User-Generated Content

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User-generated content (UGC), sometimes also referred to as user-created content (UCC), is a generic term that encompasses a wide range of media and creative content types that were created or at least substantially cocreated by "users"—that is, by contributors working outside of conventional professional environments. Although UGC in digital formats is as old as computing technology itself, and UGC in nondigital formats has an even longer history, the term emerged to widespread recognition especially with the participative turn in Web design and practices that took place in the early years of the new millennium and is often referred to as the emergence of "Web 2.0."

Digital predecessors

Most of the platforms and channels for computer-mediated communication that pre-dated the invention and introduction of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 drew substantially if not entirely on UGC. Early online communication platforms including bulletin board systems (BBSes), Fidonet, or Usenet newsgroups (including especially the alt.* hierarchy) provided channels for like-minded users to engage and exchange messages with each other, and to thereby develop a shared knowledge base that subsequently was codified in the form of frequently asked questions (FAQs) or other documents (Baym, 2000). Similarly, pre-Web hypertext systems from Vannevar Bush's hypothetical Memex to Ted Nelson's Xanadu allowed and encouraged their users to generate their own content, and to contribute to the organization of the overall knowledge base by making new connections and sharing their work with other participants.

The early Web, too, consisted predominantly of UGC in the form of hand-coded, privately, or at least unofficially produced home pages. Gradually, a greater range of tools and platforms for the development and hosting of such content emerged, resulting in a further widening of participation in user-led content creation, but also in a gradual channeling and systematization of content creation activities that centered on a number of major content hosting platforms. Such early platforms included sites such as GeoCities, AOL, Blogger, LiveJournal (all launched before 2000), and (in 2003) MySpace; collectively, these and similar sites came to be recognized as a new, "participative" generation of Web sites described as "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly, 2005).

The participative Web

The growing scholarly and popular recognition of participative Web spaces in the early years of the new millennium centered especially on the environment for UGC that these platforms provided. A major Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report released in 2007 defined the "participative web" as

> based on an Internet increasingly influenced by intelligent web services that empower the user to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating on and distributing Internet content and customising Internet applications. As the Internet is more embedded in people's lives "users" draw on new Internet applications to express themselves through "user-created content" (UCC). (OECD, 2007, p. 4)

The same report sought to establish a unified definition of UGC, focusing on three major criteria:

- UGC must be "made publicly available over the Internet";
- UGC must reflect a "certain amount of creative effort";
- UGC must have been "created outside of professional routines and practices" (2007, p. 4).

Although terms such as "user-generated content" and "user-created content" continue to be used loosely and in widely varying contexts, this OECD definition encapsulates the key aspects of UGC that most users of these terms are likely to recognize. The third criterion should not be misunderstood to mean that UGC is entirely amateur content, however: It means that UGC is not produced within inherently professional contexts, but it may well be produced by users with professional-level knowledge and skills.

   Additionally, the OECD study also identifies the key technological, social, economic, and legal drivers that have led to the emergence and widespread acceptance of UGC. The study notes especially the growth in broadband uptake in many developed societies, and the development of more capable Web technologies that are able to support greater user interactivity, creativity, and collaboration; the widening social acceptance and use of Internet media, and changing attitudes toward the privacy implications of self-publication; the growth in Internet businesses, and their increasing embrace of user-led content creation both as a user practice in itself and as feeding into mainstream media activities; and the emergence of content licensing schemes that are capable of managing the intellectual property interests of users as well as platform providers.

Major applications

UGC is now widely used and accepted across virtually all areas of the creative industries, and has also led to the emergence of a range of new business models both for hosting the content, and for enabling users themselves to monetize their content. Major platforms for image hosting include generic sites such as Flickr and Picasa, as well as niche spaces such as DeviantArt and image-centric social media platforms such as Instagram and

Pinterest; the commercialization of image and especially of stock photo sharing is led by sites such as iStockphoto (now iStock) and Shutterstock, which enable the direct marketing of professional-grade photos. Audio content is hosted by projects such as ccMixter, which explicitly promotes the use of Creative Commons licenses that enable audio artists to reuse and remix other contributors' content, while Bandcamp provides the facilities for emerging, unsigned artists both to share their music and to generate income from direct digital sales to end users. In an expanding market, YouTube remains the leading platform for the sharing of user-generated video content, and now receives some 100 hours of video per minute and serves six billion videos per month (YouTube, 2014; note that this figure includes commercially produced videos as well), and shares some of its advertising revenue with its "YouTube Partners," including some amateur content creators.

