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12. Identifying the Interests of Digital Users as Audiences, Consumers, Workers, and Publics

Sonia Livingstone

Introduction—Why Consider Users?

I was asked to act as discussant on the chapters by Greg Downey, Tarleton Gillespie, Chris Kelty, and Steven Jackson as if we were all together at a conference. Conference delegates—like most audiences—listen for a purpose, relating what they hear to their prior standpoint. You, too, as my reader, start from somewhere particular, doubtless wondering what I have to say. While all the chapters in this volume are concerned with the shifting relations among communication technologies, social practices, and institutions of power—put simply, with how to imagine what the Internet could and should be (Mansell 2012)—I shall contrast their various conceptions of the ordinary person whose interests are so vitally at stake in the digital era. Should you be used to regarding the producer as more important than the consumer, the text more subtle than its various actualizations by readers, or the technology more fascinating than its uses, then I hope to persuade you that the study of media, communication, and information technologies should always address the activities of users in context. Only thus can we uncover the social shaping and social consequences of the digital (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006).

My degree of linguistic artifice—encoded by the nineteenth-century novelist through a direct address to the “dear reader”—signals that, as a reader of these four chapters, addressing the reader of this text, I hope to illuminate the reader or user of digital technologies more generally. In my own work, I have examined the interpretative agency of television audiences (Livingstone 1998), their contested relations with publics (Livingstone 2005), and the fraught ways they are framed as citizens or consumers in policy discourses (Lunt and Livingstone 2012). Given this horizon of expectations (Jauss 1982), you will not be surprised that I am interested in how these conceptions of the ordinary person (itself no simple idea [Thumim 2012]) resonate or contrast

across the four chapters, implicitly or explicitly, in ways that are important for our analysis of the communication process.

But where, you may ask, are the readers or users in the chapter? Surely Downey is concerned with the too-often invisible information laborers, Gillespie with complex algorithms of which the users have never even heard, Kelty with grand questions of freedom and coercion, and Jackson with those who repair broken technologies and technological infrastructures. I suggest that although their starting points lie with the sociotechnical systems that modern globalized societies are so vigorously building, the authors are each, in different ways, concerned with the messy realities of everyday life, with what is visible or invisible, transparent or opaque in the emerging domain of digital infrastructures. Most important, each has a vision of the user (reader) in the digital era, as I shall unpack here. Moreover, each fears that the implied reader (user) of their own text risks underestimating how the interests of digital users are losing out in the unequal struggle that they—and we—are engaged in. The collective noun each chapter chooses to foreground this struggle is, I suggest, productive for future analysis.

User as Proletariat

Digital communication relies on the essential yet routinely underestimated work of “human ‘information labor,’” argues Downey, in chapter 8 of this volume. We google a question and the answer “comes up.” We check Amazon for something to buy and helpful recommendations are instantly at our service. We tell our students to research a new topic and the task seems effortless. But as Downey rightly observes, this apparent cornucopia is only possible because of an invisible army of coders, selectors, translators, and other new intermediaries. And because we can’t see them, we naively acknowledge that neither their efforts (thereby colluding in their exploitation) nor their motivations—or, more accurately, the motivations of their employers—are available to our critical scrutiny (thereby undermining our media literacy). What are these workers doing? Downey offers three case studies that reveal the ordinary lives of these hidden laborers who do what he calls “jumping context”—ensuring the efficient distribution of meanings from producer to consumer that is essential to the exercise of power. Calling for wider recognition of this work, Downey appeals to the media-literate teacher and the cultural critic who worry first about the students who, being “digital natives” beguiled by the ease of modern interfaces that “free” them from the effort of finding information, lack the critical literacy to evaluate what they find, and worry second about those who find themselves co-opted to the invisible workforce of the information laborer (via crowdsourcing, produsage, or other forms of “free labor,” as Tiziana Terranova [2000] has termed it). Somewhat contentiously, Downey includes both his students and those scholars excited

by the potential for amateur, playful, alternative, or flexible uses of the digital environment not only in the former but also in the latter category.

