CULTURAL INTERMEDIATION AT THE INTERSECTION POINT OF INSTITUTIONAL CO-CREATION: RECONFIGURING PARTICIPATION WITHIN THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION (ABC)

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Cultural intermediation to reconfigure participation

In an unstable and unpredictable media environment (Cunningham & Turner 2010), public service media organizations have been encouraged to explore new production techniques that engage the audience in innovative and exciting ways while delivering content over multiple digital platforms (Debrett 2010). In a multiplatform media environment described as one that intersects the single audience member with the mass audience (Enli 2008), PSM host platforms that enable content to not only be published by the institution's professional media staff but to also host content contributed by the audience. Multiplatform within PSM also engage the characteristics of participatory cultures where users refuse "to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 131), thereby appropriating media for new contexts. Walker (2009) suggests participatory cultures have seen PSM move beyond the one-way communication model of web 1.0 to an engaged, democratic and inclusive communication model more representative of web 2.0, further complicating the media environment.

With online audiences actively participating in the production of media, and in some cases engaging in co-creative practices with media professionals, complications arise in normative and editorial decisions surrounding content production. In the co-creative model, content contributed by users may be technically inadequate, editorially inappropriate or in bad taste. PSM has a public mission based on the Reithian trinity of inform, educate and entertain, suggesting user generated content aligns with this remit. Governance models guide media producers to achieve the public remit of the PSM, usually in the form of editorial policies. However, as Malaby (2009) has noted, users of online platforms tend to reject top down hierarchical governance models in favour of heterarchical governance that employs meritocracy. In other words, online platform participants engaging in cultural co-creation employ people in power in an ad hoc basis, grounded in there past performance and experience in such positions (Bruns 2008).

Online content creation projects represent the decentralisation of the production process outlined by Shirky (2008) and Benkler (2006). Shirky notes production within organizations assist in solving the problems associated with group complexity, yet is expensive, exclusionary, requires management and is class based. Benkler highlights the benefits of decentralization as peer production that brings together disparate individuals who work on a similar project "based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands" (Benkler, 2006, p. 60). Combining Benkler's observations with Shirky's provocations suggests a decentralised production model includes all the benefits of user-led innovation, is inexpensive, democratic and egalitarian. The decentralised approach towards co-creative cultural artifact production aligns with the public interest remit of PSM, yet presents the challenge of how to manage such an arrangement within this environment.

One PSM project that combines participatory cultures, ad hoc meritocracy and co-creative production of cultural artifacts was *ABC Pool* (www.abc.net.au/pool). *ABC Pool* was an opportunity for Australian online audiences to engage with the ABC by contributing their media in audio, photography, video or text. The users had access to the cultural and media expertise of the ABC staff who exchange knowledge between the users. The platform operated under a Creative Commons licensing regime enabling the media to flow between platforms, including traditional terrestrial broadcasting mediums. A common activity for *ABC Pool* was to host co-creative projects facilitated by audio producers of 360documentaries, a long form documentary program on the Radio National network. Typically, the producers would design a call-out to mobilise the *ABC Pool* community to produce thematically appropriate texts. The producers would collect and curate the user created content, and exchange expert advice on the user's production. The final stage of the co-creative project combined the user created content with the producer's work to broadcast the documentary on the *360documentaries* program. The challenge for *ABC Pool* team, and the Radio National producers, had been to manage the participants insofar as encouraging user-led innovation during the production process while aligning their activity with the public service remit of the ABC. The *ABC Pool* project closed in late 2013, however many of its co-creative standards live on in legacy projects such as *ABC Open* and triplej's *Unearthed.*

The process of managing the co-creative arrangement for cultural artifact production was previously understood to be the role of the community manager (Wilson, Hutchinson & Shea, 2010). The community manager engages, encourages and supports the community members (Bacon 2009) and is the representative of the community towards the institution (Banks 2009). However, emerging research suggests relying on one person as an intermediary between multiple stakeholders within the project is a slow and restrictive process. Rather, it is the coordinated efforts of multiple intermediaries operating simultaneously that enable this crisis of production to be seamlessly negotiated. The role of the community manager is one aspect of the negotiation process to manage social behavior of individuals engaging in cultural production with institutions. The combined intermediary activity is the underpinnings of cultural intermediation, a phenomenon that has emerged from the cultural artifact production process within the PSM sector, to connect decentralised production behavior with centralised institutional activity.

