



Getting Noticed, Showing-Off, Being Overheard: Amateurs, Authors and Artists Inventing and Reinventing Themselves in Online Communities

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This paper reports early findings of an ethnographically-inspired research project focused on individuals who are actively engaged in the creation and online distribution of original media – on blogs, vlogs, and social networking sites – and on the collectives that form around “user-generated content.” In this paper, we profile a small number of creative individuals producing original content in four very different cultural contexts: a children’s book author in Los Angeles, a pair of video bloggers in New York, an ex-pat journalist and social commentator in Dubai, and a cosmetics expert sharing advice with an online community in Seoul, South Korea. We explore what motivates each “lead user” to create; we examine how they imagine themselves as authors and artists, and how they imagine (and interact with) their readers and viewers. In addition, we explain how the insights they provide into an emerging form of online authorship are relevant to Intel Corporation’s Digital Home Group.

USERS CREATING CONTENT

There are now fifty million tracked blogs; that number has doubled every six months for the past three years. One hundred million videos a day are being downloaded from YouTube. There are currently 136 million user-generated content creators worldwide (eMarketer, 2007). In three years, it is estimated, every one billion uploads of “user-generated content” will generate sixty-five billion views or downloads (In-Stat, 2006). The statistics are impressive, but they do not begin to capture the full story of this sea-change in the production and consumption of digital information and media, and how it is impacting the online and “real” lives of those who are driven to create and contribute.

“Users Creating Content” is the name given to a six-month, ethnographically-inspired, broadly-scoped exploration of the ways people capture, create, manipulate and share digital media, including video, photographs, and music, as well as creative and editorial writings. Launched in January, 2007 by the User Experience Group in Intel Corporation’s Digital Home Group, the study has focused on individuals actively engaged in the creation and distribution of original content on blogs, vlogs (video blogs), and social networking sites, and on the creative communities that grow up around what we in corporate offices of high-tech

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companies call “user-generated content.” In this paper, we focus on a small subset of those creative collectives, and on just a few “content creators” whose stories of online exposure provide us with insights into an emerging form of authorship in the contemporary landscape(s) of media production and consumption. We seek to better understand how online authors imagine (and interact with) their readers and viewers. How do they imagine, express, present and position themselves vis-à-vis their publics? As individual and creative collectives, how do they imagine the medium of their expression – the Internet and the digital services and tools they employ?

This is Not Your Teenager's MySpace

In the course of our study of Users Creating Content, we conducted approximately forty-eight in-depth interviews with content creators in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates; Seoul, South Korea; Los Angeles; and New York City. A thorough cross-cultural examination of home-grown media production and online distribution in these three countries and four cities is beyond the scope of this paper. By focusing here on individuals and the creative collectives with which they affiliate themselves, we hope to shed some light on both the variety of personal motivations found for content creation and the very different social conditions under which creative individuals are finding a voice – and sometimes an audience – in each of these disparate sites. The terms we in industry most often use to refer to their wide range of off-line and online activities (e.g., “user generated content”) gloss over so much that drives these individuals, they ultimately fail to describe any usefully coherent category of activity...or category of “user.” Compounding that, the global reach of the Internet as a distribution medium tends to equalize voices at the same time that it equalizes access to means of production and to the opportunity to be heard. If the Internet provides a window for all of us into remote corners of the global experience, it also obscures a great deal about the conditions under which the media and the messages we receive have been produced.

