From the Ecology of Broadcasting to the Ecology of Participation

Critical Reflections[1]

Tobias Olsson

More than forty years ago, Marshall McLuhan, among others, famously started theorizing and analysing what will be referred to here as *the ecology of broadcasting* (McLuhan 1964; McLuhan & McLuhan 1988). His analyses hovered above questions such as: What will television mean to the world we once knew? In what ways has radio reshaped our ways of understanding the world and our place within it? His answers to these questions were mainly based on close, formal interpretations of the mediums’ technological possibilities. If they technically allow for instant communication on a global scale (TV), this is also what they will bring about (as in, for instance, his infamous “global village” metaphor). If they – in technical terms – allow for a restructuring of societal organization (radio, TV), this also becomes their most probable social outcome.[2] Ever since it was presented, McLuhan’s thought-provoking theorizing has inspired numerous studies (cf. Postman 1985; Meyrowitz 1985; Thompson 1995), and it has also become an important part of the intellectual heritage of media analyses.

His ideas have nevertheless also provoked equally numerous – or perhaps even more numerous – critical readings and debates. One of the most frequent lines of criticism has had to do with his style of writing, as it was never academic in the original sense of the word. He used flowery language in his efforts to interpret the ways in which broadcasting media would transform human beings, cultures and societies. But even beyond his aphorisms, “probes”, and speculative formulations, critical readers of his medium theory have also found additional and more substantially problematic dimensions.

Without going into all the details of this criticism, it is important to point out that these numerous critiques have been especially keen on noticing the many ways in which Marshall McLuhan seems to have been blinded by his own close readings of the technological possibilities of new media. His efforts to predict the new media’s potential social, cultural, and political consequences based on interpretations of their formal qualities caused McLuhan to be technologically deterministically insensitive to the ways in which media always develop embedded within a nexus of social, political and economic relations. Media sociologist John B Thompson (Thompson 1995) summarized this criticism quite well, and modestly, when he wrote:

> This tradition is less helpful, however, when it comes to thinking about the social organization of the media industries, about the ways in which the media are interwoven with the unequal distribution of power and resources, and about how individuals make sense of media products and incorporate them into their lives (Thompson 1995: 8).

These are fairly well-known deficits in McLuhan's theories, as well as in the theories of many other medium theorists, and for the argumentation I am about to develop here, it is only necessary to comment briefly on parts of this criticism – especially those parts concerning the tradition's lack of applicability when it comes to analysing the media industry, and its tendency to overlook the ways in which individuals understand and make use of media products.

Contrary to what many critiques claim about these analyses of *the ecology of broadcasting,* medium theorists in general – and Marshall McLuhan in particular – did actually analyse the media users and/or audiences, but in their own rather peculiar ways, rarely through the use of empirical data, and always without sociological conceptualizations of the users. Rather than digging into empirical research, or qualifications of the sociological characteristics of the users, McLuhan preferred to analyse users from a theoretical and more speculative point of departure. Hence, his writings actually contained a large number of theoretically well-informed suggestions about the possible consequences of the application of new media.[3] These ideas were also rather elaborated, but empirical analyses of users and audiences were deliberately left out.

If the audiences, or the users, were theoretically present but empirically absent in McLuhan's writings, the producers and/or media organizations were more genuinely absent in his efforts to grasp the new ecology brought about by broadcasting media. Simply put, media producers as well as the organizations producing media content were hardly a category of interest to McLuhan, nor was the overall social organization of the media industry. This missing element is also one of those aspects of McLuhan's writings that were most severely criticized in Raymond Williams' (1974) classical, critical reading of McLuhan:

> If the effect of the medium is the same, whoever controls or uses it, and whatever apparent content he *[sic!]* may try to insert, then we can forget ordinary political and cultural argument and let the technology run itself. It is hardly surprising that this conclusion has been welcomed by the "media-men" of the existing institutions. It gives the gloss of avant-garde theory to the crudest versions of their existing interests and practices, and assigns all their critics to pre-electronic irrelevance (1974/1990:128).

