

# S. Elizabeth Bird

## ARE WE ALL PRODUSERS NOW?

### Convergence and media audience practices

*This article offers a critical analysis of the relevance of convergence culture to the field of media audience study, opening up new ways to see audiences as active cultural producers. At the same time, I argue that the enthusiastic embrace of Web 2.0 practices as the new model of audience activity may hinder a full understanding not only of the importance of non-web-based audience practices, especially in non-Western countries, but also of the continuing power of media industries.*

**Keywords** audience practices; media power; Web 2.0; convergence

#### Introduction

Mediated 'convergence culture' has been described in several ways (Knight and Weedon 2009), and a common understanding of the term is still emerging. However, the point of agreement for many scholars is that the rise of digital media, specifically the Web 2.0 environment, has profoundly changed the everyday interactions people have with media today (Nightingale and Dwyer 2007). As Gross (2009) writes, 'web-based media have made multidirectional, audience-generated communication a reality, giving citizens the opportunity to join the party as producers rather than merely consumers . . . the topdown tyranny of the media has been effectively challenged' (p. 67). Jenkins' (2006) use of Bruns' (2005, 2006) term 'produser', representing the merging of the producer and consumer in an interactive environment, has been widely embraced as representing an entirely new way of seeing the media 'audience'.

From a position as a media audience scholar, I want to explore some questions raised by this new model of audience participation. These include: Is the media-creating, Internet-savvy produser indeed the new norm for media consumption? Has the emphasis on Web 2.0 crowded out considerations of other mediated practices and activities? And what are the important issues of power and control that need to be addressed in the Web 2.0 environment? These

questions are relevant not only in the West, where Internet penetration is intense, but also on a global scale, where completely different media environments may present both gross inequalities and unexpected creative opportunities.

## Audiences as interactive fans

The notion of the ‘active audience’<sup>1</sup> of course predates the current understanding of ‘convergence’; there is now a significant literature demonstrating the myriad ways people engage with all kinds of media, from talk about and around media to actually reworking media messages by creating fan fiction, zines, and so on. Scholars, myself included (Bird 1992) have long explored ‘intertextuality’, through which audience engagement with one medium is enhanced and amplified through others (e.g. tabloids/TV/movies/fan clubs and so on). Devoted ‘fan’ activity was just one of the many ways people were seen to be actively engaging with media.

More recently, however, the once despised fan has moved to centre stage in audience studies, led by the early work of Jenkins (1992), and burgeoning with the rise of digital interactivity. As defined by Bruns (2006) the ‘produser’ phenomenon is specific to the Web 2.0 environment, representing ‘the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement. Key examples for such produsage can be seen in the collaborative development of open source software, the distributed multi-user spaces of the *Wikipedia*, or the user-led innovation and content production in multi-user online games’ (p. 2). Jenkins (2006) more explicitly equated ‘produsage’ with fan activity, as fans were able not only to communicate amongst themselves about media but also to participate in the creation of digital content, problematizing further the notion of the audience (Livingstone 2003).

Thus convergent media have been hailed as creating a ‘cultural shift’, which has realigned the roles of audiences and producers in profoundly new ways. Furthermore, Jenkins (2007) argues that online fans essentially represent the way all audiences will interact with media from now on, an attractive notion that created a moment of optimism reminiscent of that which followed the discovery of the ‘active audience’ in the late 1980s. Nikunen (2007) refers to this as the ‘fanification’ of the audience (p. 111). Evidence abounds that fans in particular and new, connected audiences in general can be and are extremely active (see e.g. Bailey 2002, Cover 2004, Shefrin 2004). The new conception of the active, participating audience member has been widely discussed not only in the academic literature but also (maybe even more) in the popular press and trade book market (Lessig 2004, Tapscott and Williams 2006), culminating in 2006 when *Time* magazine named ‘you’ its Person of the Year, celebrating the power of ordinary people to change the world through convergent media.