Statistics well publicized in the popular press¹ make it quite clear that while the sheer number of online Americans using social networking and personal-content-sharing sites continues to grow, that expanding user group is also looking increasingly mature (i.e., old). Despite those facts, the first impulse for many of us (and for most of our corporate executives) when confronted with the topic of users creating content, is still to imagine kids showing-off and having fun on MySpace and YouTube. We interviewed several teenage boys in Los Angeles who fit that bill. At fifteen and sixteen years old, these boys take skateboarding and their skate-video producing seriously. They edit out of videos their awkward missteps, falls, and other unflattering shots. And they casually post their videos

¹ An October, 2006 ComScore Media Matrix statistical analysis of traffic on four of the most popular social networking sites in the US asserted that more than half of MySpace users are 35 and older. It was widely reported in the popular press, including on NPR.

online for friends to see and admire, with some vague notion that maximizing the number of people who might see them skateboarding and pulling off some nearly-professional caliber tricks can't hurt their social standing back in high school. At this point at least, they're not seriously entertaining notions of becoming professional skaters; they skate and record themselves for the pleasure of doing something with (and potentially better than) one another. Social recognition in the bounded world of their school-aged peers is a bonus; they cringe at the thought that their parents might be checking out their MySpace pages.

While the web abounds with videos of mediocre lip-synching performances and cats playing the piano, we see increasing amounts of online content posted with the express intent of advancing the poster's entrepreneurial interests and/or their careers in creative fields. This content can range from dry, but instructional, to wildly entertaining and inspirational. The Koreans have a word for it: *proteur* – an awkward portmanteau combining the English words *professional* and *amateur*. The Korean broadcast company KBS provides the best definition we have found in its online glossary of IT jargon and market trends: "Proteurs...are people who have gained recognition as professionals for their hobbies even if they don't have relevant professional certificates or degrees." One can be a proteur in nearly any pursuit – photography, cosmetics application, tennis-shoe painting – but the term is now most commonly applied to individuals producing instructional videos and posting them online in order to demonstrate skill and mastery in a particular domain...and to the higher quality – more professional-quality – standards expected of that online media. While the big media and consumer electronics companies push the UCC (User Created Content) craze to market online services, digital SLR cameras, webcams, and camcorders, PCC (Proteur Created Content) is quickly becoming the standard for homegrown video in Korea.

As part of this study, we spoke with a Korean man who, in his spare time, produces instructional videos about building spreadsheets. Another uses video to teach online design and illustration classes. For these professional instructors, online video is a way to assert one's expertise and build one's reputation as a credible source of inspiration and information. By offering free video instruction online, the design teacher attracts business to his after-school academy (*bagwon*), and the spreadsheet instructor finds students interested in private lessons and new clients interested in his specialized document services.

In the US we make no semantic distinction between uploaded home videos and re-edited mash-ups of Hollywood film trailers or professionally produced comedy shorts. It's all "YouTube." Nonetheless, we see a trend that runs parallel to the emergence in Korea of a category of Proteur Created Content. In Los Angeles, we met with Grant and Bryan, an aspiring actor and would-be director using YouTube to circumvent the old-boy-network, big-studio path to Hollywood success. They created a spoof of a major network TV show that was seen by over 5,000 people in one weekend – by far the largest audience they had ever reached with their own material. Across town, their college buddies, Scott and Adam, have launched their own web channel devoted to documenting the eccentric inhabitants and everyday happenings of their new hometown, Venice, California. They hope that *Venice the Menace* will eventually support itself – and them – through advertising revenue shares.

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There are striking similarities between the teenage skateboarders we interviewed as part of this study and the older, more professionally-motivated proteur content creators. They use many of the same tools, online services and social networking sites. All are motivated by a concern with their reputations and with how the online representations they construct are received by their peers and in their online communities. Our proteurs, however, are enmeshed in more complex networks of creative peers, fans, critics, and industry gatekeepers. For the purposes of this short paper, we focus on a few of those proteur creators – not only in Korea, but as they position themselves within creative communities based in the United States and in the United Arab Emirates as well.

