PRODUCING PROD-USERS: CONDITIONAL PARTICIPATION IN A WEB 2.0 CONSUMER COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Is contemporary media ecology an ecology that offers unprecedented freedom for producing participators, the "prod-users," or could it also be understood as an ecology in which various forms of user participation are in fact conditioned, or manufactured, by professional producers? Considering the increasing research attention paid to various notions of user participation, these questions become important. This article critically discusses the theorising of mediated participation by illustrating and analysing ways in which users' participatory practices in fact can be both conditioned and formatted by producers making strategic use of participatory opportunities. By drawing on an ethnographically inspired case study of a web company, *Moderskeppet*, this analysis reveals how the actual possibilities for participation thoroughly are conditioned by producers. The paper also analyses strategies and techniques applied by the producers to create a sense of participation among users.

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It does not take much time to search for and find grand visions about the ways in which the new, more social web – usually referred to as the web 2.0 – makes it possible for people to *participate*. With any of the available search engines, it only takes a few quick searches on terms such as "social media" or "web 2.0" and "participation." The hits immediately make it obvious that the new web creates a lot of participatory opportunities for almost any of the roles available to contemporary human beings. A search of the Swedish web reveals how the communications manager of the political party *Feministiskt initiativ* [Feministic initiative] promises that "[real] voter influence is made possible by social media" (politik.20.se, np., authors' translation from Swedish). Hence, she is basically promising new, participatory opportunities for people in their roles as voting citizens. On another Swedish blog, "Brand Me," which focuses on "innovative and strategic market communication," a similar search including the concept "consumer" offers related results. The Brand Me-blogger senses a new relationship between producers and consumers: "Web 2.0 marks the transformation of the web into a more interactive, contributory and participatory internet, where information exchanges become more complex and users get a richer experience, which companies can exploit too, and benefit from" (BrandMe, np., authors' translation from Swedish). Also to people in their roles as parents, the more interactive web seems to offer new opportunities to participate. In an online journal for educators it is argued that keeping a school blog ascertains that "staff, pupils as well as their parents become engaged and involved in school activities in new ways" (Skolverket 2009, np., authors' translation from Swedish).

It is of course rather typical that these statements are so readily available on the so-called "social web" itself, especially on blogs, as they almost are generic web 2.0-applications. As such it is also possible to understand these statements as somewhat self-centred reflections from people who are actually already involved in (and partially saved by) the brave new world that they both communicate within and analyse. To some extent this also explains their inflated rhetoric concerning the participatory potential of the web.

What is more surprising, however, is the fact that the rhetoric about web 2.0 and social media as royal roads to participation has been able to gain such a strong foothold within parts of the academic literature. With parts of the academic literature we mainly refer to those theories and ideas, which one of us has criticised in another context, as "theories of the media ecology of participation" (Olsson 2010). Despite internal differences between these theories (see below), the authors of this literature have one important denominator in common: they draw far-reaching conclusions about the social, cultural and political significance of the possibilities for participation offered by the improved and supposedly more social web.

This article will both summarise and develop on this criticism. After recapitulating some of the main arguments both within, and thereafter against, the theories of a "media ecology of participation," it develops a critical analysis by empirically illustrating and analysing a blind spot within the literature concerning participatory possibilities brought about by the more interactive social web[1] (or the web 2.0): The fact that the web development that has brought additional possibilities for user participation, also has been paralleled by a development in which professional producers of web content and platforms, have learnt how to make strategic use of the web's increasingly participatory features. As a consequence, what might

appear to be genuinely participatory practices among users (or prod-users as they are sometimes popularly referred to (Bruns 2008)) might very well be practices that are steered by, or even conjured up by, organised interests aiming at capitalising on the participatory potential of web 2.0. Such processes will be described and analysed based on a ethnographically inspired case study of web production within the Swedish web company *Moderskeppet*.[2]

Moderskeppet.se: A Web Company and Its "Participatory" Web Production

The Swedish web company *Moderskeppet* [The Mother Ship] runs the nationally leading website for those interested in enhancing their knowledge of and skills in photography and digital editing of photographs, using the software Photoshop. Their website offers free educational material such as instructional texts, video clips and courses, but also has DVDs for sale. Apart from this educational and commercial relation with its users, *Moderskeppet* also puts a lot of efforts into building and maintaining their communicative relations, which include: a) the company's self-presentation on their original website;[3] b) their website affiliates with the original website;[4] c) *Moderskeppet's* relation marketing on Facebook;[5] and d) user oriented journalism in their blog on the original website.[6] The company's educational and communicative skills have in fact managed to turn both Photoshop beginners as well as addicts into veritable fans of *Moderskeppet*.[7]

