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Between Production Capitalism and Consumerism: The Culture of Prosumption and Discovering the Mechanisms of its Functioning

Piotr Siuda

In sociological studies of culture, increasing attention is being paid to so-called prosumption. The article describes prosumption in the sphere of popular culture. The author proposes the term "culture of prosumption." The term refers to the culture industry and its contemporary mode of operation, which is characteristic of the prosumption capitalism that has currently become prevalent. The aforementioned mode of operation is a specific corporation culture; with increasing frequency, enterprises within the entertainment industry seek their success through the grass-root emergence of groups of recipients who work for a culture text. The author proposes a convenient way of diagnosing the mechanisms of the culture of prosumption: specifically, it can be described through an analysis of its most engaged recipients—that is, its fans—who constitute an avant-garde of culture of prosumption. As regards fans, all of the essential features of prosumption are clearly identifiable, which allows one to argue that studies on the culture of prosumption should take into account considerations pertaining to fans.

Production + Consumption = Prosumption Capitalism

Since the time of industrial revolution, economic analysis has focused most of all on production, which has influenced other domains of people's lives. This state of affairs is reflected in concepts that have stated that production determines which forms social life takes. The dominance of production came under questioning after the World War II, as researchers pointed out with increasing frequency that the situation was changing. Intensified factory activity—which was a result of wartime efforts, difficult financial situations, and the need for tightening one's belt in response to the considerable expenses connected with the conflict—made people consume little during wartime. In defiance of their experiences during the bloodiest

conflict of the 20th century, these same people, just after the war ended, threw themselves into purchasing new acquisitions. This longing to purchase was not the only factor that intensified consumption. New technologies of mass production, the introduction of which induced demand and consumer involvement, were also highly significant in this matter (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010: 14-7).

In the second half of the 20th century, production gradually ceased to be centrally located within the economy sphere, a change that was manifested by the still-decreasing importance of heavy industry, which was endangered by the growing service sector. Although it is hard to say exactly when it happened, consumption "jumped" into the leading position in the economy, which was closely connected with multiple phenomena that are widely described in the literature; for example, the emergence of the so-called temples of consumption, including shopping centers, and fast food restaurants. The fact that acquisition became the main category of economics (and social life in general) was also proven by the commercialization of public space, as well as the increased importance of marketing, public relations, advertising, and brand building processes (Arvidsson, 2006).

Although studies of consumption are still extremely important for understanding what happens in a society (people have not stopped purchasing), perceiving social life only from the angle of consumption has become as irrelevant as an analysis stemming only from the perspective of production. Consumption has stopped to be the key that opens the door for all forms of scientific investigation. Nowadays, more and more attention is paid to prosumption, which was "introduced" to the social sciences by Alvin Toffler (1980), who discussed it at length in his book *The Third Wave*. In his research, he noticed that prosumption was dominant in pre-industrial societies, which he called the "first wave." It was then replaced by the second wave, which brought commodification, driving a wedge into the very center of prosumption and dividing it into halves; hence the division into production and consumption, categories that are in fact an aberration of the earliest state and deviate from the original form of economics. Toffler's vision of the future presented the world of the third wave, in which the barriers between the production and the consumption erode and the society (or rather, its economy) returns to its proper state, a process of reintegration that erases the separation between producing and consuming occurs.

Is this the moment when we witnessed Toffler's vision come true? It appears that, to a large extent, the answer is positive, which can be evidenced by the so-far rather unknown phenomena and views of contemporary researchers. George Ritzer & Nathan Jurgenson (2010) pointed out that, even in the period in which industrial revolution enjoyed its greatest successes, the separation of production and consumption was not permanent; this, then, means not only that prosumption is the original form, but also that we are currently returning to it, and thus it should always have been at the center of our considerations.