Presumably following Adorno and Horkheimer's (1977) post-Marxist analysis of "the culture industry," Downey implies that the two are linked—the user as consumer is served by the user as worker; indeed, the user as consumer by night is, precisely, the user as worker by day. "We" either fall into this trap too or we must stand sternly apart and, indeed, seek their rescue. In the face of hidden exploitation and imminent struggle, as critics, we must promote resistance (Downey gives the example of the Occupy movement as a possible direction, though history will judge whether this is a sufficient or effective form of resistance). As teachers, we must make the task of interpretation harder, not easier, for our students, deconstructing the interface and revealing its illegibility behind its apparent legibility; here Downey mobilizes a particular version of media literacy, aligned with those for whom media represent all-powerful, profit-driven, ideologically exploitative institutions that promote pernicious values to their audiences. Other conceptions of media literacy, which see no going back from today's thorough-going and ubiquitous mediated environment, aim less to teach people to defend against the media and more to engage with and productively harness whatever media power they can appropriate for themselves and those they may speak for (Frau-Meigs and Torrent 2009; Hobbs 2010). The irony is that, for the first conception of media, raising individuals' media literacy has proven to be a weak (though worthy) tool. Possibly, there is more political potential for the second conception, insofar as its focus is not to counter the power of media owners, but rather to harness the power of the media so as to reach the ears of the national or international state and regulatory bodies that have power over them (as in media reform or digital rights movements).

Users as Publics

Readers and users can be more or less obscured by theory, although they are omnipresent come what may. Of the four chapters, I had the least work to do in discerning their role in Gillespie's chapter for, although hardly signaled by a title about algorithms, users are at the center of his concern with relevance. Algorithms, he argues, represent a new "knowledge logic," one that is displacing the editorial logic of the print era (and, perhaps, the call for much of the exploited labor which worries Downey?). To whom or what is this new logic relevant? To "our participation in public life" (see chapter 9). In other words, to us as democratic citizens, now divided less (or not only) by inequalities in the labor market or new stratifications introduced by globalization, but rather by all the matters that divide citizens—opinions, perspectives, visions of the good society. Thus, Gillespie asks, how are the criteria by which we analyze and judge public participation changed in the digital era? In the print era, where arguably Jürgen Habermas's ([1962] 1989)

theory of the public sphere best captured the ideals of public participation, critics concerned themselves with questions of inclusion, trust, deliberation, rationality, and the public good. But in the digital era, we are faced with vast and largely inaccessible databases built on unaccountable practices of selection, encoding, “cleaning,” “the promise of objectivity,” and, perhaps most fascinating, the recursive re-presentation of a “calculated” public back to itself (it being no longer the Times letters page but personally tailored Facebook “likes” that tell us whether others think as we do).

Gillespie addresses “us” as citizen-users, as publics (and this is my preferred approach; see Livingstone 2005, and Lunt and Livingstone 2012). But his fear is that we have already been sold, over our heads, for calculated publics that are far from organic (see networked publics, Ito 2008); rather, they are the means by which users are transformed into a commodity and sold to advertisers. The parallel with Ien Ang’s (1990) analysis of the television ratings industry is strong and, like Ang, in chapter 9 Gillespie points to “the slippage between the anticipated user and the user themselves.” But while Ang was deeply pessimistic about the television and marketing industry, she had more faith that the complexities of everyday life escape the raters’ scrutiny—and thus their data, and inferences drawn from it, are flawed. Like Ang, Gillespie is guided by the findings of media ethnographies, a welcome inclusion in a volume on science and technology studies; but his concern is, rightly, greater. For while he agrees that everyday complexities undermine the validity of the “big data” so excitedly being captured by the industry (boyd and Crawford 2012), by contrast with television, the Internet industry feeds its “findings” back to us as users immediately, relentlessly, and persuasively. How can I not fall for the conceit that my weekly Facebook update reveals my popularity? And how far can we, as citizens, be properly skeptical of the ubiquitous yet insidious re-presentation of public discourse and political interests presented to us by Web 2.0?