Following the Blogrolls, Following the Comments: A Multi-sited Approach

Because we were interested not only in creative “lead users” – bloggers, vloggers and musicians posting original content online – but also in the geographically dispersed collectives in which those creative individuals are enmeshed, we realized early on in planning this study that it was particularly well-suited to a multi-sited ethnographic approach. That materialized as a special form of snowball sampling; we recruited primarily through blogrolls. In some instances we found our way into these communities through personal contacts. In others we simply joined in on the conversation associated with certain bloggers we found interesting (and who lived in New York, Los Angeles, Dubai or Seoul), then contacted them to ask if they were available to meet in person while we were in town.

In Los Angeles, we began with Gregory K, who is profiled in the next section of this paper. Gregory K led us to Denise, a blog consultant, and to Stacey, a friend who had recently started her own book-review blog. He also introduced us to children’s librarian and kid-lit blogger Fuse#8, whom we met on a trip to New York, and she turned us on to Brotherhood 2.0, a vlog that has developed a large following and is now regularly listed among the most viewed and most highly rated on YouTube.

In Dubai we found ourselves networking through the blogroll of a multi-author, aggregator blog site called UAE Community Blog, which bills itself as “a forum to unite UAE diarists.” We were introduced to Secret Dubai – a professional journalist, European ex-pat, and creator and co-administrator of the UAE Community Blog. Secret Dubai put us in touch with Emirati – self-proclaimed “Sheik of Controversy” and the only UAE national contributing to this community of otherwise ex-pat bloggers – and with Samurai Sam, a 17-year-old ex-pat Australian who has grown up in Dubai with deep affection for his adopted country, but deep dissatisfaction with how the country is run.

In Seoul, South Korea we met with a number of young women who were active in the online community – or “café” as it is called by the host portal, Daum – founded on the basis of a shared interest in exchanging tips for purchasing and applying cosmetics. Mary Jane, Renee, and Hyung Ja share their expertise with the other 350,000 (almost all female) members of this online make-up community.

When possible, we spoke with producers of premium content in addition to the proteur creators who were the focus of our study. These industry representatives often function as gatekeepers to the brand-name portals (like HBO's *This Just In* or the Korean GOM TV) and to the inside circles of industries to which our proteur creators were striving to gain access. For us, they provided an alternative perspective on issues of media ownership, credibility, and editorial control. As the majority of our subjects were actively creating original content of some variety and were sharing that content with a larger community, we had multiple points of contact with each, and multiple texts – beyond the transcripts of our interviews – across which to conduct our analyses: blog entries, comments from blog readers, videos or serial videos, in addition to our personal email exchanges with informants. Most of our participants had also pointed us to newspaper or magazine articles, blogs and other sites on which they and their work had been referenced or reviewed. As a result, our study of these individuals often becomes indistinguishable from an analysis of the media they produce.

PROTEURS AND THEIR PUBLICS

In the following sections, we introduce four of our study participants from four distinct communities and the original works they present online.

Gregory K – Fibonacci Poetry and Making a Place in the Kid-Lit Community

Gregory K. is a screen and television writer who decided a couple of years ago that he wanted to become a children's book author. Like many parents of young children, Gregory became a fan of kid's books, and has subsequently become passionately interested in writing one himself. He wanted to meet children's book authors in order to learn and network with them and their publishers. A longtime contributor to online news groups, and a former frequenter of AOL chat rooms, Gregory decided his first step in making this career transition should be to start a blog.

Gregory says, "Writing, again, is very isolating, and I'm not an anti-social person. Some writers probably like the isolation. I have problems with it.... There's an element of support group to any group of writers that get together because you all can complain about the same issues.... It's like, only people who are trying to do the same thing as you can really understand the difficulties of that, and can help you navigate sometimes, or can just share the same frustration."

Gregory did not want to blog in isolation either, so he started thinking about ways to attract readers, and contributors. He knew readers would come back more frequently if there was something to do on the blog, so he thought about ways to make it interactive. On April 1, 2005, he began posting "fibs" on his blog, and sent out a mass email to all his friends, family members, and extended contacts asking for them to send in "fibs" of their own. "Fibs" – a term coined by Gregory K. – are poems based on the Fibonacci mathematical

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sequence – 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 syllable lines. Submissions and comments started coming in from friends and family immediately, and were soon be posted to his blog’s comments section from people Gregory didn’t know. He went from a handful of visits a day to twenty, and then thirty. Then he had an idea.

