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Spaces of Participation: Interfaces, Conventions, Routines¹

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Abstract

Against the background of current debates about participatory media blurring the boundaries between the spheres of production and consumption (Andrejevic 2004; Jenkins 2006), this paper discusses how different forms of participatory television and websites – *America's Most Wanted* (Fox since 1988), *Big Brother* (CBS since 2000), YouTube (after its acquisition by Google) – create and institutionalize 'spaces of participation'. The concept of 'institutionalization' as 'socially constructed templates for actions, generated and maintained through ongoing interactions' (Barsley/Tolbert 1997), is developed as a framework for the microanalysis of the relation between the interface as constructed by a television program or a online video sharing site, and the specific forms of user interaction as they develop in participatory practices. The paper argues that though spaces of participation of online video sharing sites seem less restricted than those of participatory television shows at first sight, users' activities are structured by the architecture of the interface, by cultural conventions of video making and by routinized practices on online video sharing sites.

As has occurred before within the history of emerging media, the advent of digital media and the World Wide Web again generated two opposing discourses on the social and cultural effects of the new media: one utopian and one dystopian. The more prevalent utopian discourse proclaims the revolutionary transformation of mass media into a truly democratic mediascape: one in which old and new media converge; where users do not merely consume pre-fabricated media content passively, but themselves become interactive producers and distributors of media content; and a location where creative ideas and knowledge are mutually shared online by ordinary people. According to, Celia Pierce in her *Interactive Book* (1997),

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[T]he interactive revolution [...] is about using powerful tools to create our own educational and entertainment experiences rather than passively accepting that which is fed to us by so-called experts. It is about the dissolution of boundaries and the translation of all thought into a common vocabulary. Binary code is the digital Esperanto that is leading concurrently to individual empowerment and worldwide unity. (1997, xvii).

This McLuhanian approach to New Media, though rather extreme in its wording, remains characteristic of much contemporary theorizing about digital media's "participatory culture". The differences between 'old' and 'new' media are exaggerated in order to praise digital technology's ability to overcome modernity's separation between the realms of production and consumption, and thus to create empowering forms of communication and cultural participation.² Whereas industrial and economic discourses describe this process as the advent of the "prosumer" (Toffler 1980, 282ff.; Tapscott 1996, 62f.; Tapscott/Williams 2006, 124ff.), the scholarly discourse declaims a "participatory turn in culture" and "the blurring of boundaries between the categories of production and consumption" (Uricchio 2004, 139). Online networks such as Napster, Slashdot, or Wikipedia serve as the chief witnesses of this "participatory turn" in our contemporary media culture, in which the consumer gains control over the production and distribution of media content.³

In opposition to this approach and less prominent, the dystopian discourse on the social and cultural effects of digital media focuses on corporate industry's ability to exploit the interactive potential of participatory cultures. As Mark Andrejevic (2003; 2004) points out in his seminal, neo-Marxist critique of interactive reality television, digital media allow for a new economic format that redefines interactivity and participation in terms of an enforced capitalist exploitation of the interactive consumer:

[T]he contemporary deployment of interactivity exploits participation as a form of labor.

Consumers generate marketable commodities by submitting to comprehensive monitoring. They

² William Boddy (2003) characterizes this discursive pattern as the "polemical ontology" of new media.

³ In discourses on media and citizenship (e.g. Couldry, Livingston & Markham 2007), cultural policy (e.g. Blokland 1997) and traditional art (e.g. Arns 2004), the word "participation" refers to acts of engaging in culture and art by actively receiving culture, i.e. reading, attending performances, visiting exhibitions, etc. In contrast, within this discourse, the meaning of the word "participation" has changed: people characteristically "participate", not only through active reception of culture and art, but also, and primarily, through the active contribution of content to the culture in which they engage. See, for example, Ebare (2004) or Jenkins (2006; 2007).

are not so much *participating*, in the progressive sense of collective self-determination, as they are *working* by submitting to interactive monitoring. The advent of digital interactivity does not challenge the social relations associated with capitalist rationalization, it reinforces them and expands the scale on which they operate. (Andrejevic 2003, 197, emphasis original)

Andrejevic's critique aims at what I would call the naïve embrace of digital media's interactive potential and the uncritical assumption that any form of interactivity gives consumers more control over media and allows for culturally more valuable forms of participation. According to Andrejevic, television shows such as *Big Brother* and *American Idol*, or online video-sharing sites such as YouTube, are examples of how the corporate media industry invests in digital technologies to redefine the relationship between the spheres of production and consumption: by seducing the audience to contribute to a television show or website, new sources of revenue are created; users pay fees to participate in a television show or to gain access to encrypted live streaming; users contribute their own content without monetary compensation;⁴ and whenever they do go online and interact, users produce data valuable for targeted marketing and mass customization.