The notion that, armed with the tools of digital media, we will all eventually act like producer fans may be appealing, and has produced some exciting and original work. However, I believe the equation of audience practices with one specific type of activity – online fandom – has the potential to stifle a richer understanding of continuing audience activity. First, it is very clear that the majority of people, whether by choice or access to time and resources, are not producers. When I studied the decidedly uncool fans of the TV show *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman* (Bird 2003), I was delighted with the creativity, enthusiasm and even erudition displayed by the online community, who wrote fiction, did video mashups, organized protests and had remarkable discussions on everything from morality to western literature and history. However, I frequently had to remind myself that the show was being watched by several million people each week. Of those, a few thousand joined the fan communities, and of those, maybe a few hundred participated regularly in the many fan activities. Many more probably watched the show passionately and thought and talked about it – but they are invisible unless we look for them. Others no doubt watched occasionally but reserved their passion for some other media form. In our embrace of the producer, we should not lose sight of the more mundane, internalized, even passive articulation with media that characterizes a great deal of media consumption – and I believe it will continue to do so.

Indeed, Van Dijck (2009) cites an ‘an emerging rule of thumb’ that suggests only one in a hundred people will be active online content producers, with 10 ‘interacting’ by commenting, and the remaining 89 simply viewing. And this simple numeric assessment does not address the nature of the interaction, which can be wildly variable. For instance, in a class project for my graduate media anthropology class, student Mike Repici (2008), looked at two online video contests launched by the bands Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails, both of which had created very direct relationships with their fans through their ‘download and pay what you can’ method of selling their latest album. After the self release of *Ghosts*, Nine Inch Nails front man Trent Reznor issued a call for user-generated videos to accompany the songs on the album: ‘This isn’t a contest and you don’t win elaborate prizes. [...] It’s meant to be an experiment in collaboration and a chance for us to interact beyond the typical one-way artist-to-fan relationship’ (Jones 2008). The contest was issued in collaboration with Google and YouTube, but as Repici writes, ‘there was nothing standing between the artist and the consumer’. His analysis of the postings described a very small number of people who actually posted creative videos, a few more who commented critically, but a much larger number who simply posted brief, often incomprehensible comments that showed ‘no indication of any focused thought process’, but were banal, profane and remarkably uninteresting.

Repici contrasted this with Radiohead’s contest, which was not run through a mainstream site like YouTube, but through Aniboom, a site for animation fans and producers. Their contest required the production of animated videos, and offered a \$10,000 prize. As might be expected, not only

were the entries more sophisticated, but the commentary was of a totally different quality, comprising complex arguments and discussion. The point is not that one approach was better or worse, but that the kind of user-generated content and audience participation was completely different – yet we tend to lump all participatory activity as similar evidence of a revolutionary change in our relationship with the media. In fact, much online activity is simply inconsequential banter. I make a similar point in relation to interactive news sites (Bird 2010b), in which, depending on context, participation may take the form of highly articulate debate – or name-calling and profanity. We need more complex explorations of audience practices that take into account the vast range of online participation, remembering that much audience activity may remain superficial. I believe one reason fandom and fan-like activities have enjoyed such an academic boom in the Web 2.0 world is that they produce large amounts of online content that can be studied quite easily, while less intense engagement is more diffuse and less obviously visible to scholars.

Second, the celebration of the Internet-connected fan may blind us to other forms of mediated practices that are equally interesting and relevant. Even fan activities are not all focused on digital interactivity. For instance, a recent collection on ‘fandom’ (Gray *et al.* 2007) presents an array of fan practices, most focused on digital interactivity. However, authors also address different contexts, such as nineteenth century concert halls and backyard wrestling. In our chapter on wrestling, for instance, my co-author and I describe interrelated practices around ‘backyard’ and ‘indy’ wrestling, practiced by young, white, middle class men (McBride and Bird 2007). These practices are clearly mediated in that they are inspired by the spectacle of televised professional wrestling; fans/wrestlers create their own characters and scripts, drawing on media examples. And the spectacle is also refracted through fans’ own media constructions, as they film their events, and distribute them on the Internet, where others comment and construct new texts. Were we studying audiences, fans or wrestlers? Web 2.0 is certainly part of this fan-like activity, but the entire experience is more multi-faceted than this. We argue, for example, that a key to the attraction of indy wrestling for its practitioners is a very real, bodily experience of often intense pain, which appears to alter consciousness. This is some distance from televised wrestling, often seen as the epitome of fake, inauthentic media – yet the original media text is still a key element in the multiple forms of participatory activities.