Gregory says, “I submitted as a story to Slashdot, which is ‘news-for-nerds,’ as they lovingly say. But it’s news-for-nerds with a great point of view. And I submitted the post as saying, hey, this is just something fun to do for National Poetry Day. And on April 7th, which was a Friday, just after midnight, they put the story up on their main page where there’s seven-to-ten stories a day. And by the end of that day, I’d had 32,000 visitors to my blog.”

The tremendous success of his Slashdot effort made Gregory think even bigger. He contacted the *New York Times* and said, It’s National Poetry Month, you know. You need to do a story about poetry. Here’s one with a technology angle. *The New York Times* printed the story on April 10th and referred to Gregory as an “aspiring children’s book author.”

Gregory says, “Part of the great thing about that, from my point of view, was that the entire children’s publishing business is in...not the entire, but the bulk of it...is in New York City. And this is the paper of record for them as well.” Gregory K. was contacted by several publishing companies, and after months of discussions and correspondence he signed a two-book deal with a large, American publishing house that focuses on the youth market.

I had started because the connected power of the web is apparent to me. It’s incredibly powerful.... I had lots of people, both in children’s books and screenwriting, and in all sorts of things ask me endlessly why was I wasting my time blogging. So this was certainly a good answer, so I didn’t ever actually have to answer that question anymore.... So it was satisfying on that level. It was also satisfying because it was the intent. It was what I had hoped to see if it was possible. And I discovered that it is possible. That’s fantastic.

Mary and Liza – Responding to their Following as 39 Second Singles

Mary and Liza were both looking for work in the television industry – Mary as a writer, and Liza as a producer – when Mary suggested turning her friend Liza’s flailing love life into a video blog that would serve as a calling-card in their job search. Now Mary produces, and thirty-nine year old Liza stars in, a vlog called *39 Second Single*. The two creators describe their show as, “Dating stories so bad they must be true.”

Mary is the disembodied voice behind the camera, or to be more precise, behind the laptop; most of the footage for *39 Second Single* is shot with the built-in webcam on Mary’s MacBook laptop computer. As viewers, we hear Mary ask Liza questions, and encourage her in her quest for love; but we never see her. She remains the mysterious, invisible half of the

duo. In a sense – and in the formal set-up of her shots, Mary is Liza’s audience, and we as viewers are (literally) positioned as Mary is, across from Liza in the booth at the Palm Restaurant, as Liza’s confidant. Mary asks our questions for us, and doles out little bits of droll advice. Mostly, Mary eggs Liza on. As Liza says, “She gets me drunk and makes me talk about my dates.”

Like Gregory K., they thought strategically about how to draw viewers to their show.

Mary: Initially, when we first started, and we were still kind of figuring out the format, and bumping along, it was just emails to friends and word-of-mouth. People were forwarding it like crazy. It was great. And we were getting an average of, like, a few hundred views.... I started working freelance for AOL, and they were doing a partnership with HBO on this site *This Just In*, which is, like, a comedy-news-pop-culture site, and I was doing viral outreach for them, so I actually learned a lot of tricks from them about where to go, and just cheeky stuff, like, you know, posting things on DIG, going to Best Week Ever, and...other viewing sites from YouTube to Revver.

In addition to scheming to increase their visibility, Mary and Liza devised several formatting strategies for gaining and keeping viewers. The 39 *Second Single* episodes are short, running from three- to a maximum of five-minutes. A new episode appears every Friday afternoon when viewers need something fun to kick off their weekends. The first season comprised 24 webisodes – the same number as most traditional TV sitcom seasons – and viewer mail was highly encouraged. As with most good serials and TV dramas, the season ended with a cliffhanger; Liza sits down at a table in an outdoor café, on a blind date with a man who was chosen for her by online votes of the 39 *Second Single* viewers.

