The Egocasting Phenomenon and the Identity Issue

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1 Introduction

Nowadays consumers are no longer passive receivers; instead they are becoming active broadcasters. Using friendly technologies, world population, especially teenagers from developed countries, are producing contents and making them available to a growing and heterogeneous audience.

Public participation through these marginal manifestations has great influence in the large cultural industries, expressing tendencies and preferences of a no longer silent "mass".

Conversely the present identity crisis, also associated to teenagers, finds in this personalized technology a powerful media.

Slogans like *Broadcast Yourself* (*Youtube*'s slogan), *Your World, Your Imagination* (*Second Life* site) or *Why be yourself when you can be somebody else?* (outdoor at

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Times Square) reflect in an undeniable way this profound transformation.

This paper intends to examine and describe this phenomenon.

2 Egocasting Phenomenon

The expression *egocasting* was first used by Christine Rosen in an article written for the *The New Atlantis* journal, called *The Age of Egocasting*. In 2004 Christine Rosen used this term to define "*the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one's personal taste, where we exercise an unparalleled degree of control over what we watch and what we hear.*" .

The online dictionary *Word Spy*, latter defined egocasting according to this transcription:

"***egocasting** pp. Reading, watching, and listening only to media that reflect one's own tastes or opinions.*

—egocast n., v.

—egocaster n.

(. . .)

Notes:

There's a second sense of this word that means "an ego-driven broadcast"

The present analysis is based on this second meaning, the ego-broadcast.

Over the last years, the evolution of technology conferred more control to consumers and, consequently, fostered public participation. Consumers are getting more demanding and want to be able to decide which contents should be available and interact with them. The technologies are attained and domesticated (Roger Silverstone). By combining different media, individuals can express their preferences and establish a personal relation with the cultural industry. However, only in these past years consumers are able to express themselves in a global way.

In 1992, BBC distributed Hi-8 cameras to viewers so they could film their daily lives. Those homemade videos were broadcasted in a programme called *Video Nation*. The displacement of the content production to the end-users was one of the first User Generated Contents (UGC). This first attempt to give voice to an unknown audience set a tendency that was strongly followed by Internet users.

Through this highly interactive media, consumers can communicate and participate in public life. Furthermore, individual's involvement in the public sphere has turned into an individual exhibition.

Daily, all kinds of self-manifestations burst online. From family videos to personal blogs, everything became public. One of the reasons for this transformation is the fact that in an endless universe such as the web, individuals have the need to be recognized. This inconsequent and widely known space turned into a place where individuality can be advertised and exposed, a place for ego-publication and self-awareness.

At the moment, we live in an experimental time. In *Youtube.com* the examples are vast. There are all types of videos online, mainly videos addressed to a small group that knows the egocaster, his virtual community. Nonetheless these "personal" videos are available for every curious and cybernaut.

The software available allows consumers to make films, compose music or edit pictures for quite some time now. However, it was only with the Internet that the online publication to millions of people all over the world became possible.

Nowadays each consumer has the opportunity to produce something. Cyberspace is not just a networked space where ideas and opinions are published, it is a melting pot overflowing with new tendencies, verging contents and exchanging influences.

Modern individuals mix different programmes in order to create something new. With meaningless resources (compared to the film industry for example), these new broadcasters produce original and quality contents.

Taking Macintosh as an example, the options are endless. Applications like *iMovie HD*, *Garage Band* or *Comic Life* stimulate creativity and provide users with friendly tools to produce worthy contents. The game *Movies* reflects the importance that these home produced contents have in the cultural industry.

In fact, new broadcasters discover innovative uses to the commercialized programmes. They merge diverse utilities and produce something that was not predicted by those programme's creators.

These amateur productions have already reached a professional level. The expression *Machinima* designates a new filmmaking technique. The events are programmed using video game and animation technologies, in order to resemble films. It is a low cost production that does not restrain the author's

creativity. The *Bloodspell* series or the music videos that use characters from *The Sims* are only a few examples.