Both perspectives, the utopian and the dystopian, address relevant dimensions of the ongoing redefinition of the relationship between the realms of production and consumption in the digital mediascape, but neither can sufficiently grasp the current transformations. The opposition between these two perspectives seems to reiterate the annoying debate between Cultural Studies' active audience approach and the critical political economy of media in the 1980's.⁵ While the utopian perspective highlights examples of participation that show exceptionally committed, often fan-based communities creating their own virtual spaces in order to contribute to the production or distribution of knowledge and culture, the dystopian perspective focuses on forums, in which the well-established media industry adopts digital technologies in order to open up new markets and to create even more sophisticated forms of consumer seduction and exploitation. While the utopian perspective draws on theories of the active audience and therefore tends to overestimate self-determined and subversive cultural

⁴ See Terranova (2000) for a detailed discussion of unpaid cultural and technical work in the digital economy as a "pervasive feature of the postindustrial economy" (2000, 35).

⁵ See Garnham (1995) and Grossberg's (1995) for an explication of the debate between political economy and cultural studies.

practices, the dystopian perspective refers to critical theory and political economy and therefore tends to overestimate corporate industry's power to determine cultural production and the circulation of meaning. While the utopian perspective discusses interactive reception and production of media content on the level of micro politics, the dystopian perspective addresses institutional and economic transformations on the macro level. In other words, there is actually no debate between the two perspectives at all: in the course of their argument, both perspectives draw on different cases, theories and approaches, and thus create two different fields of study; however, at the same time, both generalize their claims and findings as characteristic of the new participatory culture (in the words of the utopian approach) or the new online economy (in the words of the dystopian approach).

More current accounts, such as Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2006), which acknowledges the competing top-down and bottom-up powers defining digital media's participatory culture, do not manage to cover both perspectives. Although Jenkins adequately states in the book's introduction that "corporations [...] still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers" (2006, 3), in his analysis he focuses specifically on subversive and resistant activities performed by dedicated fans. Simultaneously, in his analysis of user participation in television shows and online communities, he downplays the top-down powers that structure even fan-based participatory cultures. In contrast, Andrejevic's (2004) rather differentiated analysis of resistant cast behavior in the *Big Brother* house and of related fan practices, ultimately comes to the conclusion that all of the cast's and fan's efforts to determine the outcome of the reality game show, according to their own self-created rules, merely served the producers' interests.

Against the background of the reversed blind spots apparent in these two different accounts on participatory media, I will discuss how three different examples of participation screen media – namely *America's Most Wanted* (Fox since 1988), *Big Brother* (CBS since 2000), and YouTube (after its acquisition by Google in October 2006) – institutionalize 'spaces of participation' and how participation becomes 'formatted' within these spaces. I call this process 'formatting' in reference to the adaptation of internationally circulating television programs, in which the format details how a program should be produced, but at the same time allows producers to adapt it to the local culture. The term thus indicates a characteristic tension between the predefinition by conceptual structures and the redefinition by practices. In a similar

manner, the concept of “institutionalization” (Berger/Luckmann 1967) as “socially constructed templates for actions, generated and maintained through ongoing interactions” (Barsley/Tolbert 1997, 94) helps to analyze the relation between the interface, as offered by a television program or website, and the routinized forms of user interaction. In the following, the term ‘interaction’ refers to actual, physical acts of interaction between a television program’s or Website’s interface and users, whereas the term ‘participation’ will be used as a concept to address the social, political and cultural characteristics of what I call ‘spaces of participation’.

I suggest here a spatial metaphor to indicate that television programs or website interfaces form the frameworks within which users who access and ‘inhabit’ such a space perform their actions. Again, these frameworks do not determine possible actions, but rather they structure them: they suggest and stimulate specific activities, attempt to obstruct others, and they allow ‘open spaces’ that are invaded and structured by users. Unlike ethnographic practice theory, which focuses on the observation of “publicly accessible practices” (Swidler 2001, 76), I do not think that practices as such are the starting point for an individual’s actions within real or virtual spaces. Rather, practices are structured by pre-existing socially and ideologically defined spaces within which actions are performed. These actions may negotiate and transform the very conventions and limits of a given, in this case mediated, space; however, the social power to construct such spaces and to define the frameworks for action is not shared equally within a society. Particularly in the realm of media, the power to create frameworks of communication is not distributed democratically, but instead is controlled by a multi-national industry, and in this regard digital media are no exception.⁶ The crucial question remains how various powers structure such spaces of cultural participation and co-production, because the interconnected question about whether digital forms of interaction allow for more self-determined forms of participation will be determined in this manner.