Methodology

These data emerge from a three-year research project that used an ethnographic action research methodology where I was embedded as the community manager of *ABC Pool*. Participant observation was the core method of my online ethnography, referred to by Bowler (2010) as netnography and defined as research that explores the "cultural analysis and representation, from the observation of co- located, face-to-face interactions to technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities, and the culture (or cyberculture) shared between and among them" (Bowler, 2010, p. 1271). The action method aligned with my community manager role, defined as "integrating your research into the development of your project" (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003, p. 12). Additional data was found through surveys, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and textual analysis. This paper draws on a case study of the *New Beginnings* project, which is a 53-minute co-creative documentary, produced through *ABC Pool* and broadcast on Radio National's *360documentaries*.

Discussion

This research suggests there are three approaches to reconfiguring participation within institutional online communities, indicated by Figure 1. Institutional online communities are online communities on platforms developed and resourced by institutions and are not independently facilitated. The same regulatory framework that governs its hosting institution governs institutional online communities.
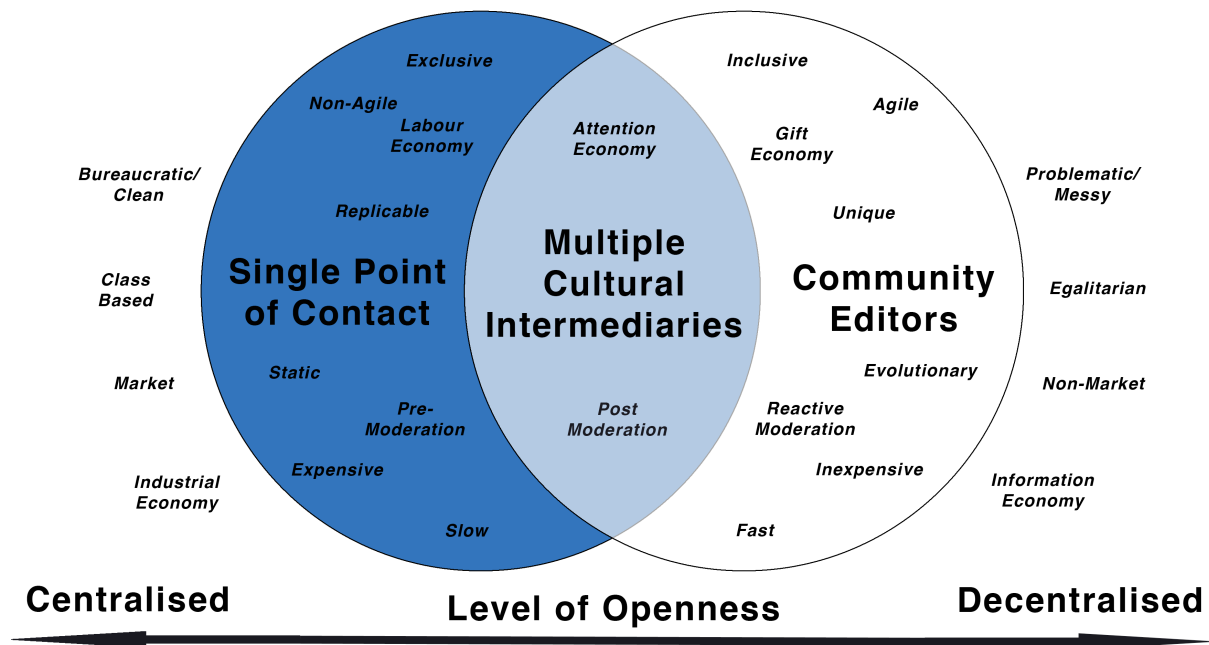

Figure 1 The three models of reconfiguring participation of institutional online communities

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship of the three models over a scale of institutional decentralisation. A Single Point of Contact is the most closed model employed by institutions to simply maintain platforms hosted by the institution. The Multiple Cultural Intermediaries model follows, consisting of multiple intermediaries operating simultaneously to guide the production of cultural artifacts and is used by *ABC Pool*[1]. If the project develops, the cultural intermediaries may endeavour to promote the online users to intermediary roles, given the Community Editor moniker in this model. The results of this research have indicated an approach that operates successfully within the PSM sector, specifically the Australian context at the ABC. The departure point for this research is to test this concept beyond public service media and within other production based industries either on or shifting to the internet.

Acknowledgments

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[1] Cultural Intermediaries differs to the original concept of Bourdieu (1984) that relates to intermediariy between creative classes in post WWII. Here the term refers to the role 'in the middle' facilitating cultural production.

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