Users and Humanity

Where Downey and Gillespie debate the politics of workers, users, and publics in the digital age, Kelty frames his concerns in ethical terms, attempting to move beyond the familiar polarization of freedom versus control (or exploitation) in order to examine “how new technologies change the meaning of freedom itself” (chapter 10, this volume). Kelty elegantly complicates Isaiah Berlin’s (1958) familiar distinction between negative freedom (“freedom from” interference) and positive freedom (“freedom to” be a self-directed agent) by observing that negative freedom, commonly associated with libertarian ideas of the Internet, conveys a particular vision of liberty whose hostility to state intervention in the private sphere (including markets and the lifeworld) ends up “forcing a particular kind of liberty on others.” In other words, the protection of negative freedoms becomes, necessarily, the

promotion of positive freedoms also: as Kelty notes, having advocated for freedoms from intervention or control, “it is an easy step to suggest that others be coerced in their own interests, that we know what they need better than they do themselves.” In relation to the Internet, this paradox is often overlooked because, while government interventions are often noticeable and therefore contested, “the creation and dissemination of technologies that coerce us and that interfere with our goals” tends to operate under the radar of critical scrutiny. Yet, as ever more aspects of our civic, personal, and intellectual lives become digitally mediated (Hepp 2012), these questions of design and implementation become all the more important, the point being not to push back against imposing forces but rather to recognize the subtleties of coercion “by design” (recall Gillespie’s concern about the obscurity of algorithms).

You may ask, my dear reader, where is the user in all of this? By contrast with Downey’s user-as-laborer or Gillespie’s user-as-public, Kelty’s user is the most elevated, for it is all humanity: the user who has the right to be free, the user who desires to dictate the freedoms of others, the user who, in Berlin’s terms, wishes “to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes which are my own” (quoted in Kelty, chapter 10)—and, now, to do so on the Internet. Yet paradoxically, by underestimating the power of technological design, it is precisely this user who, in the digital era, risks falling for “a specious disguise for brutal tyranny” (Berlin, quoted in chapter 10). Yet as scholars we do believe that we know better what is in the interests of users (indeed, of humanity): Kelty’s history of the personal computer reveals a driving belief in human emancipation—that technology can deliver “a particular vision of positive liberty: creativity, constructive learning, expressive communication, the ability to think unconstrained, like an artist or a scientist.” Unsurprisingly, then, where Downey calls for media literacy, perhaps enabling technologically mediated protest, and where Gillespie calls for transparency in the workings of algorithms, Kelty asks users to become designers, for “our very ability to become free depends on our ability to design it into our technologies.”

Users as Carers: Ethical Users

Jackson’s vision—combining politics and ethics—is one of entropy (Arnheim 1971), of a world relentlessly falling apart, notwithstanding the incessant but only temporarily successful efforts of another invisible army of workers to rebuild and repair. Elegantly illustrating his argument with an image of a once-glamorous ocean liner being dismantled and stripped by Bangladeshi shipbreakers, Jackson’s argument takes a step beyond Downey’s emphasis on what is now called the problem of “the last mile” (which, as broadband providers worry today, is the most troublesome and expensive). For while Downey’s messenger boys were essential to completing the communicative

process, Jackson's shipbreakers, who not only strip but also repurpose the salvageable parts of the ship, play a necessary (if not-very-powerful, and certainly unsung) role. Their literal acts of recycling illustrate the cyclic (rather than linear) relation between producer and user in digital communication. Still, though the energy is the workers who power the process, its direction and influence is determined by the producers.

