form of participation. Participation and its visibility move along together in the modern communication and social scenery. When participation, physical or virtual, becomes visible, observable and representable, its accountability becomes participation. Making things visible to acknowledge the change of the perception of positioning in communication is extremely important in contemporary participative strategies from the companies. To sum up, we now assist in a kind of participation which exists and shows itself even *before* actions happen. Showing itself to be a potential communication bond, but also as a connection. An observable and representable connection that grows day after day.

### **Participation: between the exploitation and the production of value**

We need to conceive online participation as a complex continuum between the production of online contents and their consumption, a point of tension among the several processes of a new media environment, in which the audience's actions and processes are encouraged by the media industries, and in which values and meanings are produced and circulated through different forms of content distribution and curation. In this sense, the act of tagging is a "building block" of networked communities (Rheingolds 2012). People select and share content, connect it by #hashtags, diffuse information through the "like" button which highlights which content people like: we live in an era of curated and distributed content, in which the audience does its job to read/view/listen to different contents, appreciating or criticizing them, talking to others to produce notoriety around a specific content, all occurring in a visible and quasi-conscious connected way. Online participation also lies in this ability to clearly identify contents and enrich them; thus, the user becomes a "readwriter" who no longer distinguishes between passively reading and actively writing in their practices, but fills the space between the two extremes with multiple shades of engagement.

On the one side we have a "light" form of participation, as in the acts of "liking" or "disliking" – when possible – an online item, or adding a tag to a photograph: they are all forms that involve the individual user to a limited extent. These can be aggregated in valuable ways through hybrid systems at the same time social and algorithmic, and that are capable of transforming large numbers of individual decisions into valuable metadata. This is a form of weak and implicit participation (Schäfer 2008: 85) that:

is channeled by design, by means of easy-to-use interfaces, and the automation of user activity processes [...] it does not necessarily require a conscious activity of

cultural production [...] it is a design solution that takes advantage of certain habits users have. Users are not required to interact in social networks, nor is there a need for common objectives or shared values in order to use platforms that employ implicit participation. Such platforms provide the means for certain user activities and benefit from the user-generated content.

It is a form of design-driven participation that does not require “a conscious activity of cultural production”, but this does not mean that it is not part of a cultural context, nor that it does not become a cultural practice. Uploading files to user-created content platforms such as Flickr, or adding tags to del.icio.us means, for example, taking part and developing a culture of sharing and searchability of contents; as in the case of P2P practices, which “automatically lead [...] to implicit participation in sharing hardware and connectivity for distribution purposes” (Ibid: 86). However, besides the infrastructural aspects of distribution and connectivity, the phenomenon of P2P develops a specific culture of sharing which contains both free and exploitative aspects.

In the centre we have the curator, who selects and organizes the communication flows and returns them in suitable formats for a re-circulation that creates value. The activity of “curating” is thus to filter, select and editorially treat (through aggregation and organization, titling and comment) the continuous flow of information that we find on the web, for the purpose of dissemination and repetition of information in a way that makes it fresh and current, interesting and relevant to specific markets and targets. The curator is able to identify those contents which have a high level of quality and reputation online and to assemble them so as to focus on a particular point of view about an issue which may also be different from that expressed by the individual produced contents. The attitude of curation can be practised through social tagging platforms like Diigo, del.icio.us, Pinterest, Storify, or social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook or Google+, but the point is that it is a form of participation that mixes: (a) the ability to select information and the ability to put it back into circulation in new ways and (b) the possibility of sharing and circulating contents, thanks to the spreadable media and social networks of people around whom they are structured.

### ***Bonus track 1. Storifying productive publics: “La Stampa”***

*La Stampa* is one of the most famous and popular Italian newspapers, based in Turin. This is the first bonus track that analyzes specific social and corporate practices that are generated around the news and publishing industry.