The Ecology of Interactivity – Theorizing the Web 1.0

Obviously, Marshall McLuhan's writings on the *ecology of broadcasting* were suggestive and inspired a number of media analysts to take on his perspective. Meanwhile, he also provoked an equally large number of media scholars, and during the 1970s and 80s, his position within the research field cannot really be considered to have been strong (Ferguson 1991); media researchers generally looked elsewhere for inspiration and new ideas.

Considering this background, it was somewhat surprising to follow his theoretical comeback by the time of the Internet's big breakthrough into Western societies in the early/mid-1990s, an period that in hindsight can be referred to as the era of *Web 1.0* (compare below). In 1996, the journal *Wired* famously named McLuhan its patron saint, and he was often used as a reference in various popular debates aimed at forecasting the potential social, cultural and political "consequences" of Internet-based communication. A significant proportion of these writings delved into the notion of interactivity, how the Internet's interactive qualities would create *an ecology of interactivity* that would involve – among many other things – turning passive media spectators into active participators, but also potentially including and giving a voice to people who were marginalized in the previous *ecology of broadcasting*.

This was not, however, only a theme within popular debates. During the early years of research into the Internet's social, cultural, political significance, many scholars also started looking in the direction pointed out by McLuhan. One of the most obvious examples in this respect was Mark Poster. His reading of McLuhan inspired him to establish the view of contemporary media ecology as "A Second Media Age" (Poster 1995); at the heart of this notion was the idea that new media – and the ecology brought about by them – would create new, de-centred, and freer human subjects. This change in ecology would then, as a consequence, bring about both a new culture and new political premises. For instance, in a chapter from 1997 dealing with the Internet's (or more exactly cyberspace's) implications for the public sphere, Mark Poster noted:

> If the term democracy refers to the sovereignty of embodied individuals and the system of determining office-holders by them, a new term will be required to indicate a relation of leaders and followers that is mediated by cyberspace and constituted in relation to the mobile identities found therein (Poster 1997: 214).

Mark Poster was by no means the only author to point to such inherent possibilities in the *ecology of interactivity*. In a thought-provoking but also rather typical journal article of this time, "Theorizing cyberspace", Ananda Mitra and Erik Watts (Mitra & Watts 2002) called attention to the ways in which the Internet's formal characteristics could increase the possibilities for inclusion and contribute to the levelling of communication power relations. They framed the Internet era in terms of the "resuscitation of voice" (ibid. 486) and pointed to the "liberating and empowering characteristics" of cyberspace (ibid.). They furthermore called attention to how this ecological change could help bring about a change in power relations between the core and the periphery, as the Internet makes it "impossible to locate the centre" (ibid. 487).

Similar accounts of the Internet – and "cyberspace", as it was very often called – were numerous around this time of academic theorizing on the *ecology of interactivity*. They did seem to be especially prevalent, however, in those parts of the literature that overused various constructions of "cyber" in the book titles – Cyber*culture* (cf. Bell & Kennedy 2000), Cyber*society* (cf. Jones 1994; Jones 1998), and *Communities* in cyberspace (Smith & Kollock 1999). But this was also a reoccurring feature within those parts of the literature that had a preference for combining the words "Internet" and/or "virtual" with various forms of "culture" : *Internet culture* (Porter 1997), *cultures of the Internet* (Kiesler 1997; Shields 1996), *virtual culture* (Jones 1997), *virtual* politics (Holmes 1997).

Not all of the above-mentioned publications made very explicit references to the work of Marshall McLuhan. On the other hand, a large number of researchers and authors actually made a particular effort to revive McLuhan's ideas for analysing the emerging *ecology of interactivity*. Gary Genosko's critical and thought-provoking reading of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard (Genosko 1999) is one such example. In his book, Genosko mainly addressed the intellectual interconnections between McLuhan and Baudrillard, but he also notes the renaissance of McLuhan's writing and points to his usefulness for understanding the ecology of interactivity: "What I am suggesting is that the McLuhan renaissance is at home in the well-established consonance between postmodernism and late capitalism" (Genosko 1999:9). Another example was Jay Bolter's and Richard Grusin's work on remediation (Bolter & Grusin 1999; Bolter 2000). While aware of the deficits of McLuhan's theories, they clearly pay him homage when they explain their notion of remediation, which certainly echoes of McLuhan's medium theory:

> [R]emediation refers to the way in which new digital media refashion prior media forms. Digital media like computer graphics, virtual reality and the web define themselves by borrowing from, paying homage to, critiquing and refashioning their predecessors, principally television, film, photography, and painting, but also print (Grusin 2000:48).