Jackson draws on Star and Strauss's (1999) analysis of the role of articulation in sustaining sociotechnical infrastructures (by supporting "the smooth interaction of parts" within the whole), but his emphasis on repair is devoted to sustaining not altering the communication process. His Bangladeshi shipbreakers seem not to deviate or cheat on their task, nor do they strike. Similarly, I first thought Downey's "jumping context" to be akin to what anthropologists call the "re-appropriation" of meaning from one context to the next (Miller 1987), or what cultural studies analyses call the "circuit of culture," linking political economy and lived culture (Hall 1999; Johnson 1986). But, more Frankfurt School than cultural or consumption studies, Downey's messenger boys appear to have no agency in the process that absorbs them. Yet Stuart Hall's analysis of articulation (for example, between encoding and decoding; Hall 1980) posits a far from smooth interaction, instead pointing to a site of struggle over the determination of meaning. Thus a focus on the (re)production and circulation of meanings (rather than just their distribution) would ask not only how the messenger boys fit into the system of communication that relied on them but also whether their labor shaped or altered, to some degree, the nature and outcome of the communicative flow, indeed, of the circuit of culture. Just as one wonders further about the lives of Jackson's shipbreakers, one might also ask not only what the messengers were paid (not enough!) or where they put their hat and coat, but also whether they ever lost or altered or even destroyed the messages they were entrusted to carry. One might also ask who could not afford to send a message, whether there were places they couldn't or wouldn't deliver to, and whether they organized any protest against their treatment.

How shall we value the work of these unsung workers and users? Where Downey offers a political vision of an exploitative labor market underpinning our ubiquitously enjoyed communication apps, Jackson is more humanistic, arguing that repair "fills in the moment of hope and fear in which bridges from old worlds to new worlds are built, and the continuity of order, value, and meaning gets woven, one tenuous thread at a time" (chapter 11, this volume). Just as Daniel Miller (1998) argues that shopping—profitable to be sure for the supermarkets—is also an act of love by those taking food home to their families, Jackson analyzes everyday activities of recycling and repair (which are certainly commonplace in any domestic setting for digital media use; Livingstone 2002) as "the subtle acts of care by which order and meaning . . . are maintained and transformed." The last mile may pose the greatest challenge for the provider, but to any domestic user, that's when the invisible tasks really begin. Siting, installing, connecting, updating, customizing, and

repairing are all everyday tasks associated with digital technologies, and in completing these, the circuit is not neatly completed but, rather, significantly reshaped: manufacturers' instructions are not followed, manuals are discarded, complex functionality is underused, and workarounds, hacks, and other fixes are endemic (Bakardjieva 2005).

Research on everyday uses and abuses of technology has long sought to counter the "productivist bias" of the field that worries Jackson. To advance his "repair-centered ethics," even "a standpoint epistemology of repair," why not start at home, adding users to his list of "neglected" people in the social history of technology? Complementing the dominant focus on innovation and distribution, Jackson in chapter 11 usefully invites consideration of other dimensions of the social life of objects, including unnoticed forms of labor, alternative relations of power and, his main focus, an ethics of care surrounding the embedding of technological objects in our lives. Yet these can only come into focus if we transcend linear conceptions of technological innovation, and binary contrasts between producers and consumers—hence the value of cyclic thinking. However, can an ethic of care suffice to counter the forces of entropy by which all that we humans create continuously degrades, decays, and disappears? And what of the capitalist effort to profit even from these acts of repair (consider the repair shops springing up on every high street, the profits now discovered in "green" businesses, and, of course, the motivations of the Bangladeshi shipbreakers' employers)? I think this might be Downey's reply to Jackson.