Textual and mixed-media content hosting and sharing platforms are even more diverse. User-generated textual content made an early impact especially in the field of news and journalism, where user-led citizen journalism both provided a challenge to established mainstream media and served as an additional source of eyewitness content especially in the context of breaking news. A number of leading news organizations have established their own tools and platforms for the submission of UGC that supplements their editorial content (including CNN's iReport, Fox News's uReport, and frequent calls for user content submissions in many other mainstream media sites); and several alternative media, such as Indymedia or Slashdot, are drawing entirely on the content submitted by their users, although such content often draws and comments on mainstream media content through the practice of gatewatching (Bruns, 2005).

One of the most prominent applications for text-centric user-led content creation practices is in collaborative knowledge management and organization, especially through the use of public wikis and similar tools. Launched in 2001 and now offering at least rudimentary versions in several hundred languages, the user-edited Wikipedia has become the world's leading encyclopedia; its English-language version contains some 5 million entries to date. Both through the Wikimedia Foundation that governs Wikipedia itself, and through the use of wiki-style platforms by other operators, Wikipedia has inspired a range of related projects ranging from the user-generated Wiktionary to the collaborative book authoring space Wikibooks, as well as smaller wiki-style *pedias ranging from the Christian fundamentalist Conservapedia to the Perrypedia, for the long-running German science fiction series *Perry Rhodan*. Wikia, a commercial Wikimedia spin-off, provides hosting services for wiki spaces.

Commercial and organizational frameworks for such projects and platforms vary widely. A large number of UGC sites operate simply as amateur and fan projects, bringing together a small community of like-minded contributors who share specific interests, skills, or approaches to content creation. Especially where such projects have grown in size, more formal organizational frameworks are often established in order to reduce a project's dependence on the continued support of its founder or other leaders (who may control the Web server, domain name, and other crucial technical elements); Wikipedia, for example, is operated by the not-for-profit Wikimedia Foundation. Some such larger projects also feature advertisements or run regular donation drives to cover Web hosting and similar costs.

Other, and especially more recent, projects may be conceived from the start as commercial ventures that are funded by on-site advertising or by "freemium" registration models that provide different access levels to paying and nonpaying users. Here, the initial development and promotion of the UGC platform are often supported by speculative start-up investments, and the platform's continued success depends on its ability to attract a user base that is sufficiently large to make it attractive to advertisers and further investors. Arguably, even as widely used a platform as Twitter still falls into this category, due to its difficulties in becoming sustainably profitable.

Popular recognition and scholarly critiques

Especially since 2005, UGC has been widely recognized as an important phenomenon. Playing on the overall trend in general, and on YouTube in particular, *Time* magazine named "You" as its person of the year 2006 and placed a reflective screen space framed by YouTube-style controls on its front cover, intended to mirror the reader's face; the title caption read "you control the Information Age." Similar popular celebrations of UGC have often also highlighted its potentially democratizing function, as a practice which removes traditional bottlenecks to public communication and publication by utilizing readily available and widely used platforms and tools for "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009, p. 55).

However, critics of such optimistic portrayals of UGC have highlighted the uneven distribution of attention: Much as in conventional, professional content production and distribution, a small number of leading creators continue to receive a significant majority of attention. Thus, while UGC might democratize the *production* of content (enabling a greater number of users to share their work), it does not necessarily also democratize its *reception*. Similarly, even the potential to engage in user-led content creation is not necessarily taken up by a majority of potential contributors: Studies of Wikipedia, for example, have shown that only some 1 percent of its users make active content contributions themselves (Benkler, 2006). This "participation inequality" (Nielsen, 2006) is likely to introduce a skew in the representation of popular views and interests in UGC repositories, and may thus undermine the purported democratizing effects of such platforms and practices.

The commercial frameworks surrounding UGC platforms and services have also received substantial criticism. Where such platforms are advertising-supported but do not return a share of their revenue to their user communities, they may be seen as exploiting the voluntary unpaid creative labor of their contributors for corporate gain; conversely, however, especially audiovisual platforms such as YouTube and Pinterest, which enable their users to upload and share content that draws substantially on copyrighted materials, have also been criticized and sued by rights-holder associations for enabling the unauthorized distribution of copyrighted works.

From both these perspectives, there are also significant concerns about the long-term sustainability of some user-led content creation platforms and practices: The unbalanced composition of its contributor base has given rise to suggestions that Wikipedia may have entered a phase of decline, for example (Simonite, 2013), while observations

that new platforms for UGC continue to attract substantial venture capital funding even before establishing a sustainable business model have led to claims that there is the danger of a new dot-com bubble around UGC-centric businesses.

SEE ALSO: Collaboration and Cooperation; Community; Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW); Intellectual Property Rights; Peer-to-Peer Interaction; Prosumption, Produsage

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