Mary and Liza appeared on *The Weekend Today Show* in a sequence about women who blog about their dates. They drew the attention of Jeff Jarvis, founding editor of *Entertainment Weekly*, and creator of BuzzMachine, a media blog, who hired both of them to produce and star in an online web show called *Idol Critic*, a morning-after critique of Fox’s *American Idol*. The attention culminated in an offer from TLC (The Learning Channel) to turn 39 *Second Single* into a half-hour cable series.

It was all part of the plan. Liza explains,

Well that was what (Mary) said originally...we were working on another TV (show)...which we were writing-up a pitch for, and part of (Mary’s) rationale for starting the blog was, (when we) pitch this show people will say, “What else do you have?” (We’ll be) like, “Oh, check out our blog.” You know, it just gives us more credibility, gives them some place to go. And that’s true, that is how it’s kind of worked-out.

Mary Jane – Saving Face in the Making-up Café

Wide distribution of self-made content is not a goal of everyone in our study. We got to know members of a very active online community in Korea who, despite belonging to one of the largest online communities in that country, prefer to limit the audience for their own work to a small group of online friends.

In Korea, where a high value is placed on education and lifelong learning, much attention is paid to honing and sharing expertise. In recent years, producing informational videos and posting them online has become a way to spread knowledge, and gain acclaim for one's talents. These *proteur* videos are motivated by a desire to inform, and to propel the creator's career or reputation amongst peers. Mary Jane, a participant in our study, is a member of an online community devoted to cosmetics. Like other members of the community, she makes videos of herself applying make-up. She holds out her digital still camera, set on movie-mode, with her left hand, and applies make-up to her face with her right hand. She uploads these videos to the make-up community on the Korean portal Daum, to instruct others. She takes pride in her expertise, and feels happy to be able to share it with a large part of the female population of Korea in this online make-up community.

Mary Jane is very careful about protecting her own identity, and her image, as are the other members we have met from that community. Although she works part-time as an online fashion model for websites selling women's clothing (known as "shopping malls"), Mary Jane rarely puts videos or images on the make-up community that show her entire face. If possible, she only films the part of her face that is crucial for demonstrating the particular make-up technique she is employing. She spoke of feeling "shy" and even "ashamed" to show her face, yet she is a very active member of the community and posts videos frequently.

Mary Jane intends her online community contributions to be seen by a small group of friends and peers in that community. Unlike Gregory K., she does not hope to attract viewers beyond her inner circle. Not only does she not attempt to distribute her work more widely, she takes steps in hopes that it will not go beyond her small comfort zone. She leaves her user-created content videos up on the site for about three days. This is the amount of time she thinks it will take her friends, and the community members to whom she is closest, to stop by, and check out her contributions. After three days she moves videos to an online vault provided by Daum where content can be stored for free.

In putting a video online in Korea, and claiming expertise in a talent or skill such as applying make-up, drawing Spider-Man or playing the guitar, one opens oneself up to criticism and ridicule. According to Mary Jane, the risks involved in leaving a video up for too long can be quite high. Community members complain about strangers who happen upon the posted content and leave negative, insulting comments regarding a member's looks or technique. As Markus and Kitayama (1991) have pointed out, in many Asian cultures the

self is determined by the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other – a contrast to the American notion of an independent self. When self is construed in terms of relationships with others, a creator and uploader can be seen as boastful and lacking humility, or can be seen as putting-down those who are less accomplished. Mary Jane sees her identity as interconnected with not only the people she knows in the make-up community, but with the people she doesn't know, and, most likely, with Koreans in general. So, the risks are high, yet she continues to create and upload videos because the rewards for uploading are also high. By posting useful, instructive, fun videos about applying make-up, Mary Jane has come to be known as an expert in the make-up community. Her strategy of leaving videos visible on the site for only a few days minimizes her risk, plus she has gained prestige in that group, and has been featured in a couple of Korean print magazine articles about applying make-up. She has successfully built a good reputation among a crowded field of participants, and takes pride and satisfaction in her role in that community.