Similarly, there is a whole array of practices that certainly articulate around media, and may employ Internet communication, but involve many other forms of creativity. Melchionne (1999) argues against the neglect by Cultural Studies scholars of home crafts and ‘do-it-yourself’ projects, including car customization, home improvement and sewing. As he points out, with cultural and media studies in the thrall of ‘defiant youth culture’ (p. 254), do-it-yourselfing ‘simply does not possess the political élan of these cultural practices’ (p. 254). Internet connectivity is important; it has allowed millions

of people to communicate with others who share their interests, and cable television has provided material in the endless array of programmes devoted to home and garden improvement, collecting, crafts and so on. There are fascinating questions to be answered about how media images (including advertising) play into the products of these practices, but the product itself is not more media. Consider, for example, the Jane Austen devotees studied by Thompson (2008), who knit, crochet, sew and otherwise craft items inspired by their heroine. Practices like this clearly illustrate convergence culture at work, but they point to the need to think beyond the virtual world and continue to develop rich ethnographic accounts of offline audience activity.

### The produser is powerful?

It is argued that in this new mediascape, fans are flexing their muscles against the power of media producers to define the terms of their engagement. As Costello and Moore (2007) write, 'online fan communities have the potential to produce unified centers of resistance to influence the global industries of cultural production' (p. 140). Jenkins, in defining the produser, argues that there is 'a new kind of cultural power emerging as fans bond together within larger communities, pool their information, shape each other's opinions, and develop a greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests' (2007, p. 362–363). Media producers have been pushed to modify their products in response to fan demands: 'we might think of these new knowledge communities as collective bargaining units for consumers' (p. 363).

The concept of the 'produser' evolved from 'prosumer', a term coined by Toffler (1980) to describe his projected shift from a passive consumer society to one in which many more people will prefer to provide home-grown services to themselves and others, selectively producing and consuming depending on their interests and expertise. Kotler (1986) considers some of the implications of this: 'If Toffler is right about a swelling wave of prosumption activity, then marketers face a challenging, if not frustrating, future. They will find fewer customers for mass-produced goods and services and less consumer interest in brands' (p. 511). At the same time, 'alert marketers will discover new opportunities in the areas of marketing research, product, price, place, and promotion' (p. 511). Kotler does not dwell on prosumption as it relates to media, but draws on Toffler's predictions that electronic communication will change business and social practices: 'They [prosumers] will search for others with kindred interests, finding them and communicating with them through electronic media, such as computer networks and CB radios' (p. 512). The full implications of that could not have been foreseen in the 1980s, but Brun's development of the term 'produser' deliberately invoked the democratic, grass-roots notion of the newly-powerful 'audience', to whom industry had to

respond and accommodate. We, the people, will own the digital mediascape, and will be able to share, if not completely dictate the terms.

