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IMAGINING AND ENABLING THE COLLABORATIVE COMMONS

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Abstract

The increasing popularity of personal, mobile digital technologies social networks have given rise to what Rainie and Wellman refer to as “networked individualism” (2012). Participants engage with others in multiple networks through the ongoing circulation of content that Jenkins, Ford and Green describe as *Spreadable Media* (2013). Rifkin documents the development of a “Collaborative Commons” that he believes is taking shape as a result of this connecting and sharing over digital networks (2014). However, the networks that enable this activity can be private or public, and, like the content they carry, they can be open or closed. In this paper, I examine and compare the work of open advocates from the fields of Education and Design to see how the ideas and projects from one area can inform the other, and to discover underlying principles and approaches that can support, strengthen and enlarge the collaborative commons.

Keywords:

social media, collaboration, open education, open design, open source, creative commons

Introduction

During the 1990s, predictions about the possible social effects of the developing Internet were largely positive. Michael Hauben coined the term “Netizens” to refer to anyone willing to work in a voluntary, cooperative, and collective fashion to create a global online community for the benefit of the world at large (Hauben 1997). Howard Rheingold promoted the internet as an alternative public site for constructive social interaction and community building (1993, 62). Mark Poster argued that it offered the possibility of greater emancipation and new kinds of group formation (1995, 93-94). More recently, the growth and power of private social media platforms has led others to argue that online sociality has become salable (Dijck 2013), the Internet is as likely to distract as empower us (Morozov 2012) and capitalism is turning the Internet against democracy (McChesney 2013).

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A small but growing activist position insists that the future of civic society in an increasingly mediated world is in the hands of the social agitators who choose to participate in its description and construction. As Benedict Anderson points out, all communities are imagined, and that it is the style in which they are imagined that distinguishes one from another (1991, 6). A shared, online commons, like any community, has to be imagined before it can be created.

Jeremy Rifkin predicts the development of a “Collaborative Commons” characterized by “prosumers”, open-source sharing, access without ownership, networks rather than markets, and the provision of products and education at near zero marginal cost (Rifkin 2014, 135). In *Networked*, Rainie and Wellman explain that the rise of the Internet, social networks and mobile technologies have resulted in media experiences that are personal, multiuser, multitasking and multithreaded. They refer to this new social operating system as “networked individualism” (2012, 11-12). In *Spreadable Media* (2013), Jenkins et al. argue that our networked culture is characterized by instantaneous, informal communication through multiple channels in which the audience participates in the creation of value and meaning, and in the circulation of media and messages. “Spreadability” is about the flow of ideas in easy-to share-formats, rather than the attraction of individuals to a specific site. It invites open-ended participation and assumes that work that is seen to have value will circulate through whatever channels are available (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 6-7).

Education and Design are two areas that could be dramatically transformed by a shift to more participatory, collaborative and networked approaches. Open advocates working in these areas have argued for a considered and strategic use of new technologies to empower individuals and contribute to the public good. Their manifestos, projects and reflections are indications of a change that is underway, and they provide examples that others can learn from. They demonstrate how online networking can enable individuals to connect to one another and form communities of practice in ways that can circumvent dominant social media platforms that can limit the freedom to associate and share work.

Open Education

Coursera, Udacity, EdX and other private Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platforms attracted much attention when they launched in 2012 (Marginson 2012). Although they may be disruptive in terms of their business and organizational models, earlier, less well-known experiments incorporated more open, connected, distributed strategies and challenged mainstream pedagogical models. In 2008, George Siemens, Stephen Downes and David Cormier coordinated CCK08 (Connectivism and Connective Knowledge), an open course based on “Connectivism”, a “learning theory for the digital age” advanced by Siemens. Learning, he proposes, is about “connecting specialized information sets” and navigating the resulting network of connections between information and individuals (Siemens 2005). Downes describes a pedagogy of learning that promotes “engagement and activity within an authentic learning community — a community of practitioners, where people practice the discipline, rather than merely just talk about it” (Downes 2010). An important side effect of this process, according to Cormier, is “the building of a distributed knowledge base on the Net” (2012). Open courses that follow this distributed, collaborative model (often referred to as cMOOCs, in

reference the Connectivist approach) continue to be offered by a variety of individuals and institutions.

