

Co-creation as a model for autonomous, participatory experiences

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Abstract

Communication design locates itself at the nexus of the craft of graphic design and the agency of communication within the contemporary public sphere. As such it is subject to the forces that shape modes of communication such as the new forms of social arrangement that are emerging out of social and participatory media.

This paper looks specifically at the practice of co-creation, which is a form of collaboration that extends to include the reader/viewer as well as the designer. Co-creation shares some features of the 'prosumer' (producer/consumer) in that co-creators often participate in the creation and consumption of media.

The modern usage of the term co-creation emerges out of the Open Source movement in computer programming. Co-creators act in concert, yet independently of each other, based on an agreement to respect the intention of the initiator. That is, full access is granted to the initial intellectual property in return for enhanced intellectual property being made available to the community under Creative Commons agreements. Co-creation is informed by practices such as co-design and participatory design.

I argue that co-creation is a model for large scale, participatory communication design. Co-creation is based on independent opt-in/opt-out actions. The practice does not rely on participants being members of a community or subscribing to a shared belief in order to take part. This sets us apart from conventional community media and design; social media communities; and other localized social arrangements. It is an ideal model for distributed interactions between makers and publics that share the ethos of autonomous and non-contingent involvement. I discuss this new situation in relation to the mainstream and professional design context.

Introduction

In a recent research project into a social and participatory media community, one of the people I interviewed commented that younger users are forging the characteristics of effective collaboration. As someone with a long-term engagement with collective and collaborative activities, I am intrigued by the notion that new collaborative practices are emerging. The comment led me think about what we know of collaborative practices and what we could imagine will develop.

I use this paper to consider how these emergent practices will impact on professional communication design as it comes into contact with the type of changes that have occurred recently in media more generally. To understand the changes I focus on *co-creation*, one form of collaborative practice. Co-creation is a concept that is prevalent in media, business, cultural and enterprise literature and discourse, yet it is rarely examined for how it works and what it offers to large-scale activities. It is my intention to explore its characteristics, the practices it affords and how we are learning to co-create as an alternative to conventional consumerism.

Social and participatory media

To look at co-creation more closely I turn to what we know as 'social media'. Social media is based on sharing information, contacts, opinions, creative works and ideas. In its current form as an online space it is relatively new, however much of what underpins social media has existed in many forms and periods. Community media, for example, has a similar grassroots participatory perspective as the social media 'commons'. Or the propaganda posters from Mai 68, Paris movement, designed by the student/worker Atelier group shares a DIY ethos akin to many blogs and online political activities, such as citizen journalism.

Yet there is also something about contemporary social media that is different to these other participatory activities. It is a genuinely mass based movement. Over one period of 120 seconds, while writing this article, 1,442,127 items were shared on Facebook, 106,482 tweets were made, 2,777,776 videos were watched on YouTube (Hayes 2011). Of course the bulk of these activities are low-level interactions, with little cultural or political impact. Nevertheless, the way that social media has infiltrated the everyday life of such large numbers of people—and not just in the West—is cause for paying attention to what is occurring, and the scale it achieves.

The introduction of new media facilities and practices, such as social and participatory media are partly the consequence of what *Web 2.0* affords. Web 2.0 aggregates available technologies into a 'user' oriented environment, with streamlined facilities to upload digital files; compile information and online interactions into workable connections; and provide realtime online publication. Social media is the term coined to describe personal interactions via Internet or mobile technology (O'Reilly 2005). The term derives from early online media iterations such as *MySpace* and *Facebook*, which were based on the notion of 'friendship' as the primary social network. As such the term only represents a small part of actual *social* life, omitting other ways in which people connect and organise into social, work and interest communities. Nevertheless the term implies the fundamental ethos of informal connectedness and ease of access to (online) networks that pervades what is known as social media.

Participatory media, as it occurs online, refers to the way people engage in and contribute to the production of media via social networking websites. Participants may upload a piece of media they have produced; comment on another's work; work on, or initiate a collaborative project; and/or engage in associated activities such as discussions, activating the community and management of the site. Online participants can also vote for others' works to create a process for the media to 'rise to the top'. These participatory activities are supported by a range of social media sites, from those that host citizen journalism (IndyMedia); to expert amateur sites (*Vimeo*); through to popular video display sites such as *YouTube*, among many others. Media theorist Henry Jenkins characterises participatory media as having:

1. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,
4. members who believe that their contributions matter, and
5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created) (Jenkins 2009: 5).