Since February 2012, the online version of the newspaper has been experimenting with the narration of the most commented online news with Storify<sup>3</sup>, particularly on Twitter. Storify is a website/social network site that helps users tell stories by curating social media: it is possible to create narratives by sequencing online materials like posts, tweets,

status updates, photos, and also adding comments to make personal connections to the storytelling.

Storify allows its user to follow the news in real time, updating the comments that are made available on the web, in order to impress a specific narrative tone to the conversations as well as a certain mood over time.

Anna Maserà is the journalist who takes care of this project, and who builds the storytelling by selecting relevant contents and the related users' online comments to describe a specific fact, especially on Twitter; she selects these contents following the #hashtags of the event created by the users themselves, or directly creating the #hashtag herself. The journalist, who is very active on Twitter, brings the contents of the *La Stampa* newspaper online and finds fresh inspiration online from generated #hashtags, narrating them in the online version of the newspaper embedding the Storify.

She often introduces the Storify she is creating by means of the #hashtags she follows on Twitter's timeline first, using other users' comments and entering in conversation with them: "Do you want to participate and be part of it? Collect network items for a Storify using this #hashtag". Thus, she is part of a conversation that she herself stimulates and observes at the same time, and reorganizes in a journalistic narrative by also including the views of those defined as "citizens of the Net" in the articles.

We could say that the online conversations and the stories which are told in the blog or through photos and videos are exploited for the purposes of journalism in Storify; but at the same time they are also reported in the way they were created, and using the same format: a tweet, a post or a status update. The authors of these contents remain visible, and their thoughts are related to the contexts in which they were produced – which is a feature of the technological design of the Storify platform and its related affordances.

This is, ultimately, a form of curation of information flows that uses an institutional venue – a newspaper – to become visible and give a voice to the contents dispersed in the Net. It can help us understand the reactions of citizens to a political statement, a political appointment/meeting or a tragic event, as was the case, for example, with the earthquake in Emilia.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, we have different forms of participation expressed as:

A. new forms of collaborative mediation between professionals and amateurs that create a reality ProAm (Flichy 2010): a close relationship between the market and the passionate amateur that generates a mixture of cooperation, conflict and co-dependency;

B. the growth of "produsage" activities (Bruns, 2008), which are co-operative, non-proprietary and user-led, and involve and are promoted by productive publics, creating specific symbolic forms and free open source around the design and production of digital content, as well as, new forms of manufacturing,



information and entertainment (as Linux, Wikipedia, Open Manufacturing, l'Open Biotech);

C. the larger reality of the so called prosumers, "those who are simultaneously involved in both production and consumption" (Ritzer 2009), which can be defined through the practices of production of media texts inspired by existing products and formats – from fan fiction to fan art, from the fan trailer to the fan film, from the alternate ending to the machinima or through the practices of remix and mashup of contents.

### ***Bonus track 2. Open Webcomics: Shockdom***

An editorial innovation in the field of comics in Italy that is going in a participative and transmedial direction is "Shockdom".<sup>5</sup> Shockdom is a web comic platform founded in 2000 from the online platform "Open Webcomics" for the self-production of 7 non-professional cartoonists. Currently, the platform reunites more than 100 web cartoonists.

Initially, the idea behind the creation of Shockdom was to experiment another way of circulating comics and animation online, but soon it became a point of reference for Italian *webcomics*, a sort of Blogspot for comics: actually, every young *web cartoonist* can subscribe to the platform and start uploading their comics whenever they prefer. In the Shockdom Store (created by the transformation of the publishing house in 2007), the best authors (or those who are considered the best by the editorial board) can see their comics published and sold in paper format, or in a tablet and smartphone version that links to the iComics platform. This indie self-production of comics on the Internet has thereby created a complex system that goes from the production to the distribution of the works, creating new places for their consumption at the same time — the blog site — where contents suitable for circulation are produced. The readers, in turn, post the strips inside SNS and in their blogs, using them to comment their lives or that of others, for instance by tagging their friends, in humoristic or celebratory strips.