Secret Dubai – Cautiously Controversial in the UAE

The emphasis placed on online anonymity is even more pronounced in Dubai where traditional Emirati society and a large, mostly-European ex-pat population co-exist in a tightly-controlled, rapidly changing country. UAE bloggers use pseudonyms, supply very little personal description on their blogs, and do not post photos of themselves or videos in which they appear.

Bloggers in Dubai tend to fall into two categories, those who consider themselves serious, politically-minded, risk-taking commentators on UAE society, and a larger group whom the politically-minded bloggers see dismissively as “just people going on about their lives.” (Samurai Sam) For the first group posting online is a form of political action, and a small step toward creating social change in a highly-controlled culture. One such blogger, a European ex-pat, calls herself “Secret Dubai.” Of her blog she says, “It's very tame compared to anything I would be able to do in the free West, we're all endlessly tiptoeing on eggshells here.” (from an email)

While it is desirable, and even necessary, to keep their own identities anonymous, the bloggers in Dubai do not wish to limit their audience. With social change as the ultimate goal, and censorship a constant threat and semi-frequent occurrence, these bloggers hope to reach as many people as they can. Secret Dubai is proud to have been mentioned in newspaper articles, referenced in other blogs, and shut-down once by her service provider.

How far they can go in challenging the government is a frequent topic of U.A.E. political bloggers. The government-owned national ISP, Etisalat, is a frequent target, as are issues of Internet censorship, and poor network connectivity – problems that are blamed by the bloggers on government-owned service providers. The circularity of the problem is evident. It is against the law to make derogatory comments about the government of the U.A.E., and the government owns and operates most of the infrastructure of the U.A.E., including the Internet service provider, and the phone company. But the best and most

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effective way of protesting the government and striving for change (not just in the quality of infrastructure, but in human rights issues, women's rights, religious rights, etc.) is to use the power of the government-owned Internet and post a blog.

Secret Dubai addresses the lack of freedom of speech in the U.A.E., plus the frustrations of using her adopted country's shaky infrastructure in this post to her blog:

Secret Dubai, July 2, 2007: ...So while America may have a president so unpopular that one can currently buy a calendar in Borders to count the days until he leaves office, at least people have the freedom to express their loathing and the communications to convey it.

Whereas in the sandlands, according to the UAE Publications Law Chapter 7 Article 76, it is actually forbidden to "blemish" the president of any "friendly state". Which means that as the US is a UAE ally, we may only express loving praise for George W Bush and the wonderful progress he has made in Iraq and for world security in general.

She does not criticize the U.A.E. government directly until she talks about a specific article of U.A.E. law (which she subsequently published in its entirety in the Comments section of her blog.) Nor does she mention any of the U.A.E. leaders by name, knowing that by doing so a representative of the ruling family would be much more likely to happen upon this entry. She is also very aware that her opinions are controversial, and will be viewed by some U.A.E. nationals as the complaints of an outsider. In response to the post, one reader commented, "Your blog does nothing but spread hatred towards the U.A.E. & Arabs."

Secret Dubai chooses not to delete unfavorable comments like this one because that would be "untransparent," but engaged in a heated exchange with this commenter, and eventually asked the person to leave the blog permanently. It is a delicate balancing act. In the tightly-controlled media landscape of the U.A.E., Secret Dubai could be "outed," shut-down, or even deported.