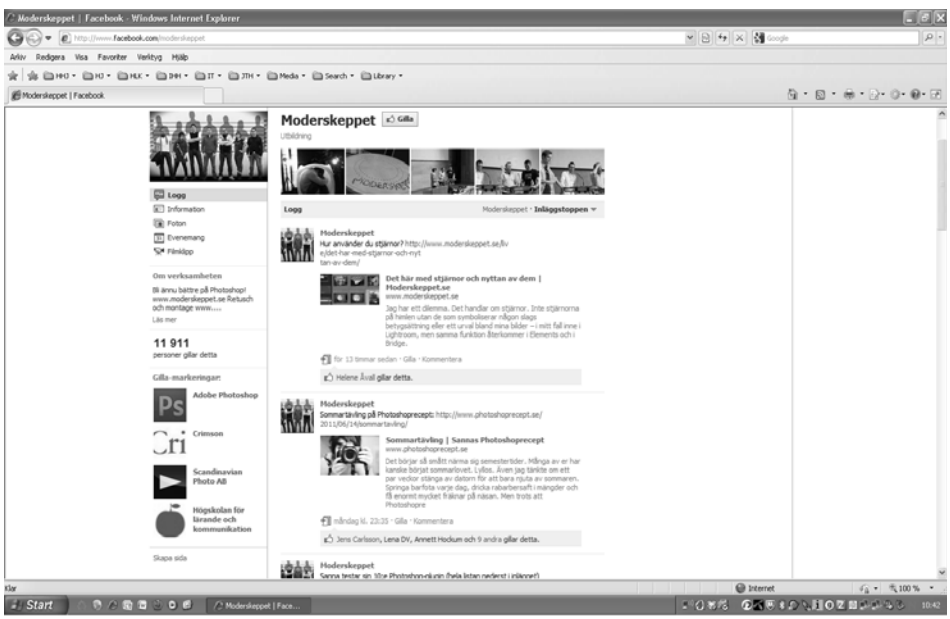
By most general standards *Moderskeppet's* internet venues, with the original website *www.moderskeppet.se* as the hub, has to be considered as popular. In a country inhabited by some 9 million people, *Moderskeppet.se* manages to have more than 100,000 monthly visitors, 10,000 subscribers to the website's newsletter, 6,000-7,000 users that "like" their Facebook community, and 3,000-4,000 people that apply to the company's undergraduate distance courses every autumn and spring semester. Furthermore, users also frequently read and comment blog posts, "like" their Facebook messages, send lots of e-mails to the staff, consume shorter Photoshop tips and tricks, read *Moderskeppet's* guides on digital editing, watch their web-TV lessons, and download materials.

Despite the immediate impression of *Moderskeppet* as a communicative company – which offers a lot of opportunities for web based communication and participation among users – a close analysis of the website, of the company's additional communication activities online (their blog, their Facebook-activities etc.), and an ethnographic look into how their communication activities are produced and organised, reveals a different story. This analytical story makes strategic (Habermas 1996) rather than the communicative (ibid.) choices obvious (choices made by the producers), especially in terms of how they in fact work actively and consciously in *steering the way for users' abilities to participate.* Furthermore, it also reveals strategic choices made in order to *produce a sense of participatory possibilities* among the users. In order to illustrate and analyse these producer practices, the article answers the following research questions:

- How do producers prevent users from participating independently and actively on their web venues?
- How do producers work in order to create and communicate the impression of both frequent and widespread user participation to the general public?

Screenshot 1: Moderskeppet's Website, www.moderskeppet.se

Screenshot 2: Moderskeppet on Facebook



By answering these questions concerning how strategic producers of web content condition, steer and sometimes even conjure up participation among users, this article aims to contribute to the critique of ideas concerning web 2.0, or social media, as infrastructures for participation. The critique, of course, does not intend to deny any participatory potential of the improved web per se. Technically speaking (O'Reilly 2005) the web 2.0 is obviously more interactive than previous versions of the web, and as such it also allows for additional participatory practices. The

Screenshot 3: The Weblog on the Website www.moderskeppet.se

critique should rather be understood as a contribution to the emerging literature that aims to *analyse and critically discuss the conditions* (social, political, economic, discursive etc.) for participation via web 2.0 or social media, since it is precisely these conditions that all too often are overlooked in analyses of the participatory potential of the improved web.

The Idea of a Media Ecology of Participation

An important step in the analyses of the more interactive and participatory web was taken as Tim O'Reilly launched his definition of web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005). O'Reilly's definition was first and foremost concerned with describing the improved web's technical, more interactive features. Nevertheless his analysis also included reflections on the improved web's social and cultural significance, as he pointed towards its potential to create a "richer user experience" (ibid., np.) and to offer opportunities to "harness collective intelligence" (ibid., np.). O'Reilly's sketchy ideas about possible social and cultural implications of the more interactive web were rapidly embraced by management literature. Within this light-weight literature web 2.0 was quickly ascribed the potential to bring implications such as better health and economic growth (cf. Tapscott and Williams 2006; Leadbeater 2007).

More importantly, however, O'Reilly's ideas have also been appropriated within parts of the academic literature, especially the literature that we have referred to as "theories of the media ecology of participation" in another context (Olsson 2010). Obvious examples of these theories can be found within the literature that connects web 2.0 and social media to concepts such as *participatory* (Deuze 2006a; Deuze 2006b; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins and Deuze 2008) and/or *convergence culture* (Jenkins 2006b). Both concepts have in common that they stress the importance of

more interactive – and social – web technology in creating a cultural infrastructure for users' active participation within various forms of co-production (usually exemplified by applications such as Twitter) and social networking (applications such as Facebook) online.

