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DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS AND THE FADING OF THE PRODUCTION-CONSUMPTION DICHOTOMY: PROSUMPTION AS A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

The recent changes regarding user's role and agency in digital environments, and the consequent influence of emerging socio-technical arrangements on productive paradigms, challenged our traditional separation between production and consumption. Productive paradigms in digital worlds proved the notion of the user as a simple consumer to be outdated. They questioned the production-consumption dichotomy and urged scholars to develop new approaches to investigate the fading of the historical separation of these two concepts. This fostered the exploration and development of new paths of research. Several concepts have been created and used to analyze current productive paradigms and the role of the users. Nevertheless, most of them seem to fail in their attempt to give a clear account of the emerging phenomena and to reach a broad understanding of all the involved actors and practices that are affecting the traditional production-consumption division. Notwithstanding the criticisms of many perspectives, the theorization of the user as prosumer – producer and consumer at the same time – and the related concept of prosumption, seems a more comprehensive approach to investigate the current ontological status of users as well as productive paradigms in digital environments. However, this theorization is in need of revision and further development.

Key words: Prosumption, digital environments, users, productive paradigms, ICT.

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Introduction

The evolution of the Internet and the increasing diffusion and pervasiveness of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have fostered the change of users' position (Carpentier, Schröder, & Hallett, 2013) as well as of their ontological status and their role regarding productive paradigms. The changes regarding the user-technology relationship have brought about the increase of users' agency (Oudshoorn, Pinch, 2008; Van Dijck, 2009) and the consequent emergence of new socio-technical arrangements which fostered new and alternative forms of production (Tapscott, Williams, 2006). These socio-technical arrangements have called into question the classical separation between production and consumption. They suggested that, even in digital worlds, the fading of the production-consumption division was under way. They also certainly proved the notion of users as simple consumers to be outdated.

Several scholars have tried to analyze emerging productive paradigms in digital environments in the attempt to give an account of the current blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption. Different concepts have been created and used in different disciplines to reach an understanding of the ontological status of the users and of the relation between online practices and the production-consumption dichotomy. Nevertheless, while they detected that emerging socio-technical arrangements were moving away from a strict separation between production and consumption, they failed to understand what they had in common (Ritzer, 2014) and to reach a broad understanding of all the involved actors and practices that affect the emerging phenomena.

This paper analyzes the current approaches to productive paradigms in digital worlds in the attempt to provide a clear overview of the current theorizations. Seven concepts were selected to be taken into account and described, namely: co-creation, craft-consumption, Do It Yourself, Pro-am, commons-based peer production, produsage and prosumption. These concepts are not the only ones that try to describe the change of users' agency in digital environments and the fading of the production-consumption division. They are, instead, the most widely renowned ones and the ones the author of this paper considers more relevant to gain an overview of the current approaches. Moreover, the order in which they are presented does not refer to the chronological order in which they emerged in the academic debate. The proposed order is developed in the attempt to help the reader to detect, among the proposed concepts,

differences and similarities, limits and potentialities, critical aspects and needs for improvement.

The main goal of this paper is to understand whether one of the abovementioned concepts is more comprehensive than the others with regard to the analysis of production practices in digital worlds. For this purpose, two criteria will be considered: the extent of the user base that every theorization can take into account, and the variety of online practices they can analyze with their approach. This manuscript is divided into two main parts. The first part will consider the different theorizations and their standing point with regard to the production-consumption dichotomy. Subsequently, their approach towards production and consumption in digital environments, namely their ability to take into account a wide range of users and online practices, will be called into question. In the second part, the selected criteria will be applied. The tendency of these theorizations to consider only one element of the production-consumption dichotomy as their main focus will result to strongly affect their ability of being comprehensive. The inclination of certain approaches to regard users as mainly consumers or producers will be detected as an additional factor able to cause the narrowing down of the user base taken into account.