Georg Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson (2010) concluded that we have witnessed the emergence of a new kind of capitalism, the third in the history of mankind. The first was the classic one that Karl Marx wrote about, which is defined by the relations between owners-entrepreneurs and workers. Here, the central place was factory—that is, the space devoted to production—hence the superiority of production, the view that, even if workers consume, they do it only to produce. As has been shown above, consumption became a priority as time passed, so that we can speak about consumption capitalism. Ritzer and Jurgenson asked the following question: do the classic and consumption capitalisms include the new category of prosumers? Their answer is negative; instead, they claim, there is a totally new form of economic system, which may be referred to as prosumer capitalism (2010: 20-2).

In prosumer capitalism, not only are consumption and production connected to an unprecedented extent, this process also occurs in a qualitatively different way than it used to. The capitalist is oriented towards a "soft" management of the consumer, using its social potential and competencies. The development of a product, and its innovative character, are to be achieved by "releasing" those abilities connected to an affective approach toward the purchased thing, abilities that are hidden in every prosumer. It is the work of the prosumer that is affective, and that work is also based on their (prosumers) knowledge and cooperation with others (Arvidsson, 2007; Campbell, 2005). What is valued is not the predictability of action, but rather experimentation and an orientation towards playfulness.

The key to the formation of prosumption capitalism is the Internet, in particular its Web 2.0 form, the essence of which is the user-generated content created by Web 2.0 users (Harrison & Barthel, 2009). In describing this phenomenon, my intent is not to go too deep into technical details, nor bombard the reader with too many examples, since the notion of Web 2.0 has become so popular nowadays that numerous scientific or popular science publications that pertain to it can easily be found. Their aim is to prove why a web space, a particular service or tool may be considered as belonging to the latest generation. At the same time these publications always pay attention to importance of content formed by Internet users as they share and manipulate information while managing their own social network. These activities are carried out by means of various net tools, such as virtual communities (social networking portals like Facebook), blogs, or wikis (Bardzell & Odom, 2008; Lih, 2009).

With increasing frequency, the content is built by a number of individual acts that result in a visible effect only if they are connected. The capability of Internet users to undertake collective work, hidden within the web, is given different names by researchers. Axel Bruns (2005) presented the forms of collective creation for civil journalism Internet services, and called this creation "gate-watching," which consists of the observations reported by various journalistic sources in an effort to quickly identify material of interest. Another type of group work is crowd-sourcing, which is a model of problem

solving that draws on a crowd of Internet users who are not experts in a certain domain (Brabham 2008). In practice, it most often assumes the following pattern: a company decides to use an undefined, and frequently a very large, group of people by making an open call for action on a project online. For the most active community participants or for the authors of the best ideas, the company may provide a symbolic reward. The corporation becomes the owner of the idea and implements it, frequently reaping considerable benefits in the process. One example, described by Daren C. Brabham (2008), is a project in which Internet users work on a teddy bear plush toy, commissioned by a company that produces plush toys.

As regards Web 2.0, prosumption seems evident. The intensification of phenomena that has been observed since the emergence of the Internet has stimulated the implosion of production and consumption. While it is certain that prosumption was not "invented" during the emergence of Web 2.0, one may risk arguing that—considering the massive engagement of Internet users' in building content—nowadays the Internet has become the most important place in which prosumption manifests itself and by which it further develops.

The Culture of Prosumption

To define the latest trends connected with the Internet, Axel Bruns (2008) used the term "produsage," which he understands as the form of production that emerges as the result of mass media users' transformation from consumers—subject to the regime of traditional business strategies—into new, active producers. Obviously, all this is thanks to information technologies that are tools of sharing knowledge. Bruns's views are consistent with those presented above; the term produsage may be assumed to be another way of naming what is otherwise understood as prosumption. Bruns's thoughts differ from the previously illustrated thesis in that they exclusively focus on media recipients. Produsage is not supposed to describe the general trends that are connected with the emergence of a new type of capitalism, but rather to show the rules that govern the behavior of mass media recipients.

