

Gerd Leonhard

The Rise of the Culture of Participation

Why the music industry should pay very close attention to blogs, photo-sharing, ringtone-mixers, and social networking

Witness: blogs, mashups, online collaboration sites and services, social networking, online photo and video sharing, *Google Map Archives*, the tremendous growth of *Wikipedia*, *Our-media.org* and the *Internet Archives*, P2P webcasting, collaborative playlist sharing, and the countless new ringtone-creation tools...the list of participation-fueled sites and booming “personal media” services gets longer and longer, while tens of millions of people are signing up just to be a part of something.

“Fan-built playlists and mixes are taking over the way people get their music,” says *Wired’s* Katie Dean in a recent feature. “Mix tapes and playlists are really the new container for music,” adds Lucas Gonze, creator of *Webjay*, in the same feature. Is this kind of music-sharing and “communing” the next big thing?

In a drastic departure from the good old one-way, topdown, TV-obsessed “culture” of the past, we are now witnessing a seemingly ubiquitous trend to media forms that allow, or better yet, promote participation, self-expression, and user engagement—and the music and media and so-called “content” industries are the first to feel it.

ENGAGEMENT IS THE NEW MARKETING THE USERS ARE THE NEW CONTENT

For the average yet somewhat web-savvy consumer, though, it seems that now that we do have access to pretty much any content anytime (whether legal or not), many of us are no longer satisfied with simply taking advantage of that fact and blissfully consuming the content. Rather, now we actually want to be part of it, influence it, change it, and somehow play a more active part in it or—ouch!—maybe even create some “content” ourselves.

Does this take us to some sort of California tech-geek digital hippie-ism where every consumer is also a potential creator or (worse) publisher? Is that where it’s going?

Well, personally, I have some doubts that just giving people good, cheap, and powerful production tools plus access to almost-zero-cost publishing and distribution mechanisms actually produces good content (however you want to define that). Rather, I think it first and foremost creates a lot of content.

Still, even if this empowerment trend does not (yet) truly boost the creation of mind-boggling new art, the mere possibility of playing a more active role in content (re)creation is certainly an exciting idea to many people, and will probably unlock some potential that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

However, music may yet prove to be a different animal here: While the grassroots journalism that takes shape in blogging has already made a real tangible impact, and is very much on its way of changing the way magazine and newspaper publishing works and the journalism business operates, I am not sure that the same thing will happen with music anytime soon.

While, conceptually, I like and support the “everybody can be a publisher, composer, or writer” idea, deep down I have a hunch that so few people are actually gifted in these fields, and, personally, those are the ones I would want to hear and see, not the countless others who are just maybe of interest in their brightest moments. Who has the time?

Often, the desired result is best achieved with some sort of smart, benign, and intelligent filter in place, i.e., friends or other trusted third parties who select the best new music for me, or—maybe—some sort of human + machine + database intelligent engine that can emulate it. (See *Pandora*, *Soundflavor*, *Transpose/Goompah*, *Last.fm*, etc.) But this remains a big maybe.

As to participation, let's remember that back in the early days of the *National Science Foundation*, the *ARPANet* and the pre-*Netscape* WWW, almost every user was most likely also a contributor to its exploding vastness and ever-increasing depth. Early “epicenters of participation” like *The Well* (now for sale) thrived on people participating rather than just being “information free-loaders,” which pretty much became the default scenario in the '90s.

However, we are now at the point where many things that were invented in the late '90s, and that didn't quite make it then, are becoming actual reality. (Witness the long and winding road of eMusic—IMHO, a vastly underrated success story in digital music.) And this phenomenon also brings us to the second wave of the “culture of participation”—a phenomenon that is changing entire industries practically overnight, with the media/music/entertainment industries right on top of the s(hit)-list.

The importance of this new “participation factor” is even further amplified by that other crucial new paradigm of media consumption: Empower your customers or watch them move on. Add that to “enable user participation or become irrelevant” and you have a nice stew of opportunities—and significant challenges.

So, take a short tour with me. Even if you don't quite subscribe to the possibly naive notion that everyone can be a writer, actor, musician, artist, entrepreneur, or inventor, you still won't be able to avoid noticing how the thresholds for at least trying to be a content creator are being drastically lowered everywhere around us. Everyone can now “make music” using computers and various software programs (like it or not), and publish the results on a website, or set up his/her own online radio stations, right from the bedroom PC. Almost everyone can now be a writer and publish endless pontifications on their blogs (I should know ;-)) or even make you listen to them via podcasting (an even scarier thought, as in my own case :-).