It is within the normalising practices of social and participatory media that I look for the signs of the new collaborative practices that I allude to in the introduction. The short history of social media means that the way it works is still relatively transparent compared to the opaque nature of highly corporatised and established broadcasting media such as television. Social media has a mechanical structure, with digital functions designed to emulate human behaviours and allow them to occur online. Features such as 'liking', 'commenting' and 'retweeting' are made possible using algorithms and link pathways. In a sense, what we could imagine as the 'wiring map' of social

media also works to highlight the human interactions that they emulate. In other words, we can 'see' these interactions as clearly as we could see the relationships between the nodes and connections on a wiring map. This is not unlike *Information Theory*, authored by Claude E Shannon at the US Bell Laboratories in 1948. Shannon developed a mathematical description of how information travels over telephone wires. The theory reduces communication to a set of information-parcels, segmented at the sender's end of the telephone wires, which then re-form as meaningful messages at the receiver's end.

We can go further by applying user experience and interaction research to see through to the motivations of the people who engage with social media, trace their behaviours, visualise the connections they form; and watch as new relationships emerge. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* comes to mind as a cinematic way to envisage this type of human behaviour out in the open, situated in a structure (the apartments) with windows onto various scenes of human behaviour. I'll take caution not to fall into the trap of making the same uncertain assumptions that are clearly evident in the *Rear Window* example. Though I think some degree of speculation is necessary to conceive new collaborative practices such as co-creation, as a way to see dimensions that could otherwise be missed in a simple analysis.

Co-creation

I focus on *co-creation* as a collaborative practice in this paper. The modern usage of co-creator stems from the Open Source movement where a node of people initiate a project—such as open source computer program code—then open it up for others to work on. An agreement was established at the outset that any development would be common property rather than locked up under corporate or individual ownership. The co-creator could use the enhanced software, but not commercialise it for private gain. Creative Commons licensing emerged to underpin the agreement, literally to enable sharing intellectual property between all parties. David Bollier, in his book *Viral Spiral* describes how the open source movement and creative commons emerged as challenges to conventional propriety practices. He states:

The commoners needed to build a new set of tools to actualize freedom on the Internet, and to develop a new language, a new epistemology, a new vision, for describing the value proposition of sharing and collaboration” (Bollier 2008: 95).

More recently the term co-creator has been used to describe a range of interactions between people who in some way contribute to the making of media or creating social knowledge. This can be as simple as giving feedback or editing a wiki post. At the other end of the levels-of-participation spectrum it can be initiating a project or making a significant contribution to an activity.

The contemporary co-creator engages in a collaborative activity based on his or her own volition, opting in and out by choice. He or she is an autonomous actor; conscious of his or her own motivations; bringing expertise to the project and determining the way in which to contribute. A co-creator will negotiate his or her own outcomes, or deliberately agree to work within those that are offered. Importantly, the relationship is not predicated on the co-creator being part of a pre-established community or other collective entity. This alters the relationship between the co-creator and other partners in the co-creative activity. For a start it removes the need to establish a shared belief or ambition that is a normal requisite of forming a community of interest. This distinguishes the co-creator relationship to that of the collective (with its implicit orientation towards a common conviction).

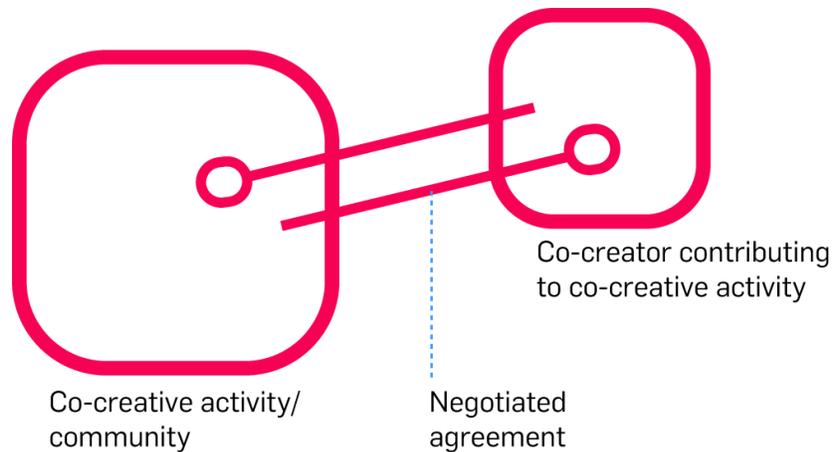


Fig. The autonomous co-creative relationship, represented by a two-way interaction via a negotiated agreement