This is a publishing system that has been institutionalized in just a few years, exceeding the mere dimension of the online platform to become a publishing reality that selects and distributes comics to the several specialist shops and in the various fairs taking place in Italy. The site also accepts advertising, and has developed a vertical system of B2B to reach the public of "comics and modern nerds", a target audience which is very difficult to reach and which is also extremely suspicious towards advertising if this does not come from authoritative channels; the site also produces some ads employing the authors' creativity, which reach an audience of more than 500.000 users. At the same time, it also maintains the ethos of an independent production, giving every aspiring comic writer the opportunity to deal with "the only critique that matters: the comments of millions of users".

A ProAm environment emerges, which is integrated with its own public: new ways of production and distribution arise from the participative community of web cartoonists in

close relationship with their readers — the site counts 100.000 single visitors a month — commenting on each new comic strip, participating in the forum's discussions, and circulating contents through SNs such as Twitter and Facebook. This is a real form of participative culture that defines itself as a “social network in which to read and draw comics”, i.e. in which productive authors and productive publics (some of whom also decide to become authors) can be connected.

The relationship between the authors and their public is very close, both as regards comments and critiques of the works and as regards the contents. One of the long-standing authors on Shockdom, Paolo Aldighieri, has created a comic strip, “eriadan,”<sup>6</sup> in which he talks about his everyday life, his feelings, hopes and illusions. One of the protagonists of this comic is his cat Cianci, whose name in the strips is “Piagatto”. On 7 January 2007 his cat died, and all this was reported in a strip: soon hundreds of comments arrived from the readers, and other authors of web comics dedicated some commemorative strips to the event. Similarly, he received more than 1,000 comments in one day after he announced the birth of his daughter Lucrezia, on 29 June 2007. The story of the life of eriadan has already entered the daily life of many web readers, connecting to their lives thanks to the real experiences that he recounts and in which the readers can see their feelings and motivations reflected.

### ***Bonus track 3. ProAm connected production: “Davvero”***

“Davvero” (that can be translated as “really” or “genuinely”) was founded in 2011 as a comic series on the web inspired by the *shojomanga* and defined as “Italian neoromantic”, from an idea of Paola Barbato, a professional writer in the world of Italian comics.

Its protagonist is Martina, the only daughter of a middle-class family, who is fickle and childish, spoiled and bored. She neither wants to go to University nor does she want to work with her father who, in the end, tired of her apathy, chases her away from home, giving her 20,000 Euros as a gift. Unexpectedly, Martina agrees and starts facing the difficulties of real life.

After trying to submit her comics to traditional publishing houses without any success, the author makes an appeal online in which she looks for colorists and cartoonists who would work for free, with the promise of future fame as the only compensation. More than 200 cartoonists answered the public announcement online, most of them amateurs, but among them also some already well-known professional cartoonists, who just wanted to take part in this kind of project.

“Davvero” has produced 70 episodes in a period of 8 months, two episodes of six tables each week published with Creative Commons License (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported ). Each episode is written by Paola Barbato and drawn from time to time by a debutant author, a semi-professional or a professional author, as well as by a different colorist every time. Less expert authors can work side by side with professional ones counseling and helping them, and even editing their tables. The episodes are issued

each Monday and Thursday at midnight, with reminders on Twitter and Facebook, and have become a fixed appointment for its faithful readers: in the first two months, “Davvero” registered 12,800 single visitors, with an average of over 2,000 people a week, of whom more than half visited the page in the first 24 hours while at least 200 people waited for the midnight issue.<sup>7</sup>