No longer are we just content with shooting cool photos or bleeding-edge videos and showing them to our family or friends; we now actually want to show them to the world, and post them on *Flickr*, *Webshots*, *Ofoto*, or *Shutterfly* for everyone to see! And it's not just because it's so easy (it's not, really ;-), it's also because we all want to be heard and seen, make a contribution, and show ourselves, even without anyone's approval or official authorization.

No longer do we take the “official” and sanctified sources of traditional news for granted. Instead, we look to find and subscribe to “our own” news-channels by connecting to other people who focus on the exact same subjects or verticals that we're interested in, and that seem credible or are otherwise recommended. (Witness the booming popularity of *Boing Boing*, *InstaPundit*, etc.) Out goes *CNN*, and in comes RSS. Never mind *MTV*, *Clear Channel*, and *American Idol*—now people tune into podcasting! Or both? No longer do we just listen to TUGOR (“the uniform, good old radio”), and take its remote-controlled programming choices for granted, instead we build our own radio stations on the Internet and swap playlists, like-it links, URLs, and profiles. Enter *Mercora*, *MySpace*, *Grouper*, *Last.fm*, *Launchcast* ...

No longer do we just accept one opinion or one point of view as “real” just because that's all we can get right now; instead, we now Google everyone and everything, and find others who may have something to add that sparks our interest.

No longer do we only read the classified ads to find stuff, meet new people, make business connections or personal contacts, or find out what's happening. Instead we become an active piece of the puzzle, and contribute to the formation of virtual metaconventions where people meet each other for kinds of purposes. Witness *MySpace*, *Friendster*, *aSmallWorld*, *Match.com*, *HotOrNot*, *Ryze*, *LinkedIn*...

No longer do we just listen to music; we are now starting to remix it the minute we have downloaded it. We morph, change, tweak, and edit with great enthusiasm the very minute it has turned up in its original version. We use samples and snippets of anything to make a personal and/or a fashion statement. Mass-customizing our cellular ringtones is a good example: Already ringtones are an estimated \$4 billion global boon for music publishers and record labels.

Look at *GarageBand*, *Minimixa*, *Digimpro*, *Hyperscore*, and many others—watch for those kinds of tools and services to go through the roof in the next five to ten years. Tune in, engage, participate, contribute, share, publish!

Good-bye, one-way-content funnel and good old “linear” copyright, and welcome to the chaos of participation—a chaos that will ultimately make the music business three times as big.

Digital trust, virtual reputation, and credibility are now starting to be real factors; something that was once reserved to *MIT* geeks, hackers, and assorted “get a life”-ers. Now, one's reputation on eBay may be just as valuable to people as his “real-life” reputation at his favorite bar.

This, to me, is a sure sign that the distinction between “online” and “offline” realities is starting to blur. In fact, I would venture to say that within five to seven years most “digital natives” in most rich countries won't even comprehend what “offline” even means (except for, hopefully, for describing a certain frame of mind).

In music—as a direct side effect of the exploding culture of participation and the drive to self-determination that fuels it—we, the users, now determine what, when, how and where we listen to music—and we egg others on to do the same. There goes Radio 1.0 (at least in its old form) and in comes Radio 2.0: time-, space-, and device-shifted. It is becoming clear that the more people are “connected” to digital networks more often and at ever decreasing costs, the more people want to participate and be involved.

We are therefore leaving something behind that in a way was the Holy Grail, the very foundation of media for the past 50plus years: the one-way communication-mode that made them (the media companies) the producers, creators and rights-holders, and us into the consumers, buyers, “users,” and couch potatoes.

Entertainment devices used to be receiving devices, now they are “trans-ceiving” and trans-sharing devices—we no longer just “get” stuff, we also change it, forward it, and share it, and that is where the growth of those industries will be found.

The advent of user empowerment is a huge shift the music industry is just starting to embrace, and as we can see in other industries (*Amazon*, *eBay*, *SouthWest Airlines*, *EasyJet*, *ETrade* ...), giving the power to the user is what makes real money, today! My humble success-recipe for music and media companies: Empower the user and promote participation, and you'll do well.

Please note: Naturally, I often draw inspiration from others as they may freely draw from me (hopefully)! This particular essay is inspired by a feature I recently received via email from *Business 2.0*; I believe it was Eric Schonfeld using the term “culture of participation” that egged me on to look at this a bit closer.

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