The egocasting phenomenon has developed and the contents created are getting more and more sophisticated. It is now possible to use the term audience applied to this personalized technology. With daily viewers, RocketBoom is a success case.

Furthermore, the recognition of *Youtube*'s effect has lead several brands to upload their commercials online, with no expenses and countless viewers. Also the companies that take part in the *Second Life* simulator found an efficient and original tactic to participate in the consumer's lives.

Cultural industries are aware of this potential and the Internet is seen as a relevant media for these industries. Another relevant example is *Atmo*, a network of independent directors and producers who use the net to exhibit documentary films, animations and TV-programs. *Read My Lips* is a series of comic clips that had great impact online. A music clip for a love song performed by George W. Bush and Tony Blair was one of the hits produced by *Atmo*. The social and political critic is an important aspect of these new productions. There is a new space for critics and opinion makers in the online public sphere.

We are experiencing a structural change that will determine the creation of the next cultural contents. This transformation implies modifications in the cultural industries. Taking as an example the video game industry that has an enlarging number of enthusiasts, it is possible to observe how the cultural industries are reacting and adjusting to this situation. By increasing the quality of the images and improving the soundtracks, video games have been trying to resemble movies. The games are becoming more real, are offering more possibilities to the players and making harder to determine what is real and what is not.

Actually, video games aim to look like movies and movies are getting more influenced by the game's logic. It is possible to identify a clear tendency in film direction to use video game references like photography, theme, music or style. For instance, movies like *Sin City* or 300 are clearly influenced by video games and comics.

3 Identity Issue

Using Fausto Colombo's distinction, in this section the Internet is seen as a territory, delimited by user's participation and socialization.

This "stroking of the ego", as Christine Rosen described it, mirrored in the online ego-broadcasting, has a tremendous effect in the individual's self conscience.

What is the purpose of filming a senseless video and placing it online? Why do cybernauts create false identities and pretend to be someone they are not?

In the technologically developed civilization, individuals feel pressured to belong to the emergent virtual world. There is an implicit need to be someone online, a contemporary obligation to have a cyber identity or a nickname. Internet users do not require honesty from each other since it is the ideal scenery for fantasy, drama and simulation.

Cybernauts, mostly teenagers, are dragged into this pretending game where they can be anyone.

Chat rooms are more commonly related to representation and self-simulation. Howe-

ver, simulation games like *Sims* or *Second Life* offer as well the possibility to assume new identities.

The games function almost like a parallel reality where the players, or pretenders, can alter what ever is wrong in their real lives. It is possible to be a millionaire, to get even with the boss, to be a pop star, to direct films, to be a musician, to make friends, to make enemies or to offend with no fear of retaliation. The parallel reality provided by Internet presented the freedom to do everything without demanding any responsibilities.

Since this is a recent modification, younger generations are more aware of this technological development. Teenagers deal with networked communication since they were born. They grew up with Internet, cellular phones, television and video games, this fact determines the way they see the world. Their codes are different than the codes of the generations that produce technology. Hence, online coolhunters are essential, cultural producers need to study their preferences carefully and search for the latest tendencies.

In role-playing games, the player's identity is imagined and often associated to an ideal character or a hero. Video game characters are frequently compared to movie stars; they are in fact seen as role models. Nevertheless, even if the pretending personality is opposite to the real personality, it is always an extension of the player's identity. The real identity is present in every representation.

The so-called identity crisis related to adolescents is stimulated by the possibility of being anyone online. This possibility brings in a profound change in their mentalities. There are no boundaries, no waiting times and no responsibilities. Through cyberspace they can assume other identities and experience unimaginable adventures. According to Sherry Turkle, one of the traits of the growing presence of the virtual world within the real world is the boundary erosion between reality and virtuality. This statement can have two implications. On one hand the technological evolution is irreversible and vital for our social development. But on the other hand, society is generating confused beings that face life according to game rules.

By accepting that culture reflects society, we must acknowledge that the Internet evolved in this direction of diversity because our society and ourselves became multiple.