Focusing on the recipients—and thus narrowing the considerations of prosumption to popular culture—one can see that the processes of prosumption are extremely evident. I use the term "popular culture" in the sense that it is used by theoreticians of the Frankfurt school; that is why the culture industry is treated as an important element of the capitalistic system, which produce popular-culture goods in the same manner that other consumption goods are produced. The aim is not the creation of art, but profit; the business task of the culture industry is the production of texts that will attract consumers and, as a consequence, gain the support of advertisers, eventually translating into money. Although the term has been adopted from the Frankfurt school, I do not share its approach. According to representatives of the Frankfurt School, culture goods are those that are produced on a factory line and reach people who exclusively engage in purchasing.

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Such a standpoint fails to reflect the present state of affairs. In the times of prosumption capitalism, the situation appears different. The recipients have increasing influence on what products of the popular culture look like (Deuze, 2008; Deuze, 2009). The industry strives to cooperate with them; newspapers and magazines include sections in which readers may express their views, journalists more frequently take advantage of the activities of amateur reporters (Erdal, 2009; Thurman & Lupton, 2008), TV programs such as reality TV rely on viewers' opinions (Enli, 2009), and games and other computer programs offer applications that enable users to make modifications. The Internet stimulates the co-creation of a product to a significant extent, since the ratings and reviews given by Internet users are of great importance for building a particular media brand. What is witnessed is the bloom of the so-called "word-of-mouth marketing" or "viral marketing," which consists of stimulating and observing discussions within virtual communities. The industry values the importance of information that is collected in connection with prosumers' activities, as well as the products that prosumers create. These can be included in the work created by professionals (a good example are the modifications made to computer games by amateur programmers) or used in a completely different way. Those prosumers oriented toward cooperation are highly significant; nowadays, marketing strategies have, with increasing frequency, begun to be set by determining how to benefit from the activities of prosumers.

Thus, we are now witnessing the emergence of a culture of prosumption. I use this term to define the contemporary way in which the cultural industry works, which is characteristic of the prosumption capitalism that is now starting to prevail. Its method of functioning is a specific corporate culture, consisting of enterprises oriented towards a particular type of production, distribution, and marketing within the sphere of popular culture. The use of amateurs' participation, of people not employed by the industry, is becoming the dominant business model, and often entails an increase in transparency (Deuze, 2007: 247-8) that reveals the method of creation (e.g., the increasing availability of interviews with actors and writers and publication of behind-the-scenes photos that offer insight into the process of creating a film or series) and hands the control of a text over to consumers. Prosumption culture domination has resulted from, among other things, the development of new technologies that enable non-professionals to work on the consumer goods.

Fans as Trendsetters

New trends connected with prosumption culture are most evident in the case of its most engaged recipients, its fans. They are not easy to define; in the literature, it is difficult to find detailed, unequivocal definitions that explain what fans are, although various theoreticians underline different aspects of being a fan. According to me, a particular set of features that are characteristic of the ideal fan type can be pointed out (2012; 2013): fans are consumers of

popular culture who are also productive (capable of creating new works based on the original texts) (Jenkins, 1992; Pugh, 2005) and community members (Brooker, 2002). All three characteristics are easily illustrated with examples of fan activities. These examples are intended to show that fans are trendsetters, people who lead in the implementation of new patterns and models such as, in this case, those connected with popular culture prosumption.

With the continuous development of prosumption capitalism, cooperation with fans becomes the key issue for an increasing number of companies (from the culture industry sector). Many researchers have written about this cooperation, including R.M. Milner (2009), who presented the transformation of media conglomerates in the shape of the so-called "new organization," which would be based on the specialized work of self-motivated knowledge workers. When information becomes the basic commodity, capitalists have no choice but to rely on models that accelerate and widen communication, increase the drive towards innovation, and eliminate the strict hierarchy by replacing it with "cells" in which specialists work beyond the supervision of traditional organization schemes. At the same time, the specialists are the largest resource, possessing the greatest knowledge and understanding of the aims and modern operations that people employed in the old model lack. If one ignores the fact that knowledge workers are well-paid professionals, it is easier to understand why fans may be considered such specialists.