A very evident, recent example of this theoretical connection between the improved, more interactive web and ideas concerning increased user participation, and even a "participatory culture," can be found in the book on You Tube by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009). In the very introduction to the book, Burgess and Green point to how You Tube, as a typical web 2.0-application, fosters new forms of participation and engagement among users. They state:

> *[The] shift from the idea of the website as a personal storage facility for video content to a platform for public self-expression matches You Tube to the ideas about user-led revolution that characterizes rhetoric around "Web 2.0"* (Burgess and Green 2009, 4).

Burgess and Green then proceed by characterising You Tube in terms of a site for participatory culture and more specifically refer to it as a "co-creative environment" (ibid., 82) in which all users "at various times and to varying degrees" (ibid.) are "audiences, producers, editors, distributors, and critics" (ibid.).

Jean Burgess' and Joshua Green's analysis of You Tube provide a rather typical example of analyses that connects applications of the improved web to a new media ecology of participation. Nevertheless, Henry Jenkins' widely cited book, "Convergence Culture" (Jenkins 2006b), probably makes up the example par excellence when it comes to developing these theories. Not least as his work constitutes an important reference in several of the efforts to analyse the emerging media ecology. Henry Jenkins presents his book as an effort to analyse the cultural shift taking place as a consequence of converging media. According to Jenkins, this shift includes the establishment of a new relationship between media users and producers. Within this emerging media ecology processes of consumption and production of media become intertwined in new ways, and more specifically in ways that activate media users to the point at which they appear as prod-users (Bruns 2008) rather than merely users of media. As prod-users, people previously known as users (or audiences), become involved in co-constructive interactions with both traditional media producers (with a capital "P") and other prod-users in collaborative media practices. Together this adds up to a whole new media ecology:

> *Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules* (Jenkins 2006b, 3).

Critique of the Media Ecology of Participation

The ideas concerning the improved web as an infrastructure for a media ecology of participation have become influential within various fields of research. For instance, they are especially easy to recover in the field of educational sciences (cf. Churchill 2009; Greenhow *et al.* 2009; Sigala 2007). Within media studies, however, it has recently been possible to discern the emergence of a more critical discussion concerning new possibilities offered to (prod)users by the emerging media ecology. It is also to this body of research that this article wishes to contribute by illustrating

and analysing an aspect that so far has been overlooked in this critique; how the web-development that has brought possibilities for additional participation among users also has been paralleled by a development in which professional producers of web content have learnt how to make strategic use of the web's increasingly participatory features. In order to contextualise the forthcoming analysis, we will briefly review relevant parts of the literature concerned with critical analyses of the participatory potentials of web 2.0.

Several important contributions to this critique have been made by media researcher Christian Fuchs (2009). Writing from his position within critical theory, inspired by – among others – political economists like Peter Golding and Dallas Smythe, Fuchs has developed a critical theory of the internet. He states that even the more interactive web remains embedded within a capitalist order. The capitalist order then ultimately determines the web's social and cultural outcomes. From his point of Marxist ontological departure (Fuchs 2009, 74) he criticises the supposedly transformative potential of web 2.0. In his analyses he argues that web 2.0-applications commodify users; a line of thought that he also develops in another text:

> *[T]he exploitation of surplus-value in cases like Google, YouTube, MySpace or Facebook is not merely accomplished by those who are employed by these corporations for programming, updating and maintaining the soft- and hardware, performing marketing activities and so on, but by them and the producers who engage in the production of user-generated content. New media corporations do not (or hardly) pay the users for the production of content. One accumulation strategy is to give them free access to services and platforms, let them produce content, and to accumulate a large number of producers that is sold to third party advertisers. No product is sold to the users, but the users are sold as a commodity to advertisers* (Fuchs 2010, 147).

The extract deals with a fairly obvious way in which producers of websites, or even platform producers (cf. Gillespie 2010), make strategic use of users' participatory practices. By participating and spending time on a website, users make up a body of potential consumers, which become valuable for producers as they can be sold to advertisers. This is basically the same observation as Dallas Smythe made, more than thirty years ago, in his analysis of broadcasting media (Smythe 1977). Nevertheless, the analysis seems equally valid within a media ecology of participation.