This early theorizing of emerging digital media in general and the Internet (in its Web 1.0 version) in particular was not uncontested at the time (cf. Robins 1996; Robins & Webster 1999). Considering the obvious similarities between this approach, and the medium theoretical ideas that inspired McLuhan's analysis of the *ecology of broadcasting*, it comes as no surprise that the criticism against analyses claiming thorough cultural transformation simply through the application of interactive media was quite similar in nature. Hence, parts of this criticism were aimed at the lack of attention paid to the fact that all media are embedded in and dependent upon "off-line" social, political and economical circumstances. One obvious example was Gerald Sussman's analysis of emerging digital technologies, in which he argued that: "Communication technologies are extensions of opportunity within the rules of the political economy that control the allocation of resources in society. It is naive or worse to believe that computers […] can bring about new forms of economic, social, or political relationships" (Sussman 1997:285). Other parts of this criticism called attention to the need for additional empirical analyses of users:

> Responses to, or consequences of, technological innovation […] cannot be assumed at an abstract level of analysis. They require close examination at the point of connection with concrete day-to-day situations that social subjects inhabit and make meaningful (Moores 2000: 59).

Despite this incisive criticism, I would argue that it was mainly another factor that contributed to calibrating these early ideas about a new media ecology materializing through the Internet: the fact that the Internet itself, as well as the inflated discourses about its transformative potential, became subject to the critical re-interpretation and questioning of fairly conventional research. I have covered this development elsewhere, with a special emphasis on the parts of the research literature that have focussed on the Internet's political implication (Olsson 2007; Miegel & Olsson 2010), and in this context it suffices to say that these more conventional studies of the Internet and its potential social, cultural, and political implications moderated the initial, McLuhan-like analyses of the Internet's transformative potential (cf. Meikle 2002; Norris 2002; Warschauer 2003; de Jong et al. 2004; Latham & Sassen 2005).

The Ecology of Participation – Theorizing the Web 2.0

Sometimes history seems to repeat itself surprisingly quickly. Conventional research had hardly managed to start deflating the inflated discourse on the transformative potential of the *ecology of interactivity* (Web 1.0) when a very similar – and equally inflated – discourse was (re-)invented, only this time pointing to the new, "improved" Internet, the *Web 2.0.* Even though I would argue that the buzz about Web 2.0 features started to emerge already in the early 2000s, with the advent of additional networking spaces and the popularization of the weblog (blog), it was not until 2005 that the idea of Web 2.0 was properly formulated in writing (O'Reilly 2005).

Tim O'Reilly's definition of Web 2.0 was mainly a description of the "improved" Web's technical features. His description included ideas about the Web as a technological platform, about lightweight programming models, and thoughts about the end of the software release circle. Nevertheless, he also pointed to social and/or cultural features that were offered by this – seemingly – new and more interactive web. He wrote about it as a "richer user experience", and, above all, about the fact that Web 2.0 makes us better able to "harness collective intelligence". It is also this latter aspect that has become the most preeminent basis for the theorizing on what I will refer to here as the *ecology of participation*.

The shift from the notion of *ecology of interactivity* to the notion of *ecology of participation* has been given special attention in theoretical conceptualizations that connect the Internet to concepts such as *participatory culture* (Deuze 2006; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins & Deuze 2008) and/or *convergence culture* (Jenkins 2006b). Both concepts have in common the fact that they stress the importance of more interactive web technology in creating the cultural infrastructure necessary for users' active participation in various forms of co-production (typically exemplified by applications such as You Tube, Twitter, Blogs) and social networking (through applications such as Facebook) on the Internet.