On the website Davvero.org, the readers comment on each episode in detail and interact with the author, who confronts their comments and critiques, and even clashes with them, explaining her narrative choices and the reasons for the kind of drawing and the palette chosen. The dialogue continues on the Facebook page too, in which previews of the episodes, pin-ups, homages to the cartoonists and making-offs are offered to the readers. Some of the protagonists of the story (Martina, Selena, Marcello, Sara, Riccardo, Damiana) also have a Facebook profile. If we look at Martina’s profile,<sup>8</sup> her timeline follows her studies, her problems with her father (“Ok, I have just discovered that my father has already enrolled me to Cattolica University! He’s such an asshole!), her relationship that is coming to an end; she also interacts with the other characters’ profiles tagging them in their status updates and in her pictures (drawings). At the moment, these profiles serve to promote the paper version of the project, and not all the characters are connected, since they do not know each other in the story.

Recently, “Davvero” has found a publishing house (Star Comics) and is going to shift from the web to Comic shops: “the drawings will be different, the scripts completely rewritten, the characters’ profiles will be analyzed in more detail and, starting from the fifth (monthly) volume, the story will have inedited twists”, says Paola Barbatto.

This project has a participative and sentimental component that goes beyond the editorial rules or the common relationships that we usually find among authors in the construction of a story. The mixture between debutant, semi-professional and professional authors and the close relationship with the audience gives rise to a very specific context:

We all work together, we decide everything together, we participate together in all the activities that concern the world of comics. This is “our stuff”, something that we trust very much, every one of us. We are driven by our passion, and this is wonderful.<sup>9</sup>

As regards the readers, their productive activity intervenes: (1) around the several comments that follow each episode, in the discussions with the author (and with the cartoonists too) about the narrative and stylistic choices, the coherence of the story, the quality of colors and drawings and so on; (2) In the interactions (in the form of likes, comments, tags) with the Facebook timeline<sup>10</sup> and on Twitter;<sup>11</sup> (3) inside the “DavveroOpenspace”<sup>12</sup> Facebook group, which is used to carry out surveys or vote the characters, since the readers’ choices can also influence the way the plot develops. Among the surveys carried out, there are questions asking: “The characters of ‘Davvero’ are all

aged between 20 and 25. Do you think a major age range should be represented as well?”, “We are on the roof of a tower. Which characters of ‘Davvero’ would you push off? Please argument your choice... “, “Which of the characters of ‘Davvero’ should have a major role in the story?”, “Which character of ‘Davvero’ do you feel you resemble more? And why?”

To choose the new female villain, a series of female faces chosen by Paola Barbato has been published, to be used as a source of inspiration; and a contest has been announced for the readers to vote, with their likes and comments, for their favorite character.

The readers’ opinions and comments not only regard the choices about the ways the plot will develop, but, if we look at the questions posed, they also express their desires and aspirations, and the way they recognize themselves in the characters’ behavior. Some readers also use the images of the characters from the series as their avatars on their Facebook profile.

In this regard, the question is not: when and how does the “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly 2004) become exploitative? But rather: how can we rethink the reality of playbor (play+labor) and how can we go beyond the dichotomous view exploiters / exploited in the realities of the prosumer, of the produser and the ProAmonline? The architecture of participation does not produce exploitation in the abstract. We should rather focus on the specificities of manifold participatory practices so as to be able to notice in which ways the different possibilities of liberation and of exploitation are produced.

The contents that are produced, shared and consumed online incorporate social relations and produce their value from the ability to connect with the individual experiences and the social networks that they share.

All forms of consumption are productive (Ritzer 2010; Bartoletti 2009), but the reality of the social web with its connection states (Boccia Artieri 2012) and the propriety of online contents (boyd 2008) makes this productivity observable and employable by companies/corporations in a systematic and strategic way.

It is also increasingly clear that the corporations and brands create and disseminate contents to stimulate and exploit the connection between people (see the example of viral marketing) in a media environment in which each content becomes a quasi-object (Serres 1981) and produces networks and makes networks evident in its circulation. Sharing content on Facebook, or tagging a picture becomes an indicator of a state of potential exploitation. Like in the case of the use of strategies of co-creation with the users who work for free and often lose the rights of what they produce, as the cases of platforms such as Zooppa or Brickfish are teaching us.