Fuchs' critical remarks are important and valuable. They are also, however, very overarching and as such somewhat difficult to make use of in analyses of actual web practices. Instead there are other researchers who have been working on an analytical level closer to everyday practices, for instance Bart Cammaerts (Cammaerts 2008). In his article "Critiques on the participatory potential of Web 2.0," Cammaerts is specifically interested in blogging and the blogosphere. First, he describes how the blogosphere has become part of the discourse on participation surrounding most web 2.0-applications. Cammaerts does not deny the participatory potential of the web 2.0, but also finds in necessary to "acknowledge the limitations of and constraints to these participative and democratic potentials" (Cammaerts 2008, 360). In order to take on such a mission, Cammaerts maps and analyses a number of threats to the blogosphere as a participatory arena. He divides these

threats into two groups; threats on a "structural/organisational level" and threats on an "individual level." To the first group of threats he counts "colonisation by the market" (cf. Sussman 1997; McChesney 1999). For instance, he notes a number of strategies used by various market actors within the blogosphere in order to make the free, participatory space into a space for marketing practices. More specifically Cammaerts comments on the frequent use of "clogs" (corporate blogs) and "flogs" (fake blogs) as such phenomenon. Another "structural threat" to the sphere for participatory practices is identified in "censorship by states, organisations, and industries" (ibid., 363ff). In Cammaert's analysis these actors have the power to make use of techniques that limit the free flow of opinions and discussion. The third structural threat has to do with the fact that already established political and cultural elites appropriate the blogosphere and make it their participatory space and public sphere, rather than everyone's.

On the level of "individual threats" to the participatory potential, Cammaerts finds it important to pay heed to the fact that the blogosphere creates mechanisms for social control. Among other things he points to the fact that a blog's "visibility and popularity also leads to an increased possibility of social control and intimidation" (Cammaerts 2008, 369). As a fifth and final threat Cammaerts mentions how not only the "good guys" make use of the blogosphere. Also antidemocratic voices, for instance from the far right (cf. Atton 2004), have managed to develop a high degree of presence within the blogosphere.

Bart Cammaert's article maps important constraints to the participatory potential of Web 2.0. This is also the case in the work of José van Dijck, even though she starts out with a different theoretical departure (van Dijck 2009; van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). van Dijk argues for the need of more theoretically anchored analyses of what it actually means to be a user in the media ecology of participation. One way of doing this is, she argues, is: "to include the perspectives from cultural theory, consumer sociology and political economy" (van Dijck 2009, 54). This is essentially an argument for additional social and cultural contextualisation of our understanding of users, and as such van Dijck's suggestion echoes similar analyses concerning previous media ecologies (cf. Gripsrud 1995; Moorse 2000). Nevertheless, her point is still equally important to make, not least in light of the inflated discourses claiming contemporary users' participatory opportunities. In a related analysis she also extends her critical view of the participatory potential of web 2.0, as she argues: "[W]e urge a more critical awareness of the socioeconomic implications of these emerging trends. […] it remains essential to untangle the succinct positions and interests of various players" (van Dijck and Nieborg 2009, 870-71).

As the review of significant parts of the literature within the field has shown, the critique of the ideas concerning a media ecology of participation has covered different aspects of the participatory potential of this new media ecology: How the new ecology remains embedded within a capitalist world order, which ultimately determines its social and cultural outcomes (Fuchs); how structural as well as individual threats constrain the participatory potential (Cammaerts); and that there is a need for development of our theoretical understanding of user agency within the new ecology (van Dijck). What the review also made obvious, however, is the fact that the important part played by strategic producers within the seemingly much more participatory media ecology, has largely been absent in these critical considerations.

Producers on the Internet – An Analytical Perspective

In light of the reviewed critique it appears reasonable – or perhaps even obvious – to argue that there are in fact producers on the internet. It also seems unproblematic to suggest that these producers also make strategic use of the web in offering content to and platforms for users' participatory activities. Still, referring to the theories that claim that we now have a new media ecology of participation (cf. Jenkins 2006b; Burgess and Green 2009), such arguments are in fact supposed to be largely obsolete. Within this latter frame of reference, the users themselves become "prod-users," involved in constant, co-creative activities which, among other things, contribute to a levelling out of established power relations between producers and users.

This habit of overlooking producers on the internet is not only a web 2.0-phenomenon. As early as at the time of the internet's big breakthrough in the western world – in the mid 1990s – it became very fashionable to assign new possibilities for user participation to the new, digital ICTs. Popular authors and researchers alike competed in trying to identify ways in which the internet would activate and engage users in unprecedented participation. A great deal of attention was for instance focused on analysing how new possibilities for participation would reshape the public sphere and as a consequence create new political subjects (Poster 1995; 1997); how the internet would offer participation and interaction within new forms of community (Jones 1994; 1997); and also how virtual interaction would reconfigure modern subjects all together:

> *It is the collective response to this experience of ambiguity, the gradual process of adaptation to the semiotic universe of free-floating electronic alibis that constitutes the unique culture of the Internet* (Porter 1997, XI-XII).

Despite the fact that a lot of research attention and analytical sharpness have been spent on calibrating these early ideas about how the internet might change the world (cf. Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002 for a useful overview), a number of these ideas have either altogether survived the critique or have simply been reinvented in light of the supposedly more participatory web 2.0. As we have already covered, this article focuses on one of these blind spots, namely the little research attention and analytical efforts paid to critically investigating the part played by *producers* of content on the internet, and *Moderskeppet* serves as an analytical example of the conscious and strategic work involved in producing web participation.