In order to dig somewhat deeper into the theories of participatory culture and convergence culture, Henry Jenkins' widely read and cited book "Convergence Culture" is a good case in point (Jenkins 2006b).[4] In his book, Jenkins – who every now and then is popularly referred to as the McLuhan of web-based media – initially states that within most analyses the concept of convergence has become affiliated with "structural features" of the digitalizing media landscape, i.e. it has most often been analysed in terms of its technological (Baldwin *et al.* 1996) and economical (McChesney 1999) dimensions. Departing from this insight, Jenkins goes on to argue for the need to pay further heed to the fact that convergence must also be considered as a cultural shift. In Jenkins' view, the cultural shift taking place within the current participatory media ecology includes a renegotiation of the relationship between producers and consumers. Today, Jenkins argues, processes of media consumption and media production have become intertwined in unprecedented ways. Within this still emerging *convergence culture,* media users (or consumers) become activated. They even become activated to the point that they appear as prod-users *(sic!)* of media content. Furthermore, the users are no longer making use of media in an isolated manner. Instead, they are perceived as constructive actors involved in collaborative media practices together with other users as well as original producers. This latter idea also paves the way for the concept of *participatory culture* – convergence culture is a culture that is made up of audiences/users participating in communal co-construction of content. Jenkins writes:

> Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules [...] (Jenkins 2006b: 3).

This is also intimately connected to the notion of *collective intelligence,* a term that Jenkins borrows from Pierre Levy (1997, cited in Jenkins 2006b), which underscores the power inherent in the fact that a large number of people, each of whom has some specific knowledge, have a large collective body of knowledge when they come together in communal activities.

The three concepts – convergence culture, participatory culture, collective intelligence – are obviously closely connected to one another in terms of content. What is specifically interesting in this context, however, is the fact that they are also theoretically glued together by digital, Internet-based media. The media ecology of participation, as it is analysed by Henry Jenkins and others, is substantiated by the infrastructure offered by digital media, especially as they come in an improved Web 2.0 shape.

Comparing the theorizing of media *ecology of participation* to the theorizing referred to above (*ecology of broadcasting* and *ecology of interactivity*), there are at least two things worth commenting on in this context. First, there are obvious similarities between the ways in which these different notions have been developed. The notion of a convergence/participatory culture is also largely based on formal interpretations of technological capabilities. This is certainly underscored by the fact that one of the key terms, collective intelligence, has been borrowed from cybernetics, but it is also made specifically evident by the way in which the new, emerging culture is considered to be built upon, and dependent on, dominant features in digital media technologies. Second, there is also a difference between them. As part of the efforts to theorize the ecology of participation, the authors seem to be more careful about avoiding obviously deterministic positions. Hence, despite similarities in their overall arguments about the transformative potential of media, the latter authors are less likely to use too overtly generalizing formulations about reconfigurations of users and/or technological impacts on culture.

Conclusion: Producing Participators, or Production of Participation?

Considering the connections between theories aimed at describing the ecology of participation and previous attempts to characterize the ecologies of broadcasting and interactivity, it comes as no surprise that also this latter notion has come to be subject to fairly similar criticism – though only very recently. For instance, concerning the perspective's views on the "user as producer" and/or the user as part of a "participatory culture", José Van Dijck (Van Dijck 2009; Van Dijck & Nieborg 2009) has elaborated on a number of critical – and well-spotted – weaknesses within this notion:

> There are several assumptions implied in the notion of participatory culture […]. First, the concept of user is often bolstered by a deceptive opposition between the passive recipient, couched in the rhetoric of "old media", and the active participant cast ideally as someone who is well-versed in the skills of "new" media. Second, participation refers to citizens and community activists as well as to people who deploy their skills and talents towards a common cause. Yet can terms such as "communities" and "(cultural) citizenship" be unequivocally transferred to internet communities? And third, now that citizens have become creators and arbiters of media content, what role do platform providers play in steering the agency of users and communities? (Van Dijck 2009: 43)

Van Dijck's first point is important in that it points to the fact that a kind of stereotyping of different user generations is taking place. Within the notion of participatory culture (and/or convergence culture), the users of "old media" are stereotyped as a passive audience, as merely consumers of what is on offer. The users of digital, "participatory" media, however, are equally stereotyped, but as hyperactive, reflexive, co-producing users. Meanwhile, it does not demand that much in terms of analytical fantasy to realize that it was perfectly possible to be both active and critical in previous media ecologies, just as much as it is equally possible to be passive in the new, digital one. For instance, despite all the participatory buzz about YouTube, exactly how participatory is it to browse through clips on YouTube on a regular weekday evening? And what about Facebook – another application that is typically connected to various Web 2.0-related notions: What kind of participation is involved in looking for and exchanging short messages with old friends from pre-school? Van Dijck's second point calls for a more general reflection concerning the fuzzy term "participation" itself. When pondering about a culture of participation, it becomes fairly important to dig deeper into the very notion "participation": What counts, actually, as participation? What contexts of participation are we talking about? Are all kinds of participation equally good? These questions, and a number of similar ones, are left conspicuously unanswered in the theorizing on the ecology of participation.