Milner pointed out that fans, considered from this angle, cannot be treated in the same way as traditional workers. In the case of fans, who base their work on voluntary engagement and their will to cooperate, the old strategies of management—which rely on one-sided communication, hidden details of production, and direct control that hampers creativity—prove to be ineffective. Therefore, the new organization's logic denies the attitude that treats fans as pirates who violate copyright, and instead perceives them as recipients who promote the company's interests. With regard to these interests, it is high time for fans to be considered not as an issue falling within the responsibilities of public relations departments (e.g., PR and marketing) but as important employees. According to Milner, an increasing number of the cultural industry's representatives have become aware of that fact, noticing that fans not only are perfect consumers, but also "act" in sales, promotion, and advertising sectors. The costs connected to customer service may also be transferred to them, since they are often likely to initiate interactions with others who purchase a particular text.

Milner showed this kind of unpaid work in an example of the fans of the Fallout series of computer games. According to Milner, the fans are ideal members of a new organization; they criticize the activities of some companies, continuously maintain dialogues both with each other and with the representatives of a company, create games modifications (mods) that allow one to still start the game from the beginning, and spend a lot of time writing guidebooks on how to finish the games (Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Consalvo, 2003; Nieborg & van der Graaf 2008). In short, they are consultants and assistants on technical matters. Various kinds of computer games fans also play

numerous roles in PR and marketing spheres: they test the beta versions of the games, thus provoking continuous changes to them. Fan bulletin boards are filled with polemics describing what the newest productions should look like (Postigo, 2007; Postigo, 2008).

It is not only the games sector that has changed its attitude toward fans; fans are also becoming knowledge workers for the film and TV industries. In interviews, J.J. Abrams, who was responsible for the creation of the *Alias* and *Lost* series, has frequently admitted that he regularly reads Internet bulletin boards where fans are active. He also pointed out that this gives him the opportunity to play "games" with the audience, continuously adjusting to the needs and preferences of his shows' viewers (Andrejevic, 2008).

In the music industry, it has also been observed that fans should be taken care of, since they are the ones contributing to an increase in profits. Nancy K. Baym and Robert Burnett (2009) demonstrated this with an example of two ways in which Swedish indie rock music fans supported artists. First, fans promoted them online by adding them as their friends on social networking websites (Beer, 2008), publishing, storing, and sorting articles and reviews about the musicians in the process. The second, definitely more engaged, method consisted of creating services that were devoted to artists, as well as blogging about them. Publishers have begun to cooperate with fans, realizing that some bands have a better chance of coming onto the market thanks to their activities. From the marketing point of view, using various Internet tools and the interconnections and continuous discussions of fans is a perfect approach. Although Baym and Burnett (434) express their views in the case of the Swedish rock music, they underline that the phenomenon described by them is generally becoming more common in the music sector, proving the fundamental changes that have occurred in the music industry.

That fans are the avant-garde of the prosumption culture is proved by the recently changing aesthetics of popular culture; more and more often one may witness an intertextuality that relies on the construction of multithreaded narratives. They are built in the way that the pop culture text is presented on various media platforms (for example movies, tv shows, books, comics). Researchers vary in naming this new aesthetics: Henry Jenkins (2007) called it transmedia storytelling, Will Brooker (2001) used the term overflow, and Mizuko Ito (2007) used the notion of media-mix. The last author described, in her opinion, the first product of this kind: the Japanese Pokémon and Yugioh animations, which were published not only as cartoon films, but also as card games, computer games, and products such as T-shirts, mugs or school stationery (all interlinked in a way that enabled people to discover new layers of the fictitious world). Transmedia storytelling, or media-mixes, differ from the old forms of popular-culture synergy in terms of which texts—from different media platforms—are associated with each other. Previously they were able to be consumed separately as, for example, in the case of when reading a book does not contribute to the understanding of watching the film. In the case of storytelling, all narratives are significant in the sense that they

each reveal new knowledge of the depicted world, and a complete picture of the universe is gained by exploring of every production.