The analysis of *Moderskeppet* as a producer is inspired by the analytical model "Circuit of Culture" (du Gay *et al.* 1997). The model argues that in order to gain analytical understanding of cultural artefacts, the analysis has to attend to five different but interrelated aspects; the ways in which the artefacts are: 1) produced; 2) consumed; 3) represented; 4) identified; and 5) regulated. This model has so far been brought to use in analyses of, for example, the Sony Walkman (Du Gay *et al.* 1997) and the cell phone (Goggin 2006).

In terms of the dimensions within the circuit of culture, this article is – empirically – first and foremost interested in production. It attends to the conditions of consumption, in terms of participation offered to users (or "consumers"), through the strategies applied by producers to regulate the ways in which the users are allowed to participate. These two dimensions; consumption and regulation, offer valuable analytical insights into Moderskeppet's mode of producing for the web.

Methodology

The case study upon which this article is based has taken a fundamentally ethnographic approach. Data has mainly been collected through systematic observations of *Moderskeppet's* homepage, its blog, and its Facebook fan page, but also the related website *Pixelplaneten.se*, on which users can discuss relevant issues. During these observations the content of *Moderskeppet's* homepage and the rules users must follow in order to be allowed to participate in discussions on *Pixelplaneten.se* have been paid specifically careful attention. Moreover, the observations have also documented the frequency of blog and Facebook comments posted by users. Two monthly samples have been drawn from the blog each year between 2005 and 2010 and from the Facebook site during 2009 and 2010. The frequency of postings has been measured as well as what themes the users have commented upon. In essence, these data reveal insights into both the participatory conditions for and practices among users.

Apart from data from these observations we have also conducted interviews with members of *Moderskeppet's* staff. All together some six hours of semi-structured interviews with *Moderskeppet's* CEO (Mattias Karlsson) and two additional members of staff have been conducted. These data both substantiate and triangulate our observational data (above), and also offer insights into producer strategies. The interviews with Mattias Karlsson play a pivotal role as he is both the company's founder and CEO. Furthermore, he is also specifically careful to be involved in all of the company's strategies and policies concerning communication.

As a consequence of this research design the analysis presented here mainly draws on data from observations, especially when it comes to the actual conditions for user participation. In order to illustrate our analytical points and to present insights into producer strategies concerning user participation, however, we also make rather extensive use of interview data, mainly from the interviews with CEO, Mattias Karlsson.

Moderskeppet: Strategies for User Participation

In both practical and theoretical terms the very concept of participation can signify many different things, and the meaning of the concept can also vary between different empirical contexts (Pateman 1970; Dahlgren *et al.* 2007; Dahlgren 2009; Carpentier 2011). In this case, as our ambition is to focus on some of the ways in which participation is being conditioned, formatted and even limited by a specific producer of web content, we allow ourselves to start from a more tentative, less theoretically elaborated notion of participation.

From such a point of departure participation could be regarded as the difference between taking part of, as a passive receiver, and taking part in, as an active subject. Hence, participation in this respect transforms one-way communication into an interactive act of communication. Consequently, participation on the web thus involves users taking advantage of different interactive means at hand. As a space, the web (for instance a website) provides visitors with verbal, audible and visual texts to read, listen to, and watch. At this stage the website is a space for one-way communication, from producers to users. Neither buying products nor downloading material from a website could be regarded as participatory practices.

Such activities are limited to appropriation of materials offered to users. Arguably, participation instead needs to involve leaving some kind of trace on the web: a message, a film, a comment, a vote etc. This is what we understand as participatory web practices.

We further need to distinguish between different levels of participation. Participation can be active in the sense that a user initiates a discussion by posting a message. It can, however, also be reactive in that the user reacts to what is published by a producer and chooses to post a comment, *a self-generated reaction*. Furthermore, reactive comments can also be effected by exhortations pronounced by the producer, *promoted reactions*. These kinds of participation are *public*. Meanwhile, the internet also offers opportunities for *private* participation. E-mail, for instance, provides users with opportunities for both *active* and *reactive* private participation.

Looked upon from this angle, participation can be private or public, of which the latter could be regarded as the most powerful and in line with what is actually referred to as the empowering meaning and potential of participation (cf. Jenkins 2006b). Participation can also be active, on the users' initiative, or reactive, on someone else's demand. Finally, reactive participation can be self-generated or promoted. In all, the most ultimate form of participation would be a public and active mode of participation, i.e. when the user of a website on her or his own initiative starts a public act of communication and dialogue without being restricted by any other conditions than what is commonly accepted as public communication standards.

As we will see, *Moderskeppet* provides their users with both private and public opportunities for participation. On the private level it is possible to participate actively, as the users are able to initiate e-mailing with *Moderskeppet's* employees or CEO. Of greater interest, however, are the questions concerning to what extent and how *Moderskeppet* allows for users' *active* and *public* participation.