Against this background, a comparative historical approach to different frameworks and spaces of participation is useful: as I seek to demonstrate, it helps to avoid naïve accounts that proclaim new forms of participation to be radically different, when they are actually linked, to a much greater extent than the utopian perspective acknowledges, to traditional forms of culture and cultural conventions.

⁶ In terms of political economy, we have witnessed the “normalization” of digital and online media in the past decade; see Resnick (1998).

1. *Aktenzeichen XY... ungelöst*: participation as ‘nation watching’

Television shows that invite members of the audience to participate in a program, beyond simply watching it, are not a new phenomenon in the history of television. Beginning with the medium’s early years, members of the audience have performed as cast and contestants on quiz, game and talent shows. However, prior to the advent of digital media, there were very few shows that initiated audience interaction by implying the possibility for viewers’ participation in the show, while they were simultaneously watching at home.⁷ One of the earliest examples of participatory television shows was the West-German reality crime show, *Aktenzeichen XY... ungelöst* (ZDF, beginning in 1967), which became the prototype for *America’s Most Wanted* (Fox, beginning in 1988) and can, therefore, be seen as a key forerunner for a certain brand of reality programming.⁸ Broadcast in October 1967 for the first time, and still on the air, *Aktenzeichen XY* transformed the television studio into a stylized police department, presented reconstructions of real criminal cases as short filmic narratives, solicited the audience to call-in live, and thus to help in solving the cases. The program’s rationale, as Eduard Zimmermann⁹, the program’s presenter, explained in the very first episode of *Aktenzeichen XY*, was to employ the modern mass medium of television to fight crime, especially because the crime rate was increasing while the detection rate was decreasing. As Zimmermann (1969) declared, the millions of eyes of the television audience would see more than the few eyes of the police ever could. The one-hour program was broadcast monthly on a Friday night during the time slot for a popular German crime series. As a follow-up, later in the same evening, *Aktenzeichen XY* would broadcast a report as to whether the information derived from the audience had already helped to arrest suspects.

This show’s distinctive combination of dramaturgic elements – real crimes reconstructed in a documentary style, the presence of the police in the television studio, and the appeal for live audience participation – made the program an immediate and long-lasting popular success; it is

⁷ An interesting example of these early formats of participatory television includes fund-raising shows where people could phone-in and donate money.

⁸ See Jermyn (2007) and Pinsler (2007) for a detailed history of the reality crime show.

⁹ Like Jack Wash, the presenter of *America’s Most Wanted*, Eduard Zimmermann became an emblematic and highly controversial representative of the conservatives’ call for law and order.

one of the few West-German television shows to become adapted internationally.¹⁰ In any country where the show was produced, heated public debates arose over the program's legitimacy and its possible social and cultural side effects. In the US, for example, David Putnam (2000) has identified *America's Most Wanted* as the prototypical example of antisocial television programming: according to Putnam, *America's Most Wanted* and similar programs are the cause for Americans' increasing disconnection from social bonds such as family, friends, neighbors, and democratic structures. In the US, as in many European countries, the show became a major popular success, which attracted the requisite and parallel intellectual criticisms for its questionable journalistic ethics, i.e. its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction; its discrimination against suspects; its conservative account about criminality; and for its possible dissemination of fear of crime.¹¹ The program has been especially criticized for its power to address the national audience as police informers. As the German psychoanalyst and media critic, Claus-Dieter Rath (1985), commented furiously in an essay entitled "The Invisible Network", this program is

[...] a perverse realization of Brecht's theory of radio, which called for the distribution system of radio to be turned into a communications apparatus in which everyone is involved. [...] The TV-citizen becomes a member of the police, the restorer of 'law and order', the eye of the law. The state and the police force merge into the audience, into a community around the broadcast, made up of the invisible electronic network between isolated homes and dwellings – which in the case of *XY* serves to arrest the errant and the deviant. Thus the social arena functions as a hunting ground, the living room as a hunter's hide. Mixing documentary, fiction and live action, the show also mixes the enjoyment of television with the denunciatory activity of a viewer who passes on advice to central office. (1985, 200)

This critique could easily be translated into the more optimistic language of the utopian approach to participatory media, which focuses on the 'blurring of boundaries', but neglects questions of power: The 'hybrid combination' of television and telephony breaks down modernity's separation of public and private, of citizens and state authorities, of information and entertainment. It turns the passively consuming mass audience of traditional television

¹⁰ *Aktenzeichen XY* is one of the longest-running German TV shows ever and the only West-German program that was successfully adapted abroad. For a more detailed history of the international circulation of *Aktenzeichen XY*, see Bourdon et al. (2008).