From this point of view, our mere presence in a social networking site or our bare use of a search engine are already forms of free labor that produce value for Facebook or Google, which in turn use it to exploit us. On the other hand, when I share my content through Facebook or through the indexing of Google for a large number of people, I can

produce a value that could not have been generated before with this same speed and ability to spread.

We are facing a complex reality that requires us to rethink participatory culture as a “dispositif” (Foucault 1971) in which forms of technology, social practices and discourses are interconnected.

### **Productive publics**

Talking about participatory culture does not mean, however, that we need to treat it in a utopian way as a necessity of participation inscribed in communication technologies, but it means, on the contrary, highlighting the cultural component that is structured around practices of consumption and production and both material and conversational forms of sharing. Instead, we have to deal with the genealogy of the cultural forms that are structured around the technological forms and around the contents processed through them.

The reality of networked publics can be described as a way of seeing ourselves as communicative subjects following collective paths of identification around shared communicative practices. The way these practices are shared is through technologies that allow a reciprocal circulation of the forms of production, distribution and consumption. Networked publics find a suitable form (Luhmann 1995) for their practices in participatory culture.

You do not develop formal and hierarchical links between nodes, but connections that are established from the practices and cultures that these nodes incorporate. The forms of production/consumption should not be thought of in the abstract, they should never be delinked from common and rooted practices nor should they be conceived as in neoclassical economics: cultural processes are fundamental, that is, the way you feel involved, in which we are thrown into the meanings and collective practices.

The level of involvement and constraints on the participants are defined by a membership limited to practices, which by its nature is something in transition (depending on momentary interests or on different possibilities of access) and based on a shared ethos around the objects of production and around the same practices that outline the recognition of a difference in value. So networked publics become “productive publics” through a process characterized by: (a) an orientation around a common ethos, a ground of shared values and standards, which do not necessarily imply direct knowledge of each other; (b) the possibility of access to common property – whether it is knowledge or pieces of code; and (c) production processes that take place in public and are therefore both accessible and transparent.

### ***Bonus track 4. Transmedia and open source novel: Manituana***

*Manituana* (2007) is a novel written by the WuMing collective. It is set in North America at the end of the eighteenth century, during the fight by the rebels against the loyalists of King

George of England; a fight for freedom carried out by the colonized people against their English motherland. This story of battles and deaths, mourning and famine is narrated by a native Mohawk tribe whose members are loyalists of the English crown. The slogan actually is “a story from the wrong side of the history”. This work, like many others of WuMing’s works since 1996, is copyleft and constitutes a sort of anomaly for the Italian publishing house, Einaudi, with whom this novel has been published. Copyleft means that the license of the work is Creative Commons (CC-BY-NC-SA-2.5-it), so that the work can be freely reproduced, distributed, given to the public, played, represented, set up and modified without any copyright, as well as without commercial aims, maintaining an equal or equivalent license. This is a way to encourage the circulation of works and to develop new forms of appropriation by the fans/readers. We can call this a literary open source form, a work that can be enriched, extended, modified and transformed by means of diverse media platforms. It is an enrichment of the work’s meanings and of the *Manituana*’s ethos that the readers can experience through the different channels and paths feeding the narration and leaving the story considerable autonomy.