After the analysis of the current approaches and the application of the abovementioned criteria, the second part of this paper will also serve to identify the most comprehensive theorization among the considered ones. The identification of pros and cons of different perspectives will allow the consideration of the concept of prosumption (*infra*) as the most comprehensive approach to investigate the ontological status of the users and the emerged and emerging production practices in digital worlds. Nevertheless, the acceptance of this concept as a tool of analysis will lead to a further investigation of this theorization and to the detection of its innovative characteristics as well as limits or critical aspects. Finally, the paper will suggest the potentialities of this approach in stimulating alternative and more comprehensive perspectives as well as the need for revision and improvement of this theorization.

The change of user's role in digital environments

The increasing access of people to information and communication technologies brought about a change with regard to the user-technology relationship as well as to the users' role and agency (Von Hippel, 2005; Van Dijck, 2009; Carpentier *et al.*, 2013). Users' agency has been enhanced through their increasing access to ICT and the consequent emergence of online collaboration and participation practices (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010; Hardt, Negri, 2012). Over time, increasingly more individuals committed themselves to the production of online content in

an attempt to express themselves, to encourage ICT firms to develop their products in specific ways, to transform existing products, or to create on their own the digital products they needed.

These factors forced scholars to question the role of users and to consider users' online production as a very powerful phenomenon. There are different levels of online production. For instance, there are users who limit themselves to creating and sharing content while others collaborate with ICT firms in the development of specific products. Besides, there are low digital-literate users who just produce data while consuming online content, while high digital-literate users, alone or in collaboration with others, try to create or transform ICT features (Hartmann, Doorley & Klemmer, 2006) to make the tools at their disposal more suitable for their purposes (Ciborra, 2002). Some examples of these new forms of users' agency are the increasing amount of user-generated content posted on web platforms and social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), and the emergence of several user-driven online movements; for instance the Open Source Software movement, the online Hacktivism (Auty, 2004) and the Do-it Yourself communities.

These online practices, regarding users who act in collaboration with firms, users who act alone, and users who collaborate with each other in small or large groups, are redefining several social fields or systems (e.g. economy, education, art). This current redefinition is the result of the exploitation of the Internet and particularly of the Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) as a tool that allows the generation, production and transformation of content by its users. Internet evolution and the advancements of ICT have encouraged the change of the ontological status of individuals, users, from passive consumers to potentially active participants and producers (Benkler, Nissenbaum, 2006; Schäfer, 2009). Consequently, the classical production-consumption dichotomy has been challenged by emerging productive paradigms in digital environments.

The new forms of users' agency and related emerging socio-technical arrangements fostered the transformation of production and labor practices and promoted new and alternative ways of production (Tapscott, Williams, 2006). In the last decades some ideas and concepts with regard to the change of users' role and their influence on the fading of the production-consumption division rose. Some of these theorizations were initially inspired by and applied to production and consumption in materials worlds and then, after the rise of the Internet as an easy and accessible generative platform (Zittrain, 2006), translated to digital environments.

Users as consumers, producers or both?

The increased agency of users and their influence on productive paradigms fostered a re-evaluation of the figure of the user and of his/her role. The concepts employed by scholars to analyze the renewed agency of users and the consequent blurring of boundaries between production and consumption are numerous. Some of them focus on production, others on consumption, while a few of them focus on both. Nevertheless, even if they do not always share the same perspective, they all show similarities.

One of the most renowned terms by which to address the increased agency of users is co-creation. This term refers to the role of active consumers, users, as co-creators of value in cooperation with firms. It also challenges the distinction between supply and demand from a market perspective. The concept of co-creation regards the interaction between firms, consumer communities and consumers as the locus of value creation and value extraction; where value is the result of an implicit negotiation between the consumers and the firm (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2004). It is based on the idea that networked, knowledgeable, empowered and active consumers through their attempts to exercise their influence on the business system and to interact with firms, changed the nature of the consumer-company interaction (*ibidem*).