Van Dijck's third point – "now that citizens have become creators and arbiters of media content, what role do platform providers play in steering the agency of users and communities?" – indicates a new direction. It reminds us that, despite the fact that the media ecology of participation offers potential inclusion, participation – and voice – to everyday users acting as *disorganized Internet producers* (or "everyday prod-users"), there are still *organized producers*[5] out there, who make use of various combinations of, for instance, economic, discursive, and marketing resources in preparing websites, web platforms, or other kinds of venues for everyday users' supposedly participatory (and more productive) media use. This raises a number of interesting questions: What does it mean for "participation" that the very platforms on which participatory practices are being played out are in fact handed down to "prod-users" by various organized interests? In this context, it is also very useful to allude to an observation by media sociologist Nico Carpentier, when he calls attention to the fact that also "web 2.0 technologies (just like any other technology) can be perfectly used in a top-down non-participatory way" (Carpentier 2010). Or to put it another way: (Organized) Producers, with a capital "P", are not necessarily that easily overthrown by disorganized everyday bloggers, twitterers, Facebookers, or textual poachers.

This also leads to the tension in the question in this section's heading: Can contemporary media ecology be understood as an ecology that offers unprecedented freedom for producing participators? Or should it rather be understood as an ecology in which various forms of user participation are in fact produced – or even manufactured – by organized interests? In essence, the question points all the way back to classical issues in social science concerning structure vs. agency, individual freedom vs. freedom constraints, the power of producers vs. the power of users, etc. Hence, it is impossible to give a straightforward answer here. But what we do know for sure at this point, not least in light of the theorizing on previous media ecologies (that of broadcasting and that of interactivity), is that it is very important both to ask and to critically discuss such issues in relation to developing ecologies. In any case, this is undoubtedly important if we wish to actually analyse rather than just mythologize their potential implications.

Notes

1. This article is based on the author's presentation at NordMedia09 in Karlstad 13-15 August 2009. The session theme was "'Dig IT or Not': Are We Addicted to the Media". The ideas presented in the paper draw on the author's current research activities within the project "Organized Producers of Young Net Cultures: Actors, Practices, Ambitions", which is funded by the Swedish Knowledge Foundation (2009-2013).
2. For example:
   > Electronic man loses touch with the concept of a ruling centre as well as the restraints of social rules based on interconnection. Hierarchies constantly dissolve and reform (McLuhan & Powers 1989:92).
3. For example:
   > The immediate prospect for literate, fragmented Western man encountering the electric implosion within his own culture is his steady and rapid transformation into a complex and depth-structured person emotionally aware of his total interdependence with the rest of human society. […] Fragmented, literate, and visual individualism is not possible in an electrically patterned and imploded society (McLuhan 1964:50-51).
4. In this part of the text, I draw on (and aim at summarizing) Jenkins' main ideas in a short but – hopefully – comprehensible way. I mainly depart from the book *Convergence Culture*, but also use other pieces of his writings. This format means that I cannot refer to specific pages at all times, but Jenkins' own introduction (p. 1-24) and his conclusion (p. 240-260) in *Convergence* Culture (2006) can be considered useful reading for anyone interested in recapturing his main arguments.
5. *Organized producers* is a tentative conceptualization that the research project (Organized Producers of Young Net Cultures: Actors, Practices, Ambitions) upon which this article is based aims at starting to develop through a number of empirical studies of various institutions producing web content for (mainly) young people. Hence, at this early phase of our research, I need to allow myself to be somewhat sketchy in my definition of the very concept itself. It is, in essence, the project's theoretical ambition to further develop this concept. It can initially be interpreted, however, as the opposite of everyday users' producing activities as *disorganized producers*. Thus far, these latter practices have been very much in focus in the discourses on participatory and/or convergence culture.

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