¹¹ For more a more detailed discussion of the program's ideology, see Cavender (2004) and Jermyn (2007).

programming into active users of the interactive possibilities of a multimedia environment that allows the ‘collaborative intelligence’ of broadcasters, the police and the audience to fight crime and make the world a safer place. This patently unreasonable translation of Rath’s dystopian account into the language of the utopian perspective misses the central question about power relations, which are implied in the program’s specific setup, and structure the interaction of the participating parties. *Aktenzeichen XY* and its international adaptations define a very narrow ideological space of participation: not only does this show allow for a very limited range and depth of interaction;¹² the broadcaster, in collaboration with the police, remains in control of the production of the television text, while the show forces the interacting audience to subscribe to the ideological position of the program, as defined by the conservative call for law and order.

This might explain the polarizing effect characteristic of this and subsequent forms of television programming that drew on actual audience participation: whereas the ‘passive’ viewer has the freedom to negotiate or resist the ideology of a program (as described in active audience theory), the interactive participant actively necessarily affirms the program’s ideological stance: the interactive viewer engages in this televisual form of nationwide “neighborhood watching”.¹³ As the reception of *Aktenzeichen XY* and its international adaptations demonstrates, the program provoked two different, if not quite opposite reactions: one can be described as the affirmation of citizenship, in a conservative sense, by those who were willing to interact and forward information to state authorities via television and telephone; the other, as embodied in a flood of critical commentaries and parodies, can be described as a progressive form of citizenship that questions the legitimacy of the collaboration between state authorities and public television in a civil society. Though one could argue that, for most viewers, the participatory potential of the program remains only virtual, the critical reception of the program teaches us to not only examine the technological interface of digitally enhanced forms of television and participatory websites, but also to critically analyze how their dramaturgical and ideological setups structure actual forms of interaction in any specific ‘space of participation’.

¹² I employ here Jenssen’s (1999) theoretical approach to interactive television, in which he favors a quantitative model of interactivity that allows for distinctions between different levels of interaction, which are allowed within a medium or application.

¹³ As the history of the program’s international circulation and reception demonstrates, the critical public and some other viewing groups refused to subscribe to the program’s ideology; for more detail, see Müller (2008).

2. *Big Brother*: Participation as engagement in a cross-media spectacle

Although *Aktenzeichen XY* and its international adaptations made use of a hybrid media ensemble, they remain examples of how television structured the relationship between the spheres of production and consumption, as developed by broadcast media in the 20th century: the range and depth of possible interactions were limited and ideologically defined. However, at the end of the ‘century of broadcasting’, another highly controversial television program redefined the genre of reality programming. For the first time in television history, the Dutch reality format *Big Brother* systematically employed a hybrid combination of television, telephony and the internet to create enhanced forms of audience participation. In addition to a daily episode (60-minutes that summarized and dramatized the events in the *Big Brother*-house), this cross-media spectacle made unedited live streaming from cameras in the house accessible, which covered the life of the cast 24 hours a day. In addition to this, *Big Brother* invited the audience to discuss the cast and the events on the program’s official website and (in its original version as broadcast in 1999/2000¹⁴) to decide every other week which of the two nominated cast members should be expelled from the house. Any viewer with access to a phone or a networked computer could literally make his or her choice between the *two* options every other week, and it is well documented that many viewers employed this option, and further attempted to define the program’s development by communicating their vote.¹⁵

While the ‘traditional’ audience used the old media, television and telephone, as a means for communication, a more media-savvy group of users began watching *Big Brother* on the internet and employed this medium as a communicative space, which allowed for alternate means of relating to the development of the program and its reception. Online, fans commented on contestants, speculated about future developments in the house or about the outcomes of nominations and votings, formed fan groups supporting individual contestants, and advised producers about possibilities for further development of the program. For this group of active fans, differences between the edited 60-minute episodes on television and the live streaming on the internet became crucial, as the live feed allowed this audience to watch life in the house

¹⁴ Here, I refer to the rules of *Big Brother* as produced in its first season. The rules for the format vary from season to season, not only to keep the format fresh and attractive for the audience, but also to redesign the possible forms of audience interaction. Generally speaking, the show’s producers increasingly attempt to control the ‘space of participation’, which was much less restricted in the first season.