The result of this approach is the increasingly widespread involvement of users in the process of creation of what they will buy or consume (Von Hippel, 2005). It can be considered, from a strategic point of view, the way in which firms try to maximize users' perspectives, constraints and needs to develop products. On one hand, considering the user as a co-creator is intended as a celebration of creativity and choice through consumption, whereas on the other hand, it is seen as the attempt to foster consumer-corporate partnerships according to business interests and for capitalist purposes (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008).

Besides the idea of the user as a co-creator who collaborates with firms to influence product development, there is the idea of individuals who decide to take care both of the design and of the building of what they need, while avoiding contact with firms. In this case, some scholars talk about craft-consumption. This term refers to consumption activities in which the products are both designed and made by the consumer (Campbell, 2005). It is based on Tanya Harrod's definition of craft as "made and designed by the same person" (as cited in Campbell, 2005:

27) and it is a concept that goes beyond the ideas of appropriation, personalization and customization. The assumption of the concept of craft-consumption is that people's consumption of a particular thing is inspired by their desire to engage in creative acts of self-expression through which they employ their skills, knowledge and passion (Campbell, 2005). The main idea here is that some people have a distinctive mode of consuming, namely they are inclined to buy products that they use to build what then they themselves consume (*ibidem*). As a consequence, context and manner of usage can transform the meaning of a product (Miller, 1987) and the classical notions of consumption (Campbell, 2005). Moreover, thanks to craft-consumption practices, consumers are able to express themselves and their potential through creativity.

Similar to the idea of craft-consumption and often used to describe the engagement of individuals in creative productive pursuits is the concept of Do-It-Yourself (DIY). It indicates the phenomenon by which amateurs commit themselves to "engage raw and semi-raw materials and component parts to produce, transform, or reconstruct material possessions" (Wolf, McQuitty, 2011: 154). Consequently, the consumers who undertake such activities are simultaneously considered designers, builders, inspectors and evaluators of the final result of their projects (*ibidem*). They are considered as "knowledgeable actors whose acquisitions are in some sense an expression of their capabilities and project-oriented ambitions" (Watson, Shove, 2008: 71). The DIY approach focuses on the relationship between consumption and practice, regarding the first as an outcome of the latter (Warde, 2005), and on the active and creative role of consumers. Therefore, the relation between what is consumed and the practices of production of new objects results in being important not only for the accomplishment of users' future projects, but also for future patterns of consumption (Watson, Shove, 2008). Finally, the DIY is intended as a transformative process – both of the consumers and of the objects on which they work (*ibidem*).

A recent evolution of the DIY approach is the concept of Pro-am (professional-amateur). According to this approach we are witnessing the convergence of professionals and amateurs, where the amateurs are increasingly doing professional-level work. Some scholars claim that the activities of Pro-ams cannot be adequately captured by the traditional definitions and dichotomies of work and leisure, professional and amateur, consumption and production (Leadbeater, Miller, 2004). This is because individuals pursue their activities and projects as amateurs, hence driven by the passion and love for what they do and mainly in

their spare time, but they do it while setting professional standards. For this reason users engaged in these practices are considered a social hybrid that bridges the professional-amateur divide (*ibidem*). Pro-Ams are mainly engaged in Do-it-yourself activities that can lead to social and technological improvements, especially with the emergence of the participative web (Blank, Reisdorf, 2012) and of collaborative platforms. Indeed, several Internet related innovations have emerged from the works of Pro-ams who collaborate online and mix their diversified skills, knowledge and backgrounds.

As anticipated, the abovementioned concepts were developed and applied to material worlds and in the last decades also applied to digital environments. Notwithstanding their interest in the fading of the production-consumption dichotomy, they maintain their focus on consumption. In these theorizations the protagonist is the 'user as consumer' engaged in practices of consumption that lead to production. Nevertheless, these practices have the consumption of their own outcomes as a final goal.