Preventing and Cultivating Active Participation

As mentioned, with active public participation we mean that users of a website are provided with the means to make it possible to start acts of public communication and potential dialogue, on their own initiative. One example of such a practice would be a forum for online discussion. In a forum anyone can post an agenda setting message, not only the producer of the hosting website. For many years *Moderskeppet* hesitated to open such a forum, mainly because of the fact that other websites frequently showed instances of low standards. *Moderskeppet's* CEO (Mattias Karlsson) explains the conditions:

> We are extremely saved from grumbling discussions if one compares to and looks at other photo communities, i.e. communities where the users initiate discussions in forums and things like that … you know, it's astounding how sulky and whining it sometimes is within the realm of photography. People have completely different concepts of how to look at or perceive pictures and there are incessant conflicts.

Not having a forum, and thus avoiding "sulky and whining" discussions, was a company-wide policy decision. To compensate for this absence *Moderskeppet* was originally present on other websites instead, for instance on *Fotosidan.se* (which is a photo related community with a forum, which they check three times a day in order to see whether there were any questions or discussions concerning

Moderskeppet). Consequently, active public participation did take place between the users and *Moderskeppet* as producers, but not – interestingly enough – on their own website.

Very recently, however, the producers have launched a new strategy for dealing with users' active, public participation. The company has now finally opened a forum, but not on their main website. In order to manage the problem of low standards they have set up a parallel website, *Pixelplaneten.se*, which includes a forum. This forum is surrounded by multiple rules of behaviour by which *Moderskeppet* aims to cultivating users' active, public participation. There are actually 17 thoroughly described rules, which correspond to two A4 pages when printed, that govern how to the users should behave, express themselves, and what subjects they can include. After a first violation of these rules, the user gets a friendly warning, but after repeated violations the user account can be suspended.

Permitting Reactive Participation

Moderskeppet provides their users with several opportunities for reactive participation. The users can react in two respects; either by commenting on blog posts or on Facebook messages published by *Moderskeppet*. *Moderskeppet* publishes blog posts and Facebook messages, and then it is up to the users to decide whether or not to react with a comment. Mattias Karlsson makes this power relation explicit:

> We create all the content and then we offer the users the opportunity to comment or give us feedback on that content. Consequently, they don't actually contribute with anything new, besides reflections. We set the agenda and then the users are free to contribute, complying with that agenda and conforming to existing regulations of the communication standard.

The regulations and standards mentioned in the extract are not completely and explicitly spelled out in writing. Mattias Karlsson instead argues that different rules of behaviour have been mentioned every now and then and as such they are implicitly suggested. On the other hand, the "rule" of contribution has been explicitly pronounced: "Consequently, we have declared very clearly: you are included if you contribute to the quality of the content, and will be excluded if you do not!"

These regulations do not warrant *Moderskeppet* from critique from its users, their purpose is to guarantee a good standard of communication:

> You may gladly criticize us, for instance by saying "that is not necessary to write about, or to describe." But, if you enter our website and your only purpose is to muck up and grumble … then you are not welcome. But I guess that is understood, because we have never needed to tell anyone that they are not welcome.

Self-generated Reactive Participation

The average frequency of *self-generated* blog comments are today less than five at each of *Moderskeppet's* blog posts. Before the introduction of their Facebook fan page, in the fall of 2009, the frequency was a bit higher. Today Facebook has taken over some functions from the blog, i.e. creating relations with users. If we take into consideration the average number of daily visits at the website, 4 000-5 000, the average number of self-generated comments are extremely few. Of course the number of visits is not equal to the number of visitors, but the active participation in terms of commenting on blog posts does not at all match the distribution

between active and passive participation suggested by the Pareto principle (Juran 2004), saying that 20 percent perform a major part of the work.

Furthermore, the frequently participating blog commentators seem to constitute a fairly small group of people. A rough estimation, made by *Moderskeppets* CEO Mattias Karlsson, asserts that the group consists of some 100-200 people. We can compare this number with the fact that more than 10 000 people subscribe to *Moderskeppet's* newsletter. Moreover, a very small group of these recurrently post weekly comments, ranging from unlimited praise to recurrent objections.

The number of comments varies to some extent due to the interest that a single blog post, or Facebook message, manages to evoke among users. This becomes apparent when comparing the frequency with the topics discussed. The number of blog comments increases (a) when blog posts contain news concerning Adobe's or *Moderskeppet's* own products; (b) when blog posts deliver simple and innovative tips and tricks for photo editing; and (c) when a blog post in some regard is open-ended, pondering or conjectural and thus implicitly entices the readers to contribute with an answer or a solution.

The average number of comments on *Moderskeppet's* Facebook messages is barely five on each message. The messages receiving most comments are messages explicitly creating social relations between the users and the company, its individual employees, and its CEO, Mattias Karlsson. This means (a) e.g. messages announcing *Moderskeppet's* victories in different competitions, reporting from the travels to Photoshop World, and messages from the photo serial "Days at *Moderskeppet*" (which offers insights into the everyday atmosphere of the office); (b) e.g. messages noting that yet another of the employees has qualified for the title Adobe Certified Instructor; and (c) e.g. messages celebrating Mattias Karlsson's birthday and the birth of his son. These categories of social messages generate between 20 and 40 comments.