¹⁵ For an overview of the international success of *Big Brother*, see Mathijs/Jones (2004).

independently from the producers' choices, and thus to accumulate knowledge and generate interpretations that were uninfluenced by the edited and dramatized narratives that were broadcast on television. According to comments by online fans, these edited episodes misrepresented the events in the house in order to manipulate the television audience's decisions, and bring them into accordance with the producers' economic calculations.¹⁶ The online fans' critique raised two crucial questions: who actually exercised authorial control over the program, and whether the range and depth of *Big Brother*'s interactivity were as meaningful as the producer's promotion for the program had claimed.¹⁷ As a cross-media platform, *Big Brother* created an enhanced, but at the same time still restricted, 'space of participation'.

In his aforementioned neo-Marxist approach to reality television, Mark Andrejevic (2004) has suggested that the space of participation, as created by *Big Brother*, can be described as "a commodified example of procedural authorship: the producers craft the set of rules whereby cast members (and sometimes audiences) shape the show." (2004, 49)¹⁸ Compared to *Aktenzeichen XY*, this form of procedural authorship does allow for more complex contributions by the audience, particularly on the internet. Nevertheless, possible moments and the dramaturgical depth of potential contributions by the audience are still limited. Beyond that, the range of participation is formatted by the program's setup and is structured by the program's ideology. Therefore, Andrejevic in his analysis claims that

the result has not been a transfer of power and control from the power elites of Hollywood to the masses, but rather a shift in the burden of labor from paid actors and writers to the viewers, from whose rank the cast is drawn and whose free labor of fan sites helps add value and interest in often lackluster performances. (2004, 89)

Andrejevic here points to a problem that is characteristic of the intermediate step located between a merely consuming audience and the evolution of interactive users in the realm of digitally networked media: whenever the audience stops simply watching and consuming,

¹⁶ For detailed analyses of the actions and reactions of the active online fans, see Andrejevic (2004, 117-141), Tincknell/Raghuram (2004) and Wilson (2004).

¹⁷ The history of the changes within the format could be written as the history of negotiating the authorial control between producers and active audiences. The figure of "America's player", as introduced in the US during the 8th season of *Big Brother*, serves as a particular example. However, during season two, the producers had already abolished the audience's privilege of determining who of the two nominated cast members had to leave the house.

¹⁸ Andrejevic draws here on Murray's famous concept of "procedural authorship" (1997, 152f.)

whenever viewers start to interact with and contribute to a program or to a program's "overflow" (Brooker 2001) on the internet, whenever users share their views or content online, they perform unpaid labor and they submit to extensive monitoring. This generates (*quasi* 'behind the back of the user') a surplus value that only the producers can control and exploit. Arguing within the tradition of critical theory and political economy, Andrejevic tends to equate any act of interaction in the cross-media space of participation with the economic rationale of the industry; however, his critical analysis of reality television highlights aspects of the new media economy that many of the utopian approaches neglect or downplay. In a more comprehensive approach, one could address this, which Andrejevic critically describes, and which advocates of a utopian perspective tend to underestimate, as the 'condition of participation'. On the one hand, active users do perform unpaid labor and produce exploitable data. At the same time, members of the *Big Brother*-audience become active contributors to the program and some of them do move, as fans, critical commentators and creative contributors on the internet, beyond the limits of the space of participation as formatted by the producers.¹⁹ Even those who do move beyond the limited space of participation, accept *Big Brother* as a meaningful cultural phenomenon and, even more, contribute to its construction as a cross-media spectacle. As prominent examples, like the famous plan for a collective walk-out by the remaining candidates during the first American season of *Big Brother*, demonstrate, here the power to control and format the space of participation was not democratically distributed.

3. YouTube: Participation in a digital bazaar

Compared with *Aktenzeichen XY* and *Big Brother*, which represent two different types of producer-formatted participation, video-sharing sites, such as YouTube, GoogleVideo or Revver, create both a completely different space of participation, and one in which users maintain more control over the space. These sites allow users to upload and distribute any video file that does not show adult or offensive content, or violates copyrights. As the technology

¹⁹ One incident during the first season of *Big Brother* in the US serves as a perfect example of the power relations within the setup of the show: the cast discussed the option of walking out of the house, ending the show and collectively sharing the prize. However, when the producers explained that no one would receive a single dollar if this occurred, the rebellion crumbled. For more on the different interpretations of the walk-out; see Andrejevic (2004, 154-159).

magazine *Wired* has commented, “any amateur can record a clip” and can, by following the six easy steps as recommend by *Wired*, “look like a pro.” (Feely 2006) Generally speaking, any one who owns the technological means to record and upload a video film, i.e. a video camera, a video-equipped cell phone or digital photo camera,²⁰ and a networked computer, can share his or her self-made clips online. The rapid increase in the number of video clips uploaded to and watched on YouTube, by far the most popular of all online video-sharing sites,²¹ appears to prove the claim that the ease of access to digital means of production and distribution disrupts the traditional regimes of television production and distribution. This substantiates the aforementioned statements, which have indicated that the boundaries between the spaces of production and consumption are becoming increasingly blurred (e.g. Uricchio 2004; Anderson 2006; Jenkins 2006).