Industries are beginning to pay attention to the most loyal and active recipients who take the trouble to explore a particular media-mix. Transmedia strategies cover an increasing number of genres. The original source texts, which become the basis for developing media-mixes, are more and more varied (Williams, 2009). They include films, as well as series, books, games, and comics. All of them assume the recipient's immersion into the fictitious world, their desire to learn all its nooks and crannies that drives them to explore hidden areas and, in a sense, to enter into it as if it were real. This is evidenced by fans' tendency to engage in the encyclopedic organizing of the explored universe (there are online services/encyclopedias pertaining to a number of particular pop products; Kozinets 2007).

The perfect illustration of transmedia storytelling is *Lost*, a series where transmediality has reached a so-far unprecedented degree (Abbott, 2009; Brooker, 2009). It must be noted that the station that produced *Lost* has started an alternative reality game (ARG) with the show's fans. This type of entertainment uses the real world as a bridge between the plot and the players that play the game; the aim of the creators is to give the impression that the game takes place not in the fictitious world, but in the real one. Christy Dena (2008) presented a very thorough analysis of this phenomenon in an article in which she used the term "tier" to discuss both the history and the aesthetics of the ARG. Every alternate reality game is like a cake, insofar as it consists of various tiers, each of which will taste better to a specific segment of fans. Every tier pertains to a different type of engagement: one demands bigger reserves, the next demands some smaller ones. However, it is burdensome to follow the information that appears in the text or online places connected with ARG (websites, wikis, blogs, etc.). For the more "hard-core" players, there are tiers that refer to solving puzzles both online and offline.

The Lost Experience ARG is considered an extremely vast and complex compared to others; Dena would say that it existed on all tiers. Hints that facilitate solving the fictional world's mysteries were revealed through TV commercials, sponsored by Coca-Cola and Jeep, and by sending text messages and voice mails to the mobile phones of those fans who were first to discover a fragment of enigma. This was in addition to announcements in the traditional press, the publication of a faked book that viewers were informed of in one of the series' episodes, interviews with the authors that were published on Amazon's and Barnes & Noble's services, the participation of fictitious characters in real American talk shows, and messages hidden in the source code of the series' official websites. As it turned out, fans were able to find all of the elements of the puzzle, resulting in the final scene of the game: the necessary search for the seventy enigmatic signs, the so-called glyphs. When collected, they were supposed to reveal the reference to a website with additional video material that was never shown on TV but would significantly contribute to explaining the series' extremely mysterious plot. The glyphs, similar to the hints that led viewers to them, were hidden in various places: in

Internet services and blogs, on mugs belonging to the hosts of the TV programs, on the packaging of bars from selected companies, and even on window displays in shops in Sydney, London, and New York. As it turned out, the collective intelligence of fans had again functioned perfectly; the signs were found and the film discovered; it can still be viewed on YouTube even today.

Obviously, ARG are created to stimulate interest in a pop product and increase its sales. These functions are fulfilled by alternate reality games that are created not only by the industry, but also by its fans, as was shown by Henrik Örnebring (2007) in his article describing the games connected with the series *Alias*. Örnebring focused on two games created by the corporation and one constructed by fans (called *Omniframe*). Both types of games provided various activities, including solving puzzles, writing short stories, and searching for hints in the offline world. The striking similarity between these two categories allowed Örnebring (459) to draw the conclusion that the popular culture industry will continue to successfully develop its symbiosis with the fan culture.