As mentioned, *Moderskeppet's* main reason for employing Facebook was to build social relations with the users and thus to lay the foundation for its consumer and brand community. Facebook seems to fulfil this task very well. The frequency of comments on this particular category of messages, in comparison to other categories, prove that many users are sensitive to *Moderskeppet's* efforts in building social relations. This underscores the producer influence over what themes that are allowed to constitute the basis for the narratives creating the consumer and brand community.[8]

Promoted Reactive Participation

The most noticeable increase in number of comments is caused by promoted reactions, that is when *Moderskeppet* encourages users to comment on blog posts or Facebook messages. The most striking example of this, and of the power of a loyal consumer community, occurred in 2009, when *Moderskeppet* was groundlessly accused by the vice chancellor of Stockholm University, of enticing students to apply to their undergraduate courses with free software as a reward. In essence, the vice chancellor argued that corruption was the main explanation as to why several thousands of people applied for *Moderskeppet's* courses. In response to this claim Mattias Karlsson posted a message in *Moderskeppet's* blog headed "Do we bribe you?," and then he asked his readers to: "Tell the vice chancellor at Stockholm

University why you actually have applied for our courses!" Within 24 hours more than 600 comments were posted to the vice chancellor's blog listing all kinds of personal, rational and well grounded motifs as to why the students had chosen *Moderskeppet's* courses.

Another example of promoted reactive participation are the comments on a Facebook message in early 2010 saying: "On Monday we're brainstorming all day to develop *Moderskeppet*. What do you want us to do more of?" Within 12 hours almost 50 users took part in the development work by offering ideas and wishes useful as points of departure for the brainstorming process. In this particular case Facebook was used as a combined tool for both product development and market investigation.

One additional instance of promoted participation is when users are invited to the blog as "This week's friend of *Moderskeppet*," or when they are invited to become a member of the Blog panel. As *Moderskeppet* is keen on staying in control of and conditioning users' participation, these rewards do not offer any possibilities of actually contributing freely. Instead, the awarded users are interviewed by *Moderskeppet's* staff and are only allowed to show some of their edited photographs on the website.

Communicating a Sense of Participation

It has been made obvious that the actual degree of participation on *Moderskeppet's* website, weblog and site on Facebook is quite low. Nevertheless, *Moderskeppet* possesses the power to communicate the impression of both frequent and widespread user participation. How do they make people consider themselves participators within a consumer community, involved in the activities of the website, when their actual participation is very limited?

First of all, the staff at *Moderskeppet* are fully aware of the fact that the degree of web based involvement and participation is not very high. As Mattias Karlsson puts it:

> Well, we've got a much better reputation than we deserve. Actually, the users aren't that deeply involved if we compare with communities that provide their users with online forums. People's impressions are, however, quite different.

Another member of the staff highlights the fact that there are not many applications and functions on the website that invite users to be involved and participate actively:

> We've got the blog and several of these "web 2.0 exciting things," like Facebook and Twitter. But, actually, what we offer to the users is a comment-function. We don't offer them very much in terms of active content creation. Even if they are few, comments on the blog posts and Facebook messages create an impression of a frequently ongoing discussion […].

Moderskeppet's website is busy with activities for users and visitors which give the impression of involvement. But there are also communication strategies at work creating the impression that people participate and are deeply involved in *Moderskeppet's* operations. Mattias Karlsson explains:

> As soon as there's an opportunity to emphasize that we've listened to a user's opinion, we do that by writing: "We understand that you have this kind of opinion …," or, "Peter in

> Malmoe suggested the following …," making every reader feel that we're around, in their neighbourhood, always listening and taking measures to satisfy them.

An obvious example illustrating this communication strategy occurred during the fall semester of 2009, when Moderskeppet decided to reduce the fees for so-called school licenses. Teachers who use *Moderskeppet's* educational material in their teaching are provided with reduced packages of three instructional videos on DVD. However, due to the curriculum, and also time issues, they rarely need the complete videos, and only use parts of them. Teachers contacted *Moderskeppet* and told them that they were not willing to waste public money on material they did not use. Since it is not possible to sell the video courses in parts, *Moderskeppet* reduced the price to a level teachers would pay. When launching the price reduction *Moderskeppet* was quite explicit with communicating that the reduction was the result of the teachers desiderata and that *Moderskeppet* had really listened to them.

There is no need to overstate the fact that one listens to users, but it is important to be explicit when communicating it. This was the case with the abovementioned teachers. The group of users actually being listened to does not have to be very big. Most of the time when *Moderskeppet* communicates that they have been guided by users' preferences, or opinions, it might be as few as *one* or, at the uttermost, *some* user's opinion. Mattias Karlsson explains:

> In most cases the readers' interpretations are that *Moderskeppet* addresses all users when we have listened to users. *Someone* has been participating and taken measures to influence us, and per definition this means *everyone* on this site.