Vice versa, if we want to take into account an approach that focuses on production and was inspired by online practices, we have to consider the idea of commons-based peer production proposed by Yochai Benkler (2006). Commons-based peer production is a socio-economic system of production that is emerging in digitally networked environments. Individuals engaged in commons-based peer production cooperate online in small or large groups in the attempt to generate or share information, knowledge and cultural goods (Benkler, Nissenbaum, 2006). Particularly, they are organized without markets or managerial hierarchies and are open for creative productive practices (Benkler, 2006). This kind of online production is a collective effort and collaboration to reach a common goal, after which no one owns the product or the final outcome of the process of peer production, nor manages its direction alone (Benkler, Nissenbaum, 2006). The two main characteristics of this so-called social production are decentralization and usage of social cues and motivations, rather than prices or commands, to stimulate and coordinate the actions of the involved actors (*ibidem*).

Besides the theorization of commons-based peer production, another concept directly inspired by the production of content in digital environments is produsage. The difference between the two is that while the theorization of Benkler focuses on production as the main activity of the analyzed phenomena, the produsage approach focuses on production and consumption at the same time. The concept of

produsage refers particularly to the user-led content creation, collaborative content creation and development practices emerged and emerging online. This concept, that moves from the analysis of the impact of the participative web on social practices, economy and democracy, describes the online content production as a new hybrid form of simultaneous production and usage: produsage (Bruns, 2008). As a consequence, individuals are considered producers, namely producers and users at the same time. The concept of produsage entails a non-traditional form of content production, in which what changes is the status of the products themselves; they are always unfinished outcomes ready to be further improved or developed (*ibidem*). Clearly, this idea is mainly applicable to online content production and revision and to collaborative software development.

The term produsage is not the only one employed to consider the fading of the production-consumption division while focusing on both of its elements at the same time. In reality, a term widely and sometimes erroneously used interchangeably with 'produsage' is 'prosumption' (Toffler, 1980; Kotler, 1986; Ritzer, Dean & Jurgenson, 2012). Even though they both consider individuals as producers and consumers at the same time, they present differences in their approach and field of application.

While produsage focuses on digital worlds and specific online practices, prosumption looks at both material and digital worlds and entails several offline and online practices. Similar to produsage, prosumption focuses both on production and consumption rather than one or the other (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010). Differently, the individual is called prosumer and not producer. The prosumer, both producer and consumer of goods (Toffler, 1980), is not just a simple user, but a user that, at the same time, is engaged in the production of content, features and tools that he/she will consume. Prosumption is not a new concept in the productive scenario (Ritzer *et al.*, 2012), especially if we consider production and consumption practices in material worlds. Nevertheless, the prosumer is a figure that lately found a broadened and renewed agency thanks to ICT. Overall, the concept of prosumption refers to an interrelated process of production and consumption that characterizes every human activity (Ritzer, 2014).

As shown, different concepts have been and are used to account for current changes in the role of the user and of the blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption in digital environments. Sometimes, a blurring of boundaries appears to exist between the concepts themselves; which are in certain cases used as

interchangeable or in a general rather than specific way. However, this can lead to a deceptive interpretation and a lack of comprehension of the emerging phenomena. The usage and creation of different concepts to call into question the production-consumption division in different fields certainly led to a failure both to see what these concepts had in common (Ritzer, 2014) and to reach a deeper understanding of not only the changes that were and are under way but also of all the actors and practices involved. Therefore, the abundance of terms and concepts and of different perspectives invites us to ask whether there is a theorization more comprehensive than the others and consequently able to take into account a wide range of users as well as a broad variety of online production practices. If this is the case, the question is whether theorization can lead us to innovative approaches in the study of productive paradigms in digital environments and/or if it needs to be further improved.

Prosumption as a comprehensive approach

All the concepts and theorizations considered in this paper have pros and cons. They certainly try to get a clear insight into the ongoing reconfiguration of classical productive paradigms. However, after a deeper analysis, the majority of them seems able to consider only specific sections of the user-base taking part in the emerging online productive paradigms and a limited range of practices.