With *Manituana*, the WuMing collective willingly decided to experiment with a way of soliciting their readers’ appropriation, and developing the work’s transmediality through its participative publics:

the idea is that of telling a story with every possible means, starting from the novel and exploring a narrative universe that can be accessed from several points: not only from a book-form, but also from comics, videos, music, webpage. (WuMing2)<sup>13</sup>

The book is promoted — and this happens in Italy for the first time — by a book trailer<sup>14</sup> and on a web site<sup>15</sup> that has two levels:

Very differently, in this respect, from certain Internet websites of movies, in which you can find music, images and texts that are nonetheless created by the studios and in which the fans, if they want to interact, must find their own ways to avoid the copyrights on the stories and the characters. (WuMing2)<sup>16</sup>

Level 1 presents the novel, a chronology in which to position the events of the narrative and some transmedia in-depth analyses, like the possibility of observing the novel’s places on Google Earth. Here, you can also find some “side-narratives,” so to speak, a sort of prequel that cannot be found in the novel even if they share the same imaginary, some micro-narrations that have been written for the website and some textual fragments, sort of short stories inspired by *Manituana* and written by the readers: these fan fictions – in fact, those more closely related to *Manituana* are in the Level 2, as we will see – and are integrated in

the original online content, becoming an essential part of the narrative universe of the official pages.

In the “Sounds” section, we can find some other contents that are produced by the fans and the readers of *Manituana*: some live readings of the chapters; a radio drama produced by a theater company on the basis of the book and entitled “Mohock Club Suite”; some tracks inspired by the novel, which are composed and played either by indie or professional performers, like those written by the composer and drummer Francesco Cusa (aka Frank U.S.A.) or the glam rock track composed by Jet Set Roger and illustrated by the Serbian cartoonist AleksandarZograf; or, yet, those belonging to the project of the company Casasonica, which asks its artists to read the novel and choose which of the chapters should be set to music. In this way, 8 tracks have been created that also can work as a soundtrack for the chapters.

The “Visions” section reunites the transmedia products inspired by *Manituana*, such as a cartoon prologue for the novel or an installation on the spirituality of the story created by the Italian writer Giuseppe Genna, which works both on PC and Mac, or, even, a board game inspired by *Manituana* that has won a prize for its originality and, finally, a “pigotta”, (i.e. a Unicef patch doll who looks like the female protagonist of the book, Molly Brant) made by a female fan in love with the book and its protagonist.

Level 2 is dedicated to those who have already read the novel, since it contains spoiler contents, and for this reason it can only be accessed using the answer to a plot-related question as a password. This is an environment created for the readers who intend to go deeper into the story, for example, learning the genealogy of its characters or the writing method of the WuMing collective.

We want to make the narrative ‘workshop’ accessible to those who are interested in learning how a novel can be written by five people, or how some of the decisions regarding the characters and the plot have been taken. We give them the opportunity to touch the iron filings, the tools, so to speak, and to smell the materials employed.<sup>17</sup>

There is also an additional “Comments” section, in which the readers and the authors discuss the novel and the narrative choices. The community of authors/readers discuss the contents and the characters, oscillating between different forms of reflexivity and textual expertise. The WuMing collective engages in the dialogues as part of this same community, as if its members were fans among fans, without any authorial detachment. It is as if the reader and the writer were entangled in each member of the collective, because of the nature of the collective itself. Significantly, we read in an answer by WuMing1: “as a reader, I have not been satisfied...” In such a transmedia work, the WuMing members see themselves as the first readers/writers of a peer-to-peer community, and consider their readers as, potentially, their first co-producers of meaning.

The new production/consumption link already exists at the writing level, but it is re-launched in a second phase that stimulates the readers to fill the gaps of the book and to imagine new (narrative) situations. In the “Diramazioni” section we find the stories created by the readers, which interpolate the original plot of the novel or narrate some other stories related to the characters, which the WuMing collective also encourages. Actually, its members write: “we would like to transform the website into a participative extension of the novel and of the world that we intend to explore through the stories produced by its readers. The only constraint is dictated by historical coherence.” For example, shortly after the publication of *Manituana*, a user called Moniq sent the Epilogue n. 2, which was published in Level 2, becoming a bonus track of the original novel.

The mechanisms of production are made explicit; they can be seen, commented on and shared. This stimulates the birth of fandom and also leads it. The consumer of transmedia products can be considered as potentially productive publics, outside the deterministic mechanisms that tend to overwhelm them as active audiences between the alternatives of forced appropriation and cultural resistance. As productive and connected publics, they become something more than a simple market product and something less than a semiotic democracy.

