Audience creativity and its co-option by larger powers

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This section deals with the theme of co-option of audience work and creativity. We found that acts of audience production are being sought, shaped and co-opted by larger powers, over this past decade. Such powers mainly refer to players from the commercial media industry, but also include media regulators and policy makers, and stakeholders who could profit from audiences' participation in media production. When talking about co-option, we refer to an understanding of this term as diverting or using something in a role different from the usual or original one. In specific, this can on the one hand mean to adopt something (e.g. an idea or a form of media content) for one's own purposes, or include someone in something that they often do not want to be part of; or on the other hand to make someone part of something by agreement of all parties involved (cf. Oxford Learner's Dictionary).

The latter part of this definition is not usually used or even discussed in academic debates on the co-option of audiences. The theoretical frameworks that are commonly used to discuss this topic are political economy of communication and in particular of the web 2.0[42], or the notion of participation with a background in cultural studies[43]. Discussions include terms such as the commodification and exploitation of audiences, as well as digital and free labour on the one hand (political economy), but also participation, co-creation and audience creativity (cultural studies). Nevertheless, as Vesnic-Alujevic and Murru show[44], there is a need to find bridges between cultural studies and political economy approaches and the participation and labour of audiences' work.

Different to the terms participation or free labour, co-option emphasizes the ambiguities in these processes. According to danah boyd[45], co-option can be defined as the stage when the media under investigation become a creole and new practices emerge that are incomprehensible to those who were fluent in the previous culture of that media. In neo-liberal times, processes of produsage and co-creation of media content by audiences are inevitably entangled with practices of self-governance[46] and self-care. Also, processes of self-branding and self-marketing become increasingly important in the work of audiences as YouTubers, bloggers, citizen journalists, etc[47].

The three trends we identified here are as follows:

1. Digital media platform design is increasingly shaping content and audience agency into computable data.

This trend can also be termed as metrification, which means that **audiences' agency and engagement are turned into metrics.** This process of metrification is discussed as a critical development in which companies exploit the participation of audiences as free labour. Related to the concept of affordances that is used to describe the 'mutuality between technological shaping and social practices'[48], digital audience research is trending around the areas of automated processes. Examples of automation are algorithms, on which digital media are based. On the one hand, algorithms are used for filtering information on social media platforms and search engines; on the other hand, they are used for social and political bots. Although more research is needed on both these forms of algorithms and their effects on audiences' agency, they are considered with caution, because they are not regulated or controlled and their power lies in making something popular when it is not. Also, they are difficult to trace and cannot easily be detected by audiences themselves.

2. Media industries are encouraging and appropriating audiences' productive engagement for their purposes.

This involves audience creativity and user-generated content, such as fan fiction or citizen journalism. While audiences are resisting restrictions and constraints by mainstream media with self-produced alternative media, **existing power imbalances and hierarchical structures remain fixed**. This is especially the case with citizen journalism where audiences' content is used for economic benefits, but clear distinctions between citizens' contributions and content by professional journalists are made. Additionally, this trend includes new developments of the commercialisation of 'social media celebrities' such as YouTubers and bloggers, meaning that public relations companies increasingly recruit persons who have become popular on social media platforms for their own purposes. Our analysis shows that conflicts between audiences and larger powers do not occur as often as expected and that creative audiences also enjoy the visibility and recognition of their work, which might then lead to tolerance and co-option of it.

3. The creative participation of audiences in processes of glocalisation show how audiences' work is being managed and co-opted by global players.

Here, we see that commercial players in media industries increasingly not only use, but explicitly encourage audiences' work in order to use it for their own purposes. The co-option that takes place here takes a new form of using the work of audiences in a very direct form, as commercial bodies often address audiences to take part in the development of their media products as 'volunteer workers'. This work is then rewarded through rankings and peer-review within Facebook communities. The participation of the audience is a crucial part of the process itself, since the users fulfil a vital role in the glocalisation strategy of the company.