Conclusion

In his brilliant dissection of literature, Umberto Eco (1984) showed there is always an implied reader, conceived by Eco as the combination of textual (or design) features that hail, inscribe, and presume familiarity with the knowledge and interests of the reader. In this short commentary, I have sought to reveal both the reader of this volume (including myself), in order to highlight the differences of position that we are, together, debating, but also, more important, the user (today's reader) of digital technologies (as conceived, or implied, by our four authors). From my perspective, it is crucial to recognize that, as first audience reception and then media ethnography have shown, implied readers do not always map precisely onto empirical readers; preferred readings encoded into a text are not always decoded as anticipated; and media products can be surprisingly, even resistantly appropriated by "ordinary people" with, sometimes, problematic consequences for their authors, designers, and producers (Bakardjieva 2005; Silverstone 2006). Undoubtedly, even acting collectively the public generally lacks the power to counter the meanings imposed by global media corporations. Nor, typically, is it aware of the conservative meanings embedded in the texts and technologies that surround its members. Yet communication is inherently co-constructed,

often unpredictable, and thoroughly embedded in the particular contexts that, in turn, help shape its direction and outcome. As reception theorist Wolfgang Iser elegantly explains, “as the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion too” (1980, 106).

So, readers and viewers, audiences and publics, users and consumers—call them what you will—are not dutifully positioned at the end of a well-planned chain of control, from innovation to production to marketing and diffusion and, finally, obedient receipt of the goods or meanings on offer. In this commentary, I have built on the text-reader metaphor of cultural studies, social semiotics, and reception aesthetics (Hall 1980; Hodge and Kress 1988; and Iser 1980, respectively) as extended to theorize the user of new media technologies (Livingstone 2004; Woolgar 1996). The concepts of reader and user permit recognition of agency, but they tend to underplay the significance of collectivities. When positioning agents, individual or aggregated, within a larger frame, the choice of collective noun matters, for different terms mobilize different discourses, point to different opportunity structures, prioritize different interests.

Faced with encroaching world domination by the major technology companies, our four authors are all rather pessimistic. Yet in an endorsement of user agency, each in his different way also issues a call to action—to users in general, and to us as critical scholars in particular. So how pessimistic should we be? We might retort to Gillespie that, just as readers in the print era dominated by the editorial logic could still differentiate Fox News from The New York Times, and viewers generally trust public service news on television more than commercial services, so too are Internet users striving to upgrade their digital literacy, while also finding that longstanding forms of critical literacy still stand them in good stead. Consider the example of Jackson’s consumer revolt against Apple’s abandonment of green recycling or, more modestly, the common view that Wikipedia is good for uncontentious facts but not for an election campaign update. Yet no simple overthrow of power, no straightforward celebration of user agency is plausible. Returning us to the circuit of culture, ever more complexly renegotiated at each site of articulation, Gillespie observes the “recursive loop” by which, “as these algorithms have nestled into people’s daily lives . . . , users shape and rearticulate the algorithms they encounter . . . [and then, in turn] algorithms impinge on how people seek information, how they perceive and think about the contours of knowledge, and how they understand themselves in and through public discourse” (chapter 9). So, although the circuit depends on users for its completion, and although their agency (or, as some would have it, the social contexts that condition their actions) render the circuit unpredictable, open to a measure of resistance even, this does not mean the circuit is led by—or works primarily in the interests of—the users.

Indeed, as Roger Silverstone (2006) stressed, drawing on Michel de Certeau (1984), it is not often that the tactics of everyday life (what Gillespie

calls the tactics of “obfuscation”) succeed in circumventing or redirecting the strategies of established power. And the more media-literate the users become (as Downey hopes), the more those who stand to gain by “reading” the user will strive to stay ahead (Jenkins 2003). Yet, significantly, any optimism about countering the power of the major corporations (conceived in terms of labor management, algorithms, or design) calls on users as publics to demand what matters to the public sphere—inclusion, transparency, accountability, redress, fair representation, and so on. All of these were fought for in previous eras, through public discourse, and through legislative struggles, the establishment of regulators, and even the courts. For the most part, these are fights yet to be held in the digital era, though early instances are already mounting. Inevitably they will pitch the nation-state, speaking for its citizens, against globalized corporations, in a complex and compromised negotiation of interests as part of a new and increasingly transnational struggle over the determination of knowledge. Within this struggle, the user as worker, citizen, and ethical human being has a vital part to play.

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