### **Participation as “we sense” and reflexivity**

To understand this reality we must revisit the fan studies and rethink the dichotomous category tactics/strategies.

A. We need to revisit the fan studies by considering fandom as a cultural device. In fact we have been socialized by fandom to a particular perception of the relationship with media products and the cultural industry. The practices of fans have been analyzed for a long time as a form of niche, but today they are becoming a generalized and normal mode of relating to mainstream contents. Contents are increasingly perceived and used as raw materials to be reworked through forms of meaning starting from their own/the fans’ experiences. These procedural forms and these cultural orientations have been intercepted by the marketing of media products, which feeds the levels of engagement of the public: this brings us to the issue of participation in the exploitation of audiences.

However what I would like to emphasize here, because this is what is genuinely new in terms of discontinuity, is that we need to understand *whether* and in *what ways* the meanings and processed products coming from the bottom, from “raw materials” fed by mainstream contents, can give form to a new semantic, and give rise to symbolic forms that allow us to experience media contents differently as well as generate different interpretative categories of our society.

The media contents are now increasingly being treated according to the principle of “the fans”, thanks to the possibilities of production, distribution and consumption solicited by the logic of circulation of the Web. To be a fan is to be understood as having a



participative cultural attitude towards content. This form of participation becomes a way to heal the rift between the experience of the world and its representation. It is therefore possible to experience a reality that we live in the media and develop a reflexive attitude on the content of information and entertainment diffused by the media. The possibilities offered by the web generate forms of participation in a mediatized culture that give rise to a doubly reflexive opportunity: a reflexivity in the connection and a reflexivity on the connection. These are new ways to articulate the elaboration of sense.

By reflexivity *in* the connection, we can understand the observation of how others will observe us through media contents. This is to direct the observation of how others will observe us. This way of observing is made operational through communication modes which are designed according to the principle of reciprocity: I expect a like, to be shared, to be commented, etc.

By reflexivity *on* the connection, we mean a mode of reflexive reference to the social relationship that has developed and its quality and skills. Reflexivity in this sense is developed in relation to the sense of social relationships that are built through participation in media content.

A (specific) production, circulation and consumption of symbolic forms related to the mediatization of culture, associates an increase in reflexive mode. This is a significant and concrete place in the mediatized participation through the mode of the generalized fan, who is superficial and deep at the same time.

B. We must also go beyond the theory of textual poaching (de Certeau 1980; Jenkins 1992) and the “strategies/tactics” paradigm that opposes the industrial languages to grassroots realities. The issue, here, is not so much emphasizing the forms of appropriation and resistance on the part of the audience, but rather the audience participation in a shared ethos that brings emotional and passionate elements of “world-of-life” into play, as well as an orientation to value differences that bring non-utilitarian logics into play.

If we use an outside perspective of observation of these forms of participation, we reduce any interpretation of the phenomenon in a discourse relative to the domain and the power that it needs to identify the exploiters and the exploited. This is a very useful critical point of view to highlight how society treats individual and collective impulses in a functional way to their needs. However, we risk losing the opportunity to observe the emergence of elements of discontinuity that cover both the forms (symbolic) and the content (meaning).

If instead we use an internal perspective of observation of these forms of participation, we are able to identify an immediacy of experience that cannot be reduced to the extent necessary for a vision of exploitation. Indeed, there is a meaning that is produced from the inside, a semantics that is stable in practice. It is a meaning which can also be problematized from inside: the reflective practices also serve this.

The practices of production, distribution and consumption of these grassroots contents specify the meanings of “being-in-the-world” (Habermas 1987) and the symbolic forms that are generated and circulated here. These practices become a laboratory for producing a new semantic of society (Luhmann 1995), a new “we sense” (Boccia Artieri 2011) and a new frame to interpret the relationship between media and publics, production and consumption.