Yet this optimistic scenario inevitably raises questions. First, as I discuss above, is the 'outlaw' (Costello and Moore 2007) produser really the dominant model of the media audience in the twenty-first century? And perhaps more importantly, has this shift in power really happened, or does the celebration of the online produser simply mask the ever-increasing power of the media industry? My concern is that the focus on fan produsage and local agency downplays the power of media producers, who while they certainly respond to fan demands, have also learned quickly to co-opt fan activities and viral media. In 1986, Kotler urged marketers to work with prosumers to meet their goals; today, marketers have simply found creative ways to harness the enthusiasm of active media audiences in order to sell to them more effectively. This of course is not a new observation; Sundet and Ytreberg (2009), for example, lay out the industry's opinions on exactly how best to do this, concluding that 'As established media institutions expand from their original base in the mass media into the digital realm, they seem to have adopted this discourse of active-ness and turned it into a tool for expansion' (p. 388). Indeed, there is a rapidly growing list of such case studies. Some involve the careful manufacture of viral phenomena, in which industry representatives hold out the possibility of a grass-roots produser going mainstream. Such was the rise of the singer Marié Digby, who appeared to be a genuine viral phenomenon – a young girl who in 2007 posted what appeared to be home-made videos on Youtube, and became a sensation. Later the *Wall Street Journal* (Smith and Lattman 2007) revealed that she had already been signed to a Disney-owned record label, and her video, supposedly made on iMovie, was professionally produced. Certainly, no one forced all the Youtube consumers to respond so positively to her music – but was her rise really a result of genuine participatory fan action? Web sites are springing up all over the place to help advise companies on how to use social networking sites to place their products effectively – for instance how to get on the front page of DIGG and other similar sites.

Indeed, media industries are becoming very adept at disciplining produsage. One key way is to impose 'terms of service' on fans participating online, so that anything they post becomes the property of the company. Reinhard (2009) discusses several such examples, including the elaborate marketing strategies around the 2008 blockbuster movie *The Dark Knight*. She characterizes these trends as a move from 'audience-as-agent' to 'audience-as-pusher', as viewers are coopted to do the work of marketers. She asks:

Why would fans be willing to give producers such control over their creative work? Part of this cooptation's success lies in establishing a feeling of magnanimity by creating the sense that the producers are encouraging fans to engage with their favorite media product to ultimately help shape it

... To capture this desire, the producers create ways in which the consumers can feel they are making a difference for the object of their affection, even if that impact is minor. (p. 11)

Furthermore, as Van Dijck (2009) points out, by channeling it carefully, the industry can track online activity for the purpose of targeted marketing:

the user's role as a data provider is infinitely more important than his role as a content provider ... the real value added by users – generating metadata on the social behaviour of a profitable consumer segment – remains highly invisible and unaccounted for. (p. 49)

So as the industry asserts its control, true online freedom becomes more elusive: 'Technology may actually work against "activity" by narrowing perspectives and the possibilities to act outside of the realm of the computer and it may nurture more repetition, rules and routines than freedom and creativity' (Nikunen 2007, p. 114). Toffler's vision of prosumers saw autonomous individuals able to free themselves from allegiance to advertiser-driven brand names. Indeed, the offline practices of the crafters, greens and others discussed above fit better with his vision of the prosumer, and the interesting areas for audience research are the extent to which these offline practices are (or are not) both facilitated and articulated through media. When it comes to online produsage, there seems to be increasing evidence that the surveillance and disciplinary functions of those controlling the online environment may be outweighing its liberatory potential.

## Media influence and the audience

Furthermore, I fear that an overemphasis on online audience creativity not only underplays the role of the media industries in specifically controlling producers but also may lead to neglect of the larger question of media influence on audiences. This influence is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship, but a much more subtle issue. Media producers have the power to inscribe privileged representations of the world that place constraints on actual audience practices, and may actually shape those practices. For example, Ruddock (2008), using an updated 'cultivation approach', analyzes a successful advertising campaign that through use of contemporary imagery and indeed, viral media, transformed cider drinking (specifically Magmers cider) into a cool, edgy consumption choice. Working with young people, Ruddock argues that indeed they are active, informed audiences, but they are also very much aware of and even irritated by their own realization that they have been successfully manipulated. Elsewhere (Bird 2010a), through a discussion about contemporary wedding practices, I argue that media provide scripts for

behaviour. Brides, while encouraged to consume in media-structured ways, are at the same time provided with a pervasive script that every choice they make is individual and unique. The narratives told by the media are powerful, if unpredictable in their precise 'effect' – media narratives may be the only way key issues like war are framed for audiences (Bird and Dardenne 2008). Convergence also refers to the increasing consolidation of media power that tends to narrow the range of stories and scripts from which audiences construct their views of the world. We need more scholarship on how audiences, whether 'producers' or not, negotiate and manage the complex interaction of structural media power and individual/community agency.