DISCUSSION

We selected the content creators to profile above because, in some way, their stories illustrate larger trends we noticed across the population of our study. As individuals, the motivations, aspirations and concerns they express represent unique compositions of common motifs – motifs that are shaped by (among other factors) the etiquette and norms of their online communities, the stories they hear and retell, corporate interests they come up against, and cultural and legal constraints on their expression. In the following sections, we explore only two of the many themes that can be drawn out of these stories.

Audience, Identity, and Pseudonymity

We could safely say that all of the people we met posting original content to the Internet are looking for some sort of recognition – even our skateboarding teenagers. Some are actively seeking audiences for their creative expressions; some may be looking more for a sense of connectedness with others who share their interests or artistic pursuits. Their personal goals, as well as the conditions under which they create, give rise to subtle differences in how and how much they want to be seen and heard. We see those forces played out in our content creators' online identity management and the various approaches they take in connecting their online creations back to their real-world identities.

While “Gregory K.” is a pseudonym, it is closely related to the fib poet's real name. Gregory is not particularly concerned about his own safety or the malicious intent of his readers, though he has taken the step of not using his full name, and not sharing much information about where he lives or with whom he lives out of concern for his family and the everyday realities of identity theft in the US. “Mary Jane” is well known by that name – also a pseudonym – in the Korean make-up community. Her Western-sounding online handle refers only to the women's one-strap shoes. There is no chance of the name being linked back to her or to her family. She makes it clear she is very concerned about her personal safety and the malicious intent of strangers, and she goes out of her way to ensure she does not open herself up to ridicule or humiliation. The necessity of keeping her real-world identity concealed is made clear in the pen name “Secret Dubai” has chosen to represent herself online. Whereas Gregory K. might prefer that readers don't know exactly where he lives or what his children are named, Secret Dubai face the loss of her job or deportation if a reader should take offense and report her to the authorities. There is no personal information about Secret Dubai to be found on her blog (not even a hint as to her gender).

How these authors choose to represent themselves online has much to do with how they imagine the audience reading or watching their work. It also has to do with their different imaginings of how dangerous a place the Internet is and their perceptions of the risk they take in expressing an opinion or creative impulse online. Gregory sees mostly colleagues, fellow authors, friends, and family as his audience. Mary Jane pictures a mostly collegial audience in the make-up community, but goes to great pains to keep her audience small and friendly. News stories of a famous actress whose home address was widely distributed online, and of another woman who was publicly humiliated after her dog defecated on a subway train were often referenced by our Korean informants in connection with descriptions of their cautious approach to online exposure. Secret Dubai imagines a public made up mostly of ex-pat technorati, and an extended network of acquaintances and strangers who take an interest in the daily happenings of the U.A.E. She is aware that her audience is populated both by like-minded friends, and many who disagree with her views. In the volatile political climate of the Middle East, the debates on her blog can become heated, personal, and vitriolic. Since the media is tightly-controlled in Dubai, part of her

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imagined audience is also the government, employees of the ruling family, and the Internet service providers who supply the channel she needs to continue blogging.

Participation is the Point

Bloggers and vloggers who produce serial entries – especially entries in the form of diaries, and whose subject matter tends to be personal – may develop followings of loyal fans, and as they develop those followings, often develop a new sense of purpose to their blogging, and a keen sense of responsibility to their publics. Secret Dubai, who started her blog as a way to communicate with her friends and family as she traveled, quickly recognized that her blog was regularly being read by a much broader audience – people she did not know, and who did not know her. Her blog entries now reflect her awareness that she is communicating with a large audience, and she uses the platform as a way to encourage participation in online activism that is directed at local causes, but appeals to a global readership.

While not politically motivated, Mary and Liza at *39 Second Single* also encourage interactions and fan participation. In episode 20, “America Decides,” posted toward the end of season one, Mary and Liza narrow down to three the list of potential suitors profiled on an online dating site. Then they issue a challenge to their audience – to “America.” “You decide” . . . who Liza dates next. In the weeks following, through their comments posted to the *39 Second Single* blog, viewers made their preferences known. The first season of *39 Second Single* concluded with Liza waiting at an outdoor café for the date her public had chosen for her. We had to wait until the second season to hear how that date turned out.