In reality, if we take into account concepts such as co-creation, craft-consumption, DIY and Pro-am, we realize that their main focus is on one side of the binary separation producer-consumer, namely on the consumption side. For all these approaches the individual is a consumer, maybe a very active, informed, networked and skilled one, but still an individual whose main activity lies in the act of consumption. For instance, while the users as co-creators are, depending on positive or negative perspectives, empowered or exploited consumers (Zwick *et al.*, 2008), the users as Pro-ams regard consumption as a productive activity and “create a sense of identity for themselves through consumption” (Leadbeater, Miller, 2004: 22). Furthermore, according to the craft-consumption and DIY theories, certain individuals are creative users who have a distinctive mode of consuming (Campbell, 2005). Besides, the actions and achievements of these users turn out to be important for future patterns of consumption (Watson, Shove, 2008).

On the contrary, if we consider the concept of commons-based peer production, the focus is clearly on production. Commons-based peer production is the result of the emergence of digital networks and of the rising importance of information and cultural production (Benkler, 2006).

Once again, users are relevant depending on their potential ability to become producers and to take part in “a novel system of production” (Benkler, Nissenbaum, 2006: 394). As a consequence, and after all these clarifications, one could ask: what about the other kind of users? What about the non-creative ones, those *not* engaged in the transformation of existing products or in distinctive mode of consuming? What about those who are not involved, or have never been, in online collaboration and collective production? What about those who do not fit in any of these concepts? Again, and most importantly: can we take all the involved user-base and practices into account relying only on one exhaustive theorization able to provide us with a comprehensive overview?

Depending on the approach we consider, either part of the user-base participating in online production practices or relevant aspects regarding the fading of the production-consumption dichotomy are excluded from the analysis. This seems due the focus of the abovementioned theorizations on one element of the production-consumption dichotomy and to their interpretation of users as mainly consumers or producers. Since the persistence of the dichotomy appears to limit a wider comprehension of the analyzed phenomena and of the involved actors, we could try to go beyond the binary distinction production-consumption or at least try to, and see what happens if we do. We could consider production and consumption as strictly interrelated activities without focusing on either of them and see if this perspective is applicable to every user, or at least to a wide range of users, in digital environments. In this case, we need to choose between the concept of produsage and the one of prosumption; the only two so far capable of considering production and consumption at the same time without giving hegemony or priority to either one of them.

As already stated, produsage was inspired by user-led content creation, collaborative content creation and revision (e.g. Wikipedia) and software development practices (e.g. Open Source Software). It is clearly applicable to those users who produce, generate, and revise content online and to those who are skilled enough to collaborate in software development. But what about those users who are not involved in any of these activities of content creation and revision or software development?

Notwithstanding its focus both on production and consumption at the same time, even the concept of produsage seems to limit the spectrum of users and practices that can fit in or can be analyzed by it. This limitation leads us to consider the one of prosumption and to see if it is

suitable for our purposes. If we employ prosumption as our tool of analysis, and particularly the perspective adopted by Ritzer (2014), we accept to agree with the claim that there is no pure production or pure consumption. This, says Ritzer, is true for every human activity; it is all about prosumption. Moreover, not only is there no pure distinction between production and consumption, but also there has never been one in the history of humanity; except from an academic perspective (*ibidem*). Embracing this approach for the analysis of digital worlds means to claim that all the users are prosumers no matter what they do, and all the practices are prosumption related activities. This would make this approach able to take into account all the involved actors and practices affecting the fading of production-consumption dichotomy and all the emerging phenomena. To understand if this is true, it is necessary to investigate further Ritzer's theorization.

