

User Generated Content

– a mega-trend in the new media landscape

By Professor Jens F. Jensen
InDiMedia, Aalborg University
jensf@vrmedialab.dk

User generated content refers to media content which in contrast to traditional media producers, such as broadcasters, media houses and production companies is made by ordinary users of websites, TV channels and the like.

Naturally, user generated content has always existed. We know it from telephone conversations, letters to the editor, notice boards, classified advertisements, etc. And we know it from the internet, which as a medium from the very start has been driven by various forms of user generated content such as E-mails, bulletin boards, mailing lists, news groups, chat forums, weblogs, etc. All examples of the fact that users can add material to the internet as well as having access to material uploaded by other users.

However, it is not until the last couple of years that we have begun to refer to and thematise this phenomenon as 'user generated content'. And this, of course, marks a noteworthy change. It has primarily happened in connection with web publishing and online content, but also in relation to television and more generally, in connection with production of content to new media.

The intensified focus on, and the renewed interest for user generated content can be attributed to various conditions. First of all, it is a result of the emergence of new digital technologies, which make full or semi-professional production tools for media easily accessible at an affordable cost for ordinary users. In this way, the entrance barrier to the media is lowered to a level where the individual users or community-based organisations can become content producers, and a general democratisation of media production can take place. Secondly, it can be ascribed to a shift in focus from the media organisations; changing from producing media content to creating facilities and frameworks for ordinary, non-professionals to produce their own content. This happens in recognition of the fact that the future of the media organizations primarily relates to empowering ordinary users and citizens. Thirdly, this results from the general development tendency in the experience society, which means that the need to realise oneself and differentiate oneself from others, among other things by selfexpression, is becoming an even more important part of the individual's identity. As well as it is a result of a number of other factors.

User Generated Content – Cases

User generated content covers a broad range of technologies such as blogging, digital video, photographs from mobile telephones, podcastings, wikis, etc. Likewise, it covers a series of different applications and services. The examples are legion:

Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com) is an online encyclopaedia based on references or entries, written, corrected and edited by ordinary users of the web in an ongoing dynamic process. Thus, Wikipedia represents a radical experiment in trust and a radical new form of dynamic user based content production.

Flickr (www.flickr.com) is an archive service for photos which makes it possible for ordinary web users to upload and share their digital photos with the entire user community. The service also makes use of collaborative or community generated categorisation where ordinary users can attach freely chosen keywords – so-called ‘tags’ – to the individual photos. In this way, the service, as phrased in the promotion material, is “The best way to store, search, sort and share your photos”. The originally Canadian based service with a community counting 2.5 million members has now been bought by Yahoo! for \$35 million.

Cloudmark (www.cloudmark.com) is a spam filter based on reports from e-mail users about what is considered spam and what is not. The system is said to perform better than traditional spam filters, which are based on content analysis of the actual messages.

MySpace (www.myspace.com) is a site where you can create a personal profile which makes up your own space on the web. Here, you can describe yourself, upload photos, videos, music, and write articles and blogs, which other MySpace-users can access, likewise, you can invite others to join your personal network, search for friends who are members of MySpace or look at the relations between your own friends and their friends and in this way expand your network of friends. In this manner, the site supports the creation of networks of online friends. In 2005, when MySpace was acquired by Rupert Murdoch for \$580 million, the site had approximately 65 million primarily young users.

YouTube (www.youtube.com) is a site, where you can upload, share, watch, tag, and comment original videos from all over the World. YouTube’s motto is “Broadcast yourself”, and the goal of the site is exactly to enable the ordinary users to produce their own videos, i.e. to “enable them to become tomorrow’s broadcasters”. Thereby, YouTube has built a community around watching and sharing videos. Currently, more than 70 million videos are watched at the site daily.

Current TV (www.currenttv.com) is an American 24-hours TV-channel, initiated by the former vice president Al Gore. The channel is based on news, information and entertainment. The idea behind the channel is to create a new interactive TV-channel, a ‘TV-homepage’, for the internet generation between 18 to 34 years old by mixing the video blog’s immediacy with reality TV’s voyeurism. Hence, the channel, in the words of Al Gore, combine the internet’s interactivity with “the couch-potato pleasures of TV”. This is done by encouraging the viewers to not only watch but also record, edit, and upload their digital videos to Current TV’s website. This happens in the form of short videos of between fifteen seconds and six minutes, so-called pods, which can deal with everything from technology trends and jobs over fashion and video games, to young people opinions about spirituality, finance, politics, and current events. In this way, the channel wishes to engage young people in a ‘democratic dialogue’ by supplying the viewers with stories of their interest and involve them in the channel’s content. The user generated video segments can be watched on Current TV’s website. This website also has a section guiding future video producers through the production process. Hence, Current TV can be viewed as a very large and organised video blogging platform. Through a rating system, a number of the submitted pods are picked for broadcasting on the TV channel. The submitted pods are broadcasted among professional programs produced by the TV station. Currently, 30 percent of Current TV’s programming is covered by what the channel terms: VCC, Viewer Created Content.