This sort of invitation for participation has become a common technique for bloggers and active contributors to online communities. It lets contributors demonstrate they belong to a larger community, as when widely dispersed members of the online kid-lit community individually recognize “poetry Fridays” by posting poems once each week on their personal blogs. It can help build momentum behind viral contagion, as Gregory K. demonstrated so dramatically with his call for fibs. Advertising agencies have come to understand similar techniques as a means of boosting consumers’ engagement and, in theory, brand loyalty. And as more stories spread from the blogosphere of online spectacle leading to spectacular success (or humiliating over-exposure), we are likely to see even more individuals following in the footsteps of the likes of Gregory K. – strategically manipulating online collectives with an eye toward self-reinvention

Internet technologies are providing the foundation for a model of “participatory culture” different from the one described by Henry Jenkins, which arose in a technological environment dominated by broadcast television. And artists like Mary and Liza, with their intimate, episodic communications are inventing the new media forms to fit it – to which, they acknowledge, their fans are active contributors as well, directly affecting their narrative as it develops.

CONCLUSIONS

As researchers working in Intel Corporation's Digital Home Group, we are, in the end, inevitably concerned with what these individual amateurs, authors and artists have to tell us about the technical challenges of creating digital works and sharing those online. They are more than simply interesting individuals; they represent a potential market. The numbers of people who create proteur content will, of course, always be dwarfed by the numbers who consume it. The same could be said of any artist/audience relationship. But while today's hot content portals may flame-out, some bloggers may quit their blogging, and particular online communities may disperse as quickly as they have gathered, creative individuals who are posting original media to the Internet are not likely to go away altogether. And, if the stories we have heard from Gregory K., from Mary and Liza, from Mary Jane, and Secret Dubai tell us anything about authors' ability to reach a public in the contemporary media landscape of "Web 2.0," it is that, with the right content, authors *can* be heard and audiences *can* be found; audiences can be large; they can be fiercely dedicated or brutally dismissive; they can be actively engaged, and they can be mobilized as a force to propel a career or change a government policy. For good reason, we are just as concerned with these collectives that form around our original content creators – their creative colleagues, their critics, their audiences. These (potentially) much larger markets drive demand for more original content, and their allegiances to the amateur/proteur content producers they find online – along with the cumulative effects of their passing that content along to friends – is reshaping how we think about entertainment choices and the technologies that support them.

In this short paper, we have elaborated on two of the many themes we hear as we listen to those content creators who are getting noticed online talk about how they position themselves as authors and about their relationships to their audiences. We hear about modes of self-expression heavily influenced by cultural norms of public display, by the language of consumer product marketing, and by formats that have evolved around television programming. We hear notions of ownership that – even in historically restrictive climates such as the UAE – resonate with the utopian cyberpunk sentiment that "information wants to be free." And we hear stories of creative participation of mobilized collectives that somehow, in the end, seem to run up against the success criteria of established institutions of the culture industry.

Across the board, our informants describe the online realm of user-generated content as having an untamed-frontier, anything-can-happen quality to it at this point in time. It's a space of opportunity for anyone willing to put in the effort (and having a little talent doesn't hurt either). A guy who has never written a book can go from blogging, to networking, to causing a stir, and end up with a book deal from one of the top publishers in the country. A couple of women who find their conversations about dating incredibly amusing turn out to be right, and end up with a television deal from a major cable channel.

</online> communities, all over again

Following individual artists through their connections to online, creative collectives, we get a better perspective on the personal motivations as well as the larger social forces that are working to turn this online playground of original content sharing into our newest Wild West, a space that participants in this study perceive as bursting with opportunities for the taking, complete with legends and legends-in-the-making of those who have been burned and those who have struck gold.

NOTES

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