It is this that enables the co-creative relationship support participation on a large scale. The co-creator can work collaboratively with people that he or she does not know and is often likely not to meet. The relationship can be one where people work independently of each other, each self-managing his or her contribution, within a framework provided by the social media space. This frees the co-creator from a range of limitations—such as needing to be co-located, having to share a common ethos with others in the activity, or having to commit more than desired—thus making it possible to work in assemblies larger than otherwise possible.

That is not to say that connections and communities do not form, simply that the motivation to work together lies elsewhere. What are these motivations and what practices do they drive? Co-creative engagement appears to be progressive, where people experience low-level participation via the new social media, and then extend their reach by becoming more involved. Becoming involved in a friendship network becomes a learning phase, allowing a person to work out the type of conversation that is being held online; the disparate ‘personalities’ of communities represented by each social networking space (*Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Vimeo*, for example); and the public nature of social media. This could be seen as an elementary motivation to ‘find out what it is all about’, which can lead to further involvement.

More active co-creation, such as sharing expertise to create social knowledge, or contributing media towards a collaborative creative output (mixing one person’s sound composition with another’s video, for example), appears to have other motivations. In some cases the participant wants to build his or her professional and creative identity and reputation. Otherwise it can be driven by a creative impetus to produce a collaborative work or content curation.

These types of participation lead to practices that challenge the conventional relationships in media and design production. Most notably the relationship between producer and consumer is changed from the broadcast model to one where meaning and the experience of media and design is socially constructed.

Ramifications for communication design

A designer is able to adapt to the co-creative space using the collaborative nature of the design process itself. At the heart of the design process are the conversations and inquiries that are structured to lead towards a design solution. In the first instance the notion of setting the problem involves the commissioning agent, the designer and other stakeholders in a collaborative activity, and which pays attention to the audience in various ways. Here, for example a set of what Henrik

Gedenryd calls 'inquiring materials' (Gedenryd 1998) are used. They include mood boards, which are designed to ask questions of the client in regards to the style and feel of the proposed design solution; or sketches and design roughs that start to visualise the look of the concept; or workshops that use visual materials to glean the local knowledge within the stakeholder community. The iterative cycle of design also lends itself to drawing in new influences and voices into the process. In other words, the design process is conducive to optimizing multiple and diverse participants. This is a valuable base to start from when introducing the co-creator to the practice of design. The co-creator can be brought into the design conversation in a number of ways. It may be they are involved in generating an idea; or critiquing a concept; or contributing his or her knowledge to the activity of constructing social knowledge. A tweet from branding company *incognito sum* makes the salient point: "design is not about making things, it's about making decisions" (incognito sum 2011 8.14am 12/12/2011), which points to design being a knowledge activity as well as a manufacturing occupation. That is, the conversation in and around design can be opened up to co-creators from outside the design field in a way that adds value to the outcome.

With the active inclusion of co-creators into the design process comes a change in the set of relationships around design practice. In their paper, *The Labour of User Co-Creators: Emergent Social Network Markets?* John Banks and Sal Humphries argue:

that user-led co-creation practice works as something of a dynamic wrecker of industrial era modes of production and associated business practices. User co-creation may not simply be a source of cheap content or unpaid and exploited labour. It may be more a dynamic mechanism for coordination and change—an 'innovation agency that engineers transformations of business and consumer practices towards open innovation networks (Banks and Humphries 2011)

They contend that the: "emerging relations are messy, uneven, multiple and contested. They are not easily or seamlessly incorporated by existing business or employment practices" (Ibid). Thus the existing practices are required to change to make room for this activity. The shift in how future design practice is reconfigured to accommodate the co-creator is yet to play out. However I argue that it is beneficial to the communication designer rather than a surrender of the designer's role. The designer is not required to 'amatuerise' their role to reach down to the co-creator. Instead the co-creator is likely to be design-aware and more than capable of engaging at a literate level. The new conversation that emerges out of the co-creative relationship is likely to evolve over time to the benefit of the designer as well as his or her practice and more broadly to design literacy.

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