Nevertheless, video-sharing sites remain something distinctly unlike utopian spaces of communication that are free of any technological, legal, economic or cultural constraints. The first restrictions are posed by “protocols” (Galloway/Thacker 2007, 28ff.) and copyright regulations. In addition, Google’s 1.85 billion dollar acquisition of YouTube in October 2006, and the subsequent adjustments to the site, demonstrate the new online economy has identified video-sharing sites such as YouTube as important markets for customized advertising.²² The corporate media industry has begun to incorporate and redefine what Yochai Benkler calls the “cooperative non-market production of information and culture” (2006, 2). In sheer economic terms, video-sharing sites are not, by definition, completely different from traditional systems of commercial broadcasting. As Dallas Smythe (1977) has expressed: commercial broadcast television is in the business of producing audiences for advertisers. Video-sharing sites offer not

²⁰ Beginning in 2007, Casio has offered digital photo cameras with a so-called “YouTube capture mode”, which allows users to store videos in a format that can be directly uploaded to YouTube.

²¹ YouTube itself does not reveal exact data; however, data published by ComScore Media Matrix, for September 2007, demonstrates the consistent popularity of YouTube as one of the top ten overall websites: 75 % of all internet users in the US watch streaming video online, 27.6 % of all users log on to YouTube. As ComScore Media Matrix reports, “nearly 70 million people viewed more than 2.5 billion videos on YouTube.com. Online viewers watched an average of slightly more than three hours of online video during the month (181 minutes). The average online video duration was 2.7 minutes. The average online video viewer consumed 68 videos, or more than two per day.” (<http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1929>; April 2, 2008) Stelter (2008) reports more than 3.4 billion video downloads in February 2008.

²² The latest new YouTube feature in the US is a program called “YouTube Insight” that allows video creators to monitor when and where their clips are watched: “With this, the company hopes to turn YouTube from an online video site into a place where marketers can test their messages, Tracy Chan, YouTube product manager, said.” (Clifford 2008)

only content that attracts peers, because it is produced by peers, it also provides the advertisers with data that reveal any individual user's online activities, his or her cultural preferences, and the communities in which he or she participates. Therefore, online video-sharing sites may perform the economic function of television in the future, even more effectively than commercial television has for the past 50 or 60 years.

Beyond this still-developing economic framework, the interfaces of video-sharing sites and the routinized forms for accessing and using these sites have culturally transformed them into highly structured spaces of interaction and participation. In her account on online video-sharing sites, José van Dijck (2007) suggests that their institutional form can be characterized, in contrast to broad- and narrowcasting, as "homecasting", and she suggests that the cultural form of user-generated videos clips can best be understood as "snippets": "prerecorded, rerecorded, tinkered, and self-produced audiovisual content" that is not finished like a traditional broadcast television program, but invites users to appropriate, tinker with and respond to it. This characterization of "homecasting" and the "snippet" highlights the differences between traditional broadcast television and online video-sharing sites. However, in terms of institutionalization and cultural forms, there are also many similarities between these two types of audiovisual content in regards to production, distribution and reception. In the following, I will examine YouTube in more detail and discuss the institutional and cultural similarities between traditional broadcast television and online video-sharing sites.

As a matter of fact, the traffic on YouTube demonstrates that the number of users and downloaded clips far outnumbers the quantity of individual contributors and uploaded clips. Though there are no recent figures, it is likely that figures published in July 2006 might still be indicative of the ratio between incidental 'producers' and sheer 'consumers' of content on YouTube: whereas 65,000 clips were uploaded per day, a total of 100 million clips were watched, which represents a ratio of 1:1,538.²³ In other words, most YouTubers do not employ YouTube as a means for publishing and distributing their clips, but rather view it like traditional television, as 'consumers' of a "tube of plenty" (Barnouw 1990).

At the same time, there are an extraordinary number of users who do contribute video clips to YouTube. Prior to uploading clips, users have to create an account where they can then

²³ *USA Today*, July 16, 2006 (http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-07-16-youtube-views_x.htm; April 2, 2008).

post their videos. This account becomes visible as an identifiable ‘channel’ to which other users can subscribe. Even those who do not upload their own clips can still create a channel by choosing clips already available on YouTube. Thus, as in traditional broadcast television, the concept of ‘channels’ structures the way clips are distributed online, and many users actually try to brand their channel to attract a larger audience.