Post-Modernism recognized that identities are multiple and contradicting. Normal individuals can have changing, controversial and ruptured personalities. In our time this multiplicity is not a mental disease it is a common feature. Man classifies himself as unclassifiable, as a hybrid self that finds in the web an opportunity for his various self-expressions. The "selfs within me" (Carl Jung) are now able to communicate with the outside.

Actually, there are several authors that consider that the online role-playing can have a psychotherapeutical effect. By releasing some of their hidden personalities, individuals can face critical situations and learn how to deal with them.

In a presentation called *Modding The Sims. Blurring the boundaries?between fantasy worlds and real life?*, Tanja Sihvonen from the University of Turku brings up the question: *Where does the game end?*. In identity logic, the game doesn't end. It becomes part of the player, changing his perception of the world and transforming his experience. The lifestyle simulation games

and experiences don't expire. They not only change into more developed editions but they also become part of cultures.

4 Cultural Industries

Cultural Industries, as seen, respond rapidly to the market demands. Though the generated contents usually reflect the most profitable choice, regardless to the audience best interests, consumer's authority has definitely increased.

These industries are influenced by their margins. The contents produced in the web can determine the contents and tendencies of the new cultural productions. This means that, at this moment, consumers have a determinant role in culture. They cannot only choose to consume what concerns them, but they can also set an example and produce the contents they like to view, to listen or to experience.

If innovation grows outside the system, cultural industries require these broadcaster's productions to renovate themselves. In this point of view, contents can develop from margins to business.

Then again, consumers need variety and newness therefore cultural industries require a balancing force that refrains the repetition of success formulas. This contradiction between invention and standardization is not a recent issue. However the difference is the power that consumers have access to. Cyberspace, versatile software and personalized technologies offer consumers countless possibilities that do not depend on the mainstream leadership.

This conflict is not a battle because margin productions do not aim to have profit or to please an audience. They are experiences, author-pleasing works. In fact, in certain situations the notion of an isolated author or creator is questionable. If cultural innovation is the product of collective influences it is not possible to determine who created what. The organization *Creative Commons* (CC) is a noticeable manifestation of the need to deal with this ambiguity.

In his latest book, *Un nouveau paradigme: Pour comprendre le monde aujourd'hui*, Alain Touraine suggests that to be able to identify the new actors and the new conflicts, the self and the collective representations, humanity has to understand reality through culture - the new paradigm.

As previously stated, exchanging influences are a growing presence in the new cultural productions. This reciprocity engages not only individuals but also different industries. The interactions between the margins and the mainstream, between different medias that provoke and influence each other are clear signs of these exchanging cultural influences. Different cultural industries stimulate each other and can be inspired by the latest consumer's productions. These are clear manifestations of the networked communication, the correlation between audience and distributors, between interpersonal and mass communication.

The content's narrowing made by each consumer, can have dangerous side effects. In *The Age of Egocasting*, Christine Rosen also refers these consequences, quoting the American situation.

"We are turning into a nation of instant but uninformed critics and we are developing a keen impatience for what art demands of us."

One of the threats of egocasting, according to its first definition, is the isolation of individuals from the world surrounding

them. If the consumer's attention is always focused on the same topics, his ability to gain different experiences will be lost. This menace affects not only one's identity but it also transforms society in a demultiplicated universe of autists. In response to this tendency, cultural industries tend to create progressively more specific contents destined for small communities or, conversely, wide-ranging contents intended for a heterogeneous mass.

The possibilities are overwhelming, this innovative strength is crucial for social development and it is also significant that consumers are turning into pro-active producers and critics. However, it is imperative that society does not overlook reality while it is dazzled with virtual possibilities.

"Technology has given us a universe entirely for ourselves — where the serendipity of meeting a new stranger, hearing a piece of music we would never choose for ourselves or an opinion that might force us to change our mind about something are all effectively banished."

Society is dead, we have retreated into the iWorld.
Andrew Sullivan,
The Sunday Times,
February 20, 2005.

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