This points to the fact that the impression of high involvement and participation is not only a question of communication from producers, but also of imagination among users. The fact that the internet today is embedded in what could be regarded as a mythology of participation has already been highlighted in the introduction of this article. It is not too far-fetched of an idea to suggest that the impression of deep involvement and frequent participation at *Moderskeppet.se* is not only an effect of the busy website and *Moderskeppet's* strategies for communication, but also – at least in parts – an effect of the mythology of the participatory internet.

Conclusion

Referring to the analysis above, it is reasonable to make the somewhat provocative claim that the participatory opportunities that users are offered by *Moderskeppet* (on their website as well as elsewhere on the web) are in fact pseudo-participatory. These opportunities appear to be and also look a lot like invites to actual participation, but when digging deeper into them and analysing producer strategies and tactics, a different picture is revealed. This analytical picture suggests that pseudo-participation is conjured up by the strategic use of at least two different but interrelated, overarching strategies: a) *Moderskeppet's* careful steering and conditioning of the ways in which users actually are allowed to participate; and b) the communicative practices applied by *Moderskeppet* in order to make themselves appear participatory.

Moderskeppet is of course a small institution – basically only one site in a big universe of web companies. Hence, their web practices can of course not in any simple way be understood as typical, or specifically indicative for the ways in which the web in general is being produced. Nevertheless, it becomes a telling example

of the fact that also "[W]eb 2.0 technologies (just like any other technology) can be perfectly used in a top-down non-participatory way," to borrow Nico Carpentier's well-spotted point (Carpentier 2010, 53). Despite the ICT's many inherent participatory features, *Moderskeppet* manages to produce their website, including a sense of participation, without actually allowing for much participation. If nothing else, this serves as an important reminder for those arguing for and identifying transformative potential in the so-called media ecology of participation: Producers, with a capital "P," are not that easily overthrown by scattered prod-users' participatory practices.[9]

More generally our ambition has been to offer a perspective that makes up a useful contribution to the emerging, critical analyses of the participatory features offered by the so-called social media and/or the web 2.0. Our contribution can be understood in two different but interrelated ways. Firstly, the general insistence within our approach – to re-instate the absent category producers – is in itself a suggestion of an analytical perspective for others to take on. Even in the early days of internet research there was an obvious tendency to overlook the part played by organised, resource-rich and strategic producers of internet content, sites, applications etc. This tendency has become increasingly obvious as the internet has developed in continuously more user friendly and interactive directions; the everyday-users' opportunities to act as participating "prod-users" have implicitly been treated as an excuse for ignoring the fact that there are strategic producers out there, who make deliberate choices to steer users' opportunities to participate.

Secondly, our specific approach in analysing these producer strategies and practices can hopefully also be inspiring. Rather than just making an overall claim for the importance of looking into producer practices, we both argue for and have exemplified a much more fine-grained, ethnographic approach for such an analyses. This approach pays heed to what forms for participation that are actually being allowed and how these forms are shaped by strategic choices made by producers. Among other things it offers good opportunities for critically analysing dimensions of power and control within the media ecology that is, supposedly, more participatory than the previous ones.

Notes:

1. It is in fact also relevant to briefly reflect upon the very notion of "social media" as well, which recently has become very popular within both popular and research debates. In various ways it is a very problematic concept. For instance, what exactly differs the sociability of the internet from the sociability connected to previous forms of mass- and interpersonal communication? If these new, internet based media are "social media," how are we supposed to make sense of social dimensions concerning other media, such as newspapers, radio and television? These questions, as well as a lot of similar ones, are notoriously left unanswered by the discourses that describe the improved internet with terms such as the "social web" and/or "social media."

2. *Moderskeppet* is actually the brand name. The registered company's name is *Pixondu Ltd.* For textual clarity we refer only to the brand name.

3. The website www.moderskeppet.se.

4. The company has launched a number of affiliated websites, such as http://www.pixelplaneten.se/, http://bildbehandla.se/.

5. http://www.facebook.com/moderskeppet.

6. It can be noted that *Moderskeppet* also has its own YouTube-channel, http://www.youtube.com/moderskeppet.

7. The analysis presented in this article understands the original website www.moderskeppet.se as the hub in *Moderskeppet's* web-presence, but it also includes other parts of the company's web activities.

8. In this context it is also valuable to refer to the emerging literature that comments on the tensions that user participation provokes within journalism (cf. Lee-Wright *et al.* 2012). On the one hand user participation is often understood as a democratic opportunity of inclusion for users to appropriate (cf. Rebillard and Touboul 2010). On the other hand the very same participatory practices become a threat towards the news providers' branding practices (Hermida and Thurman 2007).

9. To be sure, the low degree of participation might also be related to the simple fact that the users just are not interested in participating (cf. Svensson et al. 2011). They might also in fact find pleasure in not actually contributing, but rather prefer to get a sense of themselves as potential contributors. As this is not a study including the users' view of these issues we cannot actually know for sure. On the other hand this is not our primary interest. Instead, we have solid data of actual web practices suggesting that the degree of participation is fairly low and also follows the rules and norms suggested by the producers. We also have solid data that makes it obvious that the company's strategies and policies include limiting and cultivating user participation. It is likely – we suggest – that these two facts are somehow related to one-another.

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