When uploading a video (which is limited to 10 minutes in length and 1024 MB in size), the user is required to create a title and a description for the clip, enter keywords, and to choose one category from a list of fourteen to characterize the clip’s genre, such as “education”, “howto & style”, or “people and blogs”.²⁴ Thus, the regime of genres is imposed on all clips, which results in that videos of a certain type are more likely to be produced, uploaded and watched on YouTube. This should not be interpreted to imply that YouTube’s interface determines and limits its users’ productivity, as the 14 categories simultaneously reflect the types of clips uploaded to YouTube by its users. According to the concept of genre as a “productive matrix” (Müller 1993), which stimulates production and organizes distribution and reception, the historically dynamic regime of genre routinizes the means by which YouTube is accessed, and, as a result, institutionalizes specific expectations and conventions.²⁵ The concept of ‘genre’, like that of ‘channel’, is associated with mass-produced popular culture and television, and as such functions to format YouTube’s space of participation.²⁶

Although the sheer number of videos available on YouTube functionally prevents the exhaustive categorization of the content, handbooks such as *YouTube 4 You* (Miller 2007) and *YouTube for Dummies* (Sahlin/Botello 2007), reflect, again, routinized methods for accessing and using YouTube. Miller differentiates between nine prototypes of users, namely the “recorder/sharer”, the “historian/enthusiast”, the “home movie maker”, the “video blogger”, the “instructor”, the “reporter”, the “performer”, the “aspiring film director” and the “online business” (2007, 76-86). These different types simultaneously indicate the reasons why people would log on to YouTube: they are looking for television shows they have missed, archival material, funny videos of the sort presented on *America’s Funniest Home Videos* (ABC); have a

²⁴ In alphabetical order, the 14 categories on YouTube are: “autos & vehicles, comedy, education, entertainment, film & animation, howto & style, music, politics & news, nonprofits & activism, people and blogs, pets & animals, science & technology, sports, travel & events.” Other sites like GoogleVideo or Revver use, *cum grano salis*, similar categories.

²⁵ For a historical-pragmatic approach to genres, see Luckmann (1986).

²⁶ A systematic study of the pragmatics of genres on YouTube and other video-sharing sites is needed.

specific interest in a hobby and need instruction (howto & style is actually the largest section within YouTube); want to listen to blogger's comments on news, politics and life; or just want to watch weird or adult performances by people they do not know.²⁷

Both the genre categories, as defined on YouTube, and the types of users, as described by Miller, indicate that tinkering with the 'snippets' of other contributors is actually not the first and foremost practice performed on YouTube. Though it is true that there are many examples where the content of other users is reused and tinkered with, these still form the exception rather than the rule, which is that clips on YouTube, even if not well structured in terms of dramaturgy, are primarily meant to be watched. The interface offers no indication as to how often a clip has been reused, but instead how often it has been watched, and how it has been rated. As in any other mass medium, an implicit imperative of YouTube is to create so-called "viral videos", which will themselves be embedded in many channels, blogs and websites, and thus will be watched by a larger audience.²⁸ Handbooks include sections such as: "What makes a great YouTube video?", "Sell product placement in your videos", or "How to increase your YouTube ratings – and your potential profits" (Miller 2007, 87; 166; 172). Again, these remain approaches that are characteristic of commercial broadcast television and function to structure YouTube's space of participation according to its rationale.

However, as Van Dijck correctly points out, YouTube's interface in general, and many clips in particular, ask users to respond to the clips. The interface specifically invites users to post comments on clips; further, users can respond to the comments themselves, or users can post another video response in to a clip. As compared to traditional broadcast television, in which there exist only a few formatted moments in specific programs when members of the audience can literally respond, a dialogic structure is characteristic of online video-sharing sites, which links YouTube to traditions of oral cultures. There is a huge diversity of the types of comments on YouTube: some commentators express that they share experiences or tastes; some tutor the maker of a clip and give tips how to improve the quality; others articulate what a viewer of a regular television show might shout at his set when watching a program at home;

²⁷ According to an informal survey held amongst 50 college students (ages 18-22) at the University of Michigan in March 2008.

²⁸ Success stories, like Apple buying and remaking 17-old British college student Nick Haley's self-made commercial for the iPod Touch (Elliot 2007), not only demonstrate that YouTube functions as space where professional and amateur cultures meet, but also that acknowledgement by many viewers and professionals is an implicit objective on YouTube.

some try to create attention for their own clips on YouTube; and there are myriad other responses. Characteristic of most such comments is their use of everyday language, as if users were just chatting in an informal context. On YouTube and other video-sharing sites, this appears to be the cultural norm, the routinized practice. Again, although different from broadcast television, YouTube and other video-sharing sites generate their own (as far as the interface is concerned) explicit and (as far as recurrent practices are concerned) implicit rules and conventions, which format the space of participation YouTube offers.