Open education practitioners make effective use of networks and networking to collaborate and share their ideas freely and openly with others. Jim Groom, an Instructional Technologist and adjunct professor at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia, is an influential advocate of open practices. He teaches ds106, a course on Digital Storytelling that takes a networked, community-based approach to online learning. The course, which is free to non-credit participants, helps students to use contemporary media to build an online identity and narrate their experiences. They are expected to “openly frame this process and interact with one another throughout the course as well as engage and interact with the world beyond” (“About DS106” 2014). The course makes use of connected blogs, an Internet radio station, a collection of assignments created by participants, a Twitter community and other social media sites. Groom highlights the importance of what he refers to as the “3 Faces of Open”: “open platforms, open pedagogy, and open community” (Groom 2014). These three characteristics of a truly open course are similar to the features found in Open Design projects.

Open Design

In *Everyone is a Designer in the Age of Social Media*, Gerritzen and Lovink argue that technical, social and economic developments in the internet age have enabled an “aesthetic movement of collaborism” and a democratisation of design (Gerritzen 2010). Similarly, in *Open Design Now: Why design cannot remain exclusive*, Van Abel et al. argue that, like open data, open design is developing out of a culture of sharing and reciprocity in which designers and end users connect directly, without the need for intermediate organizations, retailers, publishers or marketers (van Abel et al. 2011). Powerful digital tools, expert advice and high quality work are now easily (and often freely) available online. The ability to quickly and conveniently upload comments and content allows anyone to participate in online conversations, activities and spaces, regardless of professional title or status. The case studies that they present as examples include openideo.com, a platform for engaging in large-scale design collaboration, Fairphone, an open, peer-to-peer, co-creation approach to designing a mobile phone that embodies social values, and DesignSmash, a company that organizes collaborative design sessions to create products that are sold under a Creative Commons licence.

In *Steal Like an Artist*, Austin Kleon provides his secret formula for becoming known: “Do good work and share it with people” (Kleon 2012, 79). He points out that it is not necessary to wait until a work is fully formed, polished, and presentable before sharing it online. By opening up your process, you can learn from others as you create. “The Internet can be more than just a resting place to publish your finished ideas”, he says, “it can also be an incubator for developing work that you haven’t yet started” (82). Kleon believes that his “newspaper blackout” poetry would not have led to a book, if he had not shared his experiments online without worrying about whether it had an audience. He reports that sharing is a two-way exchange, and the feedback he gets from his followers is crucial in determining how to proceed (Kleon 2013). In *Show you Work*,

Kleon argues that, although we usually credit individuals for significant achievements, creativity is always, to some degree, the result of collaboration. He cites Brian Eno's notion of the "scenius", an "ecology of talent" composed of a group of creative, connected individuals that can give rise to great work (Kleon 2014, 10-11).

Brad Frost, a web designer, writer and speaker based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is another strong advocate for opening up the design process and sharing process work online. In a TEDx talk titled "Creative exhaust, the power of being open by default", he argues that sharing your work openly before it is finished forces designers to articulate and justify their decisions and enables them to benefit from the feedback and advice offered by the broader community. People who go online to discuss the design problems they are facing are able to meet others who are dealing with similar challenges and work collaboratively to find solutions that each can apply to their individual context (Frost 2014). He explains that "designing in the open" can involve the sharing of artifacts (sketches, prototypes, mockups), bits and pieces (previews, trailers), stories (techniques, lessons learned), alphas (the current state of a project) and tools (code on Github and similar sites). The web, he says, helps to facilitate "the very things that society needs in order to flourish: openness, communication and collaboration," and his message to other designers is to "Share what you know" (Frost 2014).

Conclusions

New technologies and the forms of communication and social organization that they enable have the potential to transform society for the better, in keeping with the optimistic hopes in the early days of the Internet. However, they can also be used to increase the speed and efficiency of a culture that encourages individualism, unsustainable consumerism, inequity and political apathy. By using open platforms to offer free access to courses supported by an open pedagogy and that include the use and creation of open resources, educators are reimagining and reinventing teaching and learning for a connected world. Similarly, Open Design practitioners advocate the use of open networks to share work with others and to collaborate in the creation of solutions and artifacts that can then be published with an open licence. Open advocates in both domains realize that learning and designing can be more efficient, effective, socially engaged and empowering when using, and contributing to, open networks. By articulating their reasons for working in the open, and by their examples, they are helping to create a shared idea of what a truly open collaborative commons might look like online, and they are demonstrating how it can be realized.

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