Obviously, in their use of media-mixes, companies will consistently refrain from going to extremes; a recipient who will consume the basic text from which the brand starts—most often a film, series, or book—has to engage in the pursuit of all of the remaining pop products. The basic texts are constructed in such a way as to make them interesting to everyone (not only fans; Perryman, 2008). However, the transmedia strategy becomes more and more popular among corporations when, as has been mentioned, they notice the benefits resulting from it, as well as the growing interest of its recipients. In order to continue to attract their interest, future popular culture products will have to provoke collective activities to an even greater degree than what has been analyzed above.

Conclusions

Studying fans proves to be a convenient way to diagnose the mechanisms of cultural prosumption, since the easiest approach is to describe it by means of analyzing its most engaged recipients. This is the reason why, together with the development of prosumption capitalism, fan studies are gaining more significance. Fans should be studied in order to learn how the concerns of not only the entertainment sector, but also other sectors, are starting to function.

The considerations presented above prove that the cultural industry is, in its operation, becoming fan-oriented. The activities and preferences that are beginning to characterize a wider group of consumers had already manifested a very long time ago. Furthermore, so far prosumption has, in its starkest form, been observed in fans, as media-mixes consistently remain desirable for their fans. It is evident in the aforementioned example of the *Lost* series that its scriptwriters consciously decided to close the series to incidental viewers. In

the course of developing the story, the industry required the show's viewers to face increasingly large requirements in order to understand the plot, entailing an increase in the importance of those recipients who were able to engage in the intellectual game. Their decreasing accessibility to the laymen caused particular episodes, when taken out of the context, to make hardly any sense to the incidental consumer. Nowadays, the transmedia strategy, which is obviously directed at engaged purchasers, is becoming the standard as the industry seeks to see activity and participation expanded from a niche group of fans to the level of common reception. In this sense, fans are the avant-garde of the prosumption culture, the trendsetters who mark out new paths to be followed by the production of popular culture.

Today, the focus is no longer placed on passive purchasers, but on those who are referred to as content providers: the leaders of Web 2.0, members of virtual communities, and loyal or inspiring consumers. The majority of the recipients of contemporary popular culture are becoming such content providers. In this sense, fans may be considered to be leading consumers who most-frequently manifest the most valued activities. Researchers studying new trends in prosumption document a world in which the processes that constitute the essence of fan culture—the activity, production, redistribution, reinterpretation, appropriation, and creation of meanings—become the basis for the cultural industry. Therefore, fans are both an experimental and prototype group; they are the field in which experiments relating both to the industry functioning in the future and to changes in the relations with purchasers will play out. As an outpost of the prosumption culture, fans are at the same time an indicator that enables observers to trace the existence of the culture of prosumption and a barometer of its development.

It is surprising that researchers, studying the new social media and analyzing active media consumption, very rarely use the notion of fan. This type of consumption is based on practically the same activities that fan engagement has long been based on. The purchasers in the era of prosumption capitalism are, without hesitation, fans, but the extremely "softened" ones which manifest their fascinations less intensely. In this sense, the general consumption of popular culture is a reflection of the reception occurring in the fan community (in the past, the ideal purchaser was devoted only to buying; today, they undertake, with increasing frequency, a form of production, becoming similar to fans).

Such a thesis may be supported by the fact that, while in the past fan communities used to form around a few popular culture texts, nowadays an increasing number of texts entail fan activities. Even those pop products that at first glance would seem to have no chance of gaining a group of devoted fans inevitably attract some (Ross, 2008: 1-35). New communities formed at an incredibly fast pace, frequently even before a text is introduced into the market (the best examples are the *Avatar* and *Tron: Legacy* films, for which groups of fans emerged before the cinema premiere). The increasingly common access to information technologies is of some importance here, since such technologies make it easier for "average" recipients to undertake the activities that

characterize fans. On the Internet, fans are omnipresent as more and more Internet services, blogs, and bulletin boards are created. As a consequence, fans are becoming increasingly visible in their activities, which automatically results in "ordinary" consumers becoming similar to them. It is quite probable that, at some point of their Internet adventure, they will undertake activities that will be considered characteristic of fans.

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