Both, the framework and the rules and conventions that define this space of participation, have to be analyzed in much more detail. My point here is that video-sharing sites are formatted by a cultural framework that defines a video-sharing site's space of participation. This framework is partly generated by the website's interface and partly generated by the users' recurrently performed and thus "highly institutionalized actions" (Zucker 1977, 727). Regarding YouTube, concepts that are characteristic of broadcast television and conventions that are characteristic of oral cultures combine to format the space of participation. On the one hand, these concepts reveal the difference between producers and consumers, the construction of channels, the notion of genres as a framework for production and reception, the worship of high ratings and their implicit commercial potential. On the other hand, these conventions form the dialogic structure and traditions of oral culture define this space. This is, although video-sharing sites allow for far more diverse forms of participation than the examples of interactive television programs analyzed in sections one and two, even video-sharing sites structure possible acts of participation, and they do so by drawing on well established conventions that then may become transformed and redefined.

A user, who decides to upload clips to a video-sharing site, subscribes to participating in what could best be described as a 'bazaar',²⁹ in which television is redefined as part of an amateur culture. This non-professional approach to television draws on dialogic structures and oral traditions, but at the same time is geared to its professional and commercial form, which

²⁹ Though the metaphor of the "bazaar" as opposed to the "cathedral" is employed by Eric S. Raymond (1999) in an idealized way to describe collective online software engineering as an open democratic process, the "bazaar" as metaphor for online video sharing sites (as opposed to the "cathedral" of broadcast TV) might still work well, if one takes into account that a bazaar, although accessible to anyone who can walk, is an institutionally and culturally highly structured space where people not only meet to sell and buy, but additionally where there are different roles, hierarchical structures, and conventions of conduct, all of which remain more or less impregnated by the economic rationale of a bazaar. See Bezroukov (1999) for a critique of "Vulgar Raymondism", an overly simplistic and idealistic conception of the open source software development process.

formats this specific space of participation. Although YouTube and other video-sharing sites differ from broadcast television, broadcast television and online video-sharing sites do not embody diametrically opposed concepts, but different institutionalizations of television on a spectrum of cultural forms of television that mutually define each other.³⁰ Therefore, one should not underestimate broadcast television's power to shape what I call the participatory space of video-sharing sites.

4. Formatted spaces of participation

In the past decade, it appears as though we have witnessed what Bruno Felix and Femke Wolting, in their documentary on the emerging online economy, title *The End of Television as We Know It* (2000). Television 'as we know it' will remain powerful in shaping participatory practices on cross-media and digital platforms. As Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* has correctly argued, we have to consider "ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture" (2006, 243). However, I doubt that his romanticizing vision of top-down vs. bottom-up forces provides an adequate account of the economic, social, and cultural processes that are shaping and reshaping the relationship between the spheres of television production and consumption. The romantic metaphor of "top-down versus bottom-up", very much like the opposition between the utopian and the dystopian account of digital media as discussed at the beginning, evokes a morally tinted opposition that characterizes non-professional and non-commercial media practices, by definition, as authentic, democratic and empowering, whereas professional and commercial media practices are marked as repressive and manipulative. As I have demonstrated in my historically comparative account of three different forms interactive television and video-sharing sites, any of these forms creates institutionally and culturally structured spaces of participation. These are not merely imposed upon users by the industrially created interfaces. Particularly in cross-media and in digital setups, such as *Big Brother* and YouTube, these spaces are co-created and shaped by the

³⁰ Roepke (2006) shows that the boundaries between home movie making, amateur filmmaking and the professional film world have remained blurred ever since. Similarly, Leadbeater/Miller (2004) argue that cultural practices of dabblers, amateurs, and professionals form a continuum within one spectrum of practices, but not different realms.

recurrent and thus routinized practices of users.³¹ Instead of simply praising the “blurring of boundaries” between the spheres of production and consumption, the concept of “formatted spaces of participation” allows for a more differentiated and adequate analysis of the technological, economic, social and cultural powers and conventions that structure the diverse participatory practices, which these spaces allow for and also provoke. In this emerging field of research into interactive television, online video-sharing and participatory culture, I would argue that the concept of “formatted spaces of participation” helps to move beyond the technologically defined range and depth of interactivity. It asks us to critically address the routinized practices within these spaces that make these spaces into individualized institutions with their own, specific cultural conventions and ideologies.

³¹ See for an inspiring account to regimes shaping participation on line Schäfer (2008).

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