### The producer in a global context

The questions I have already raised are especially pressing when we move out of the context of the West. As I have discussed, it is questionable whether online produsage really is the model of audience practice for most people, given that it requires a level of media saturation, affluence and time and technological access that is not equally distributed. This is even more true in the developing world. In many parts of the world, engagement with popular culture is certainly significant, and becoming more so. The reach of the global media industry, and the dynamics of the interaction between global and local media, pose key questions about audience activity. But for millions of people, 'produsage', as defined within a fan model of online interactivity, is essentially meaningless. I think, for example, of a 2007 field visit I took to rural Gujarat, India, visiting villages without running water or consistent electricity, and where extended families lived in one part of the house and cattle in another. Taped on the walls of houses and silos were photos of Bollywood stars (as well as Hindu deities), and some families had small televisions. These are media audiences too – in different economic circumstances no doubt many could be creative producers of media content, as their more wealthy compatriots already are. They certainly are not right now, and yet their experiences as audiences are complex and worthy of exploration. For instance, how has Bollywood imagery permeated traditional custom and ritual? Much has been learned about the complex relationship between traditional popular media (like television) and questions of identity, gender and nationhood (e.g. Mankekar 1999), and it is likely that for the foreseeable future, a focus on offline mediated practices will continue to be most useful and relevant.

And, just as in the West, digital media convergence is producing practices that are related to fan produsage, but are not dependent on the online environment. In many developing countries, it is highly likely that the web-based infrastructure that facilitates produsage will never reach western levels. For example, Nigeria, where I am currently conducting fieldwork (see [www.](http://www.)



asabamemorial.org), has a population of almost 150 million and enormous wealth from oil production, yet is crippled by a decaying infrastructure, gross inequalities, ethnic violence and corruption (Smith 2006). Most of the population does not even have reliable electricity (Connors 2009), and only 16.1 percent of the population uses the Internet regularly (internetworldstats.com 2009). The 'best' secondary school in the Eastern town where I am working has only one, old, donated computer in the headmaster's office; the pupils have no access to the Internet.

This would seem a bleak place for produsage as it has come to be understood in recent scholarship. Yet in Nigeria, the grass-roots industry known as 'Nollywood' has become an international phenomenon. The industry relies on cheap digital technology to create video movies, using amateur actors, writers and home-made or outdoor sets, often completing a video in two weeks (Ugor 2009). Copies are sold and exchanged everywhere, and consumed eagerly both in Nigeria and the worldwide diaspora. Some are posted on websites like Youtube, but the Internet is not the primary way they are disseminated. Abah (2009) argues that these videos have become an important site of social critique, exploring issues of politics, gender and race. McCall (2002) points out that these film-makers, while influenced by Hollywood conventions, are completely free of global corporate influence, often exploring highly local issues such as traditional religion and medicine. Ugor (2009) concludes that 'the emergence of new small media technologies like the digital video and music mixing resources have reduced the once monopolistic power of the state over ownership and access to mass media forms in postcolonial national settings like Nigeria', resulting in 'the widening of the public sphere, where youth, through cheap, portable, and yet efficient mass media forms ... infuse and stamp their own independent subjective positions' (p. 403).

Thus in the developing world, as in the West, first, we cannot allow excitement about fan-like produsage to blind us to the broader question of how audiences interact with all kinds of media forms; and second, we should not assume that the online environment is the only form of evolving digital technology that facilitates creative, even subversive media practices.