We can think about the dual screen practices linked to political or entertainment shows; the practices that support and generate the conversations about media products collected around a #hashtag on Twitter; but also the practices related to a new ProAm context.

Media contents are perceived as something deeply related to the individual life and the creation of identity. Despite that, at the same time, media contents seem able to initiate wider processes of reflexivity. Those processes, which may be considered as a truly collective form of thought, seem to link the specific media product to a wider and shared *we sense*, that is the feeling of something shared: something that is assumed to be common because of the sharing of a specific media product, or of a specific time, in media history.

The *we sense* is the awareness to share a common background of belonging in terms of experiences that are shared and “felt” by the other members that we place in our close connection: “They do not only have something in common, they also have a (common) sense for (a kind of knowledge about) the fact that they have something in common” (Corsten 1999).

Today we are definitively witness to a maturity of connection states and to a reality of productive publics that process their connection in public. That is, before the possibility of activating mechanisms of collective reflexivity, that produce, circulate and consume symbolic forms in which they recognize themselves culturally, forms that in most cases are stimulated or co-generated with corporations, producing a collective ethos and a common “we sense.” As a matter of fact, we should speak of these not (only) as participatory communities but, more properly, as cultures.

In this context, as I have argued, storytelling is a transmedia platform for the attribution of meaning and the construction of a shared ethos. Productive publics participate in different ways (as prosumers, ProAmmers, producers, ecc.) to create a new model of circulation of narrative contents. Circulation refers to an emerging, hybrid system in which the spread of media is partially shaped by the authorized and unauthorized behavior of consumers (Jenkins 2010), and in which “commercial and noncommercial players help content to spread across the culture” Productive publics create value by spreading contents and commentaries through their social networks, and they also generate the possibility for the circulation of new contents, as the experience of citizen journalism or the project of crowdfunding show us. The companies/corporations and the storytelling professionals – from journalists to novelists, from screenwriters to designers – are adapting

their ways of producing and disseminating contents developing ways that are more suitable to the new logic of circulation.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> I chose to use the Italian examples to emphasize the universalism of the transmedia process. Indeed, the hyperlocal examples show the sense of transmedia, that do not depend on how much a cultural product is known or intended for a wide audience. As we shall see, it is the nature of the relationship between production, distribution and consumption of contemporary contents – with the emergence of a different form of the audience – to create new transmedia possibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> The term Web 2.0 was coined by publisher Tom O'Reilly to describe Internet technologies summarized as Asynchronous Java and XML (AJAX) and the new services evolving around the use of it (O'Reilly 2005).

<sup>3</sup> [http://storify.com/la\\_stampa](http://storify.com/la_stampa)

<sup>4</sup> [http://storify.com/la\\_stampa/terremoto-di-annamasera](http://storify.com/la_stampa/terremoto-di-annamasera)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.shockdom.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eriadan>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.fumettodautore.com/magazine/planet-o/3218-esclusivo-paola-barbato-traccia-un-primo-bilancio-di-davvero-levandosi-anche-qualche-sassolino>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/martina.ferrari.33449>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fumettodautore.com/magazine/planet-o/3218-esclusivo-paola-barbato-traccia-un-primo-bilancio-di-davvero-levandosi-anche-qualche-sassolino>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Davvero/156155887812719>

<sup>11</sup> [https://twitter.com/DAVVERO\\_fumetto](https://twitter.com/DAVVERO_fumetto)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/170465489738845/>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap11\\_VIIIa.htm](http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap11_VIIIa.htm)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.manituana.com/section/73>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.manituana.com/>; EN vers <http://www.manituana.com/documenti/76/0/EN>

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap11\\_VIIIa.htm](http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap11_VIIIa.htm)

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap11\\_VIIIa.htm](http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/giap11_VIIIa.htm)