Other prominent examples of websites or services based on user generated content are Friends Reunited, eBay, FourDocs, Capture Wales, Yahoo! News, craigslist, del.icio.us, dodgeball, Adsense, digg, shoutwire, last.fm, technorati, BitTorrent and many more.

One by one, you could reject these applications and services as marginal phenomena and niche appearances. However, in total it is clear that user communities and user generated content in volume and significance is about to match what is generated by professional media producers.

User generated content is closely related to the more general phenomena and tendencies in new media such as the new generation or the new level of the internet which is often named Web 2.0, folksonomy, blogs, citizen journalism, and social intelligence, or, what is also called, 'the new Wisdom of the Web'.

Web 2.0

The massive distribution and success of new services and communities based on user generated content is primarily founded on the capacity and the omnipresence of the web. The unifying name for this tendency or movement is Web 2.0.

Through the reference to version numbering, which normally signifies software upgrades to the next generation application, Web 2.0 refers to an updated and improved version of WWW that allows the users to communicate, collaborate, and share information online in completely new ways. While Web 1.0 was marked by isolated information silos and static web pages where the user used search engines or surfed from one website to another, Web 2.0, on the other hand, is characterized by a more living, dynamic and interactive web based on social networks, interaction, user communication, user generated content, and an architecture of participation.

In this manner, Web 2.0 is in its core a social medium characterised by open communication, decentralisation, doing away with authority, freedom to share and recycle, as well as it is known for exploitation and support of the network effect, so that content and services become better and more effective the more users they actually have. With user generated content as the pivotal issue Web 2.0 is also much closer to the original vision of the creator of WWW, Tim Berner Lee, who intended the web to be a democratic, personal, do-it-yourself communication media.

Web 2.0 is closely related to and expressed through technologies such as weblogs, wikies, podcast, social software, etc. as well as in services such as, e.g., eBay, craigslist, del.icio.us, dodgeball, Adsense, Flickr, digg, Shoutwire, last.fm, technorati.

Web 2.0 has also been used as a synonym for the so-called 'semantic web' where web pages contain metadata which describes the page's content, and which can be read by computers. Such metadata increase the efficiency of the search engines, and makes it possible to search and combine information in far more sensitive and intelligent ways. Furthermore, that there is a close link between Web 2.0 as a user generated web and Web 2.0 as a semantic web will become apparent in the following section on folksonomy.

Folksonomy

'Folksonomy' is a combination of the words 'folk' (or 'folks') and 'taxonomy'. The term literally means 'folk's' or 'ordinary people's classification system'. More specifically, it refers to the tagging systems, which emerge in different internet communities.

While taxonomies are professionally developed formal and controlled vocabularies, folksonomies are open classification systems generated in communities in which ordinary internet users classify content such as web pages, online photographs or web links by using keywords of their own choice, often named tags. By classifying content after well-known, available and shared categories, it also becomes easier for ordinary users thinking in the same way, to retrieve content via search engines. Classification by way of tagging also makes it possible to establish the form of multiple, overlapping associations that resemble the brain's way of functioning instead of the rigid categories of a given taxonomy. Just like it makes it possible quickly to adapt to the new ways in which the internet community chooses to classify content.

Since folksonomies come into existence in internet communities, the users are able to trace who has created a given tag, and which other tags the given individual has generated. Thereby, a user can also trace the tags generated by other specific users who interpret and tag content in ways similar and meaningful to the individual. Thus, folksonomy is user driven and user generated classification – both created by and used by the community of users. Among others Flickr and del.icio.us use classification based on folksonomy.

Blog

A weblog or blog is a website that regularly brings articles or discussions much in the same way as in a diary or in a journal. Blogs are often maintained by ordinary users and offer comments on everything from news to specific professional subjects such as music, games, travel, and politics to very personal online diaries. Often, they operate in relation to the local environment and in relation to local communities, in the span between the private and the public, and in relation to specific areas of interest which ordinary users are involved in but the established media has difficulties in covering.

Blogs can contain text, photos, audio, video and links to other blogs and often adopt their names after their dominating media, meaning, a blog containing video is a video blog or vlog, a blog containing photos is a photo blog, and a blog containing links is a link log. In recent years, blogs have become more and more main stream. Now, they are also being used by, e.g., politicians and journalists in order to reach the receivers more directly, as well as by television programs, newspapers and websites. However, blogs still come out as the core example of user generated content – as the main channel for user generated contents.