## Conclusion

Convergent media can and have transformed the traditional 'audience' experience, especially in the West, where even many people who are not really producers are still taking advantage of multiple media platforms to extend their mediated practices. And although the vast majority of producer activity seems to be directed around entertainment genres, perhaps the most exciting possibilities lie in the opportunities for active engagement with crucial

issues of citizenship. As Bruns himself suggests, if produsage becomes the norm among people, this ‘could rekindle a desire on their part to once again become active *producers* of democracy, rather than mere passive audiences’ (p. 9). It has been argued that the ascendancy of citizen journalists and bloggers has created an unprecedented opportunity for democracy. Rosen (2006) claims that the new context has finally destroyed the concept of ‘the audience’ for news:

The people formerly known as the audience are those who *were* on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another – and who *today* are not in a situation like that *at all*. (italics in original)

Perhaps we finally can ‘speak truth to power’ and have our voices heard, perhaps in cooperation with those journalists willing to share their professional authority (Gillmor 2006). Indeed, traditional news organizations have opened their doors to citizen journalists, although gate-keepers still filter what gets through (Harrison 2009). **New media practices have helped citizens breakthrough repressive government controls, first in Myanmar, Iran and China, and most recently in Egypt and across the Middle East, bringing stories and images that professional journalists could not obtain. And they have facilitated instant mobilization of donations to Haitian earthquake relief and a range of political causes.** Stengrim (2005) offers a powerful case study of the effectiveness of indymedia in advancing democracy.

At the same time, in 2009, we saw how what was billed on Facebook as a dramatic, major demonstration against government power in Iran eventually failed to materialize. Organizers had not understood that not only were most of the online activists physically in the diaspora, not in Iran, but also that real, offline organizing had not happened on the ground in Iran, for a variety of reasons, not least government intimidation.

The scale of the setback . . . is closely tied to the specificity and grandiosity of the visions that were being cultivated in the preceding weeks via blogs, forwarded emails, and social networking sites . . . Reassured by their own online echo chambers, activists and participants allowed their optimism to grow like a market bubble . . . (Abadi 2010)

Similarly, while new media have been crucial in the mobilizing of protest in Egypt, brutal government repression in Libya has at the time of writing minimized their potential impact. The reality seems to be that there is no single answer about whether online producers and other activists can *necessarily* make a real difference; it all depends on the complexities of any given situation, a point suggested by Bennett (2003). Most important, it means that

we should never be looking only at online practices, but always at how those intersect with the realities of the offline world.

This brings me back to my central purpose in joining the debate about media convergence and produsage – to consider how these processes affect our understanding of media audience practices. There can be no doubt that in the West, as well as affluent sectors of the developing world, the nature of media consumption has been transformed. It is harder than ever before to define specific acts of media use; being a media ‘audience’ member is basically what people do continually. As Deuze (2005) notes, some new studies report that people find it almost impossible to accurately state how much time they spend with media.

Does that mean that we are indeed all ‘producers?’ I think not, unless we regard every twitter and facebook update as an act of creativity. True producers are a reality, but they are not the norm, and can often seem to be so in thrall to big media and technological ‘coolness’ that they accept the disciplining of their creative activities. And furthermore, we must not forget that online produsage is not the only way to engage actively with media; action spurred by media takes many forms other than the creation of more media, and will continue to do so (see for example Bird 2008, Simmons 2009). ‘Prosumption’ was envisaged by Toffler as the multiple ways in which people meld commercial commodities with personal creativity, and it has not universally been replaced by online ‘produsage’. Popular culture is experienced and lived in many different ways and the Web 2.0 environment is not the only one that matters, especially outside the West. Today, audience scholarship needs to be informed by critical analyses of media economy (Murdoch 2000), as well as rich, ethnographic studies that explore the complexity of interrelated online and offline practices in specific global circumstances, and continue to interrogate the influence that media have over us, even as we can now talk back more actively than ever.

## Note

- 1 Exactly who or what ‘the audience’ is has been hotly debated for decades, with conceptions of the audience ranging from a definite, static group of people ‘receiving’ a message, to arguments that there are no distinct, identifiable audiences, because we all interact with media in continually shifting ways. I certainly place myself at the latter end of the continuum (see Bird 2003). Nevertheless, until someone comes up with a better term, I find that ‘audience’ and ‘audience practices’ are still useful ways to discuss engagements with the media.

## Notes on contributor

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