Citizen Journalism

'Citizen Journalism' is when ordinary citizens play an active role in the gathering, communication and spreading of news and information. The background for this development is among other things that a large amount of digital cameras are in circulation among ordinary users – that digital cameras so to speak are ubiquitous – meaning that it is often ordinary users that have the first possibility to document and report a news event when it occurs. Likewise, the ordinary user has also immediate access to distribution channels and reporting of news through blogs, websites, etc. Thus, Citizen Journalism takes the shape of personal blogs, photos or video from personal mobile cameras, local news written by people in the local community or comments to professionally produced news. It is, in a way, ordinary citizens in the role of the ubiquitous journalist.

During the oil repository fire in Buncefield in London, 2005, BBC received more than 5,000 photos from ordinary users. During the hours after the London bombings, July 7, 2005, BBC received more

than 20,000 approaches in the form of photos from mobile phones, videos, SMS, E-mails from citizens who wanted to show what had happened and expressing their opinion about the situation. And the debate concerning the Muhammad drawings produced more than 22,000 E-mails from viewers during the first couple of weeks. This new stream of news made BBC establish a User-Generated-Content Team (UGC) in 2005.

The new possibilities for citizens to express themselves will undoubtedly influence the media in the future. Even when this does not necessarily mean that ordinary users will replace professional journalists and news organisations, the user generated content will at least mark a new kind of news stream.

Social Intelligence or 'The Wisdom of Crowds'

User generated content on the internet also links to the idea of social intelligence or 'the wisdom of crowds'. The point of departure for this idea is the assumption that the gathering of knowledge in a group often exceeds the most knowledgeable expert. Therefore, the decisions made on the basis of information gathered by a group of users are often better than those made on the basis of expert knowledge. The best brain is that of everybody. The collective brain is the most knowledgeable.

Therefore, an army of bloggers can deliver a better news service than even the best journalists. Therefore, millions of users, having the possibility to monitor, write, and rewrite encyclopaedic entries, can create a better reference book (namely Wikipedia) than even the largest publisher. And therefore, a search engine such as Google, based on links and on which sites other users on the web have found relevant in relation to a given term, can provide more fertile search results than search engines only looking for keywords.

In this way, the new web and user generated content is collective intelligence.

The Media Landscape in Transition

There exist many other phenomena which are related to the above-mentioned, and which lies within the user generated content as a general phenomenon. Including, among other things, 'viral marketing', characterised by a form of marketing where you do not market and promote your products in a traditional manner, that is, top-down, but instead rest on the recommendations from one user to another, that is, on user generated and user distributed content. 'Digital storytelling' which as a movement enables ordinary people to tell their own stories in a combination of traditional oral story and new digital media. And of course, not least 'open source' as a general movement, perceived as a peer-based production method within software systems, in which everybody has the possibility to add a project; everyone has the possibility to download and use the code; and everybody has the possibility to build on and elaborate the projects of others. This is a sort of organic production and adaptation process which in itself is an example of collective intelligence made possible by the internet.

In many ways, the contemporary media landscape is in transition. Regarding the media content, the movement, at a higher level, unambiguously moves from passive to interactive. The interactive content is found on a continuum reaching from, on the one hand, user choice between pre-produced professional content elements over user annotated content – meaning the possibility for user generated content input as a supplement to already produced professional content elements – to, on the other hand, proper user generated content. In the future, more and more content will probably

contain user generated content as well as community generated content, and the user generated content will appear side by side and in competition with professional products.

Changes in the media landscape also means that the relation between sender and receiver, between media institution and media user is transforming. When the ordinary media user has his own digital production equipment to his disposal and in principle has the capability to distribute self-produced content to the entire world – or at least to the entire network – the established environment for production and distribution is challenged and the existing power structures in the media world are questioned. In principle, a new distributed media environment is generated which is no longer letting itself be controlled top-down.

However, of course there also exist counter-movements. Much suggest that these sites, services and applications, which are created and fed by ordinary users, also will be bought by large media houses when reaching an attractive volume which makes them commercially interesting. Moreover, there are examples of how the well-established media industry is quick to ingest and exploit new technologies in their own interests. And, finally, there are also numerous issues that point in the direction of proper user generated sites and services that, over time, establish their own power structures and power relations.

Still, the fact remains that the complex movement around user generated content displays a long series of new possibilities which are not just pointing toward new content but also in the direction of new genres, new media and new cultural and social phenomena, which are worth keeping an eye on in the years to come.