According to Ritzer we have historically had the tendency to think of ourselves as either producers, workers that produce something, or consumers, people that consume what someone else produced (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2014). Nevertheless, he claims that the separation of the producer from the consumer is just a construction and a historical error (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2012). To prove this, he argues that prosumption was already implicit in classical sociology, especially in the work of Marx, but it has been largely ignored until 2000s (Ritzer, 2014). This is because on one hand major social thinkers (e.g. Marx, Weber, Durkheim), under the influence of the industrial revolution, tended to focus on issues related to production, and on the other hand, especially after the Second World War and due to the boom of the consumption economy, other social theorists (e.g. Galbraith, Baudrillard, Bauman) focused their attention on consumption (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010). This contributed to the empowerment of the production-consumption binary distinction (*ibidem*). Ritzer also argues that, notwithstanding their focus either on production or on consumption, the classical approaches showed concern with both elements of the dichotomy. For example, according to him, Marx's interest for productive consumption, a consumption that produces different kind of things, is one of the main proofs of this concern (Ritzer, 2014). Overall, in Ritzer's (*ibidem*) theorization production always involves consumption and there is always work, or production, involved in consumption.

Ritzer's point of departure for this theorization is his own idea of the "McDonaldization of society" (Ritzer, 2011). He analyzes the phenomenon of putting consumers/users to work. According to this approach, evolved later in a reworked version of the one of prosumption, people assume they are only consuming but they are actually involved in

a variety of production related activities or in producing services while they are consuming (e.g. taking care of garbage disposal at McDonalds). In contrast with Toffler (1980), for whom individuals are prosumers only while doing certain activities and they move in and out the three sectors of society (production, consumption, prosumption), Ritzer (2014) argues that individuals are always prosumers. People do not move in and out the prosumption sector, they rather always are in the prosumption sector (*ibidem*).

Differently from Bruns and his concept of produsage, prosumption regards not only generation and revision of content or software development, but every single activity in digital worlds. If we apply this approach to digital environments, there is no user who does not fit in the category of prosumer, and no practice that cannot be considered prosumption. As a consequence, even a passive user, who does not produce any content and only “consumes” online content, does produce work and can also contribute to, for instance, the production of data used by third parties for commercials and business interests.

Therefore, among the theorizations analyzed in this paper, the one of prosumption seems to be the most comprehensive to investigate productive paradigms in digital environments while taking into account all the involved actors and practices. It allows us to consider the entire user base without excluding any section of it or any way of being an online user. It does also challenge in a fruitful way the classical production-consumption separation without any preference towards one or the other element of the dichotomy.

Criticism and potentialities of the prosumption approach

As stated above, the current most renowned definition and study about prosumption was developed by George Ritzer. His work expands and improves the previous theorization of prosumption developed by Alvin Toffler (1980) so as to include under this term a wide range of human online and offline activities; basically all human activities. According to the analysis conducted in this paper, the prosumption theorization appears to be the most comprehensive approach in the attempt to consider the entire user base taking part in productive paradigms in digital environments as well as all the involved practices. Yet this idea needs to be further investigated. In reality, if we call into question the recent evolution of this theorization, we become aware not only of its potentialities but also of its limitations. Indeed, part of its recent development represents somehow a decrease in its degree of differentiation from similar concepts and appears to be not completely compelling when it comes to its application to digital environments.

What Ritzer proposes with his recent argumentations is to regard prosumption as the main human activity and to consider it within what he calls a “prosumption continuum”. Theoretically speaking, at one end of the “prosumption continuum” we find human activities defined as “prosumption as production”, consuming while producing, and at the other end we find those activities related to “prosumption as consumption”, producing while consuming (Ritzer, 2014: 11). In the middle of the continuum stands the so-called “balanced prosumption”, where aspects of production and consumption are more or less balanced, and which will be increasingly common in the future (*ibidem*). Surprisingly, the theorization of the prosumption continuum in Ritzer’s work seems to propose a renewed and alternate focus either on production or consumption. For instance, if we take into account the “prosumption as production” we consider activities in which a user is consuming something while performing the act of producing. As a consequence, in this case the approach to prosumption seems very similar to the approach of Marx to productive consumption. It shows indeed concern for both the elements of the dichotomy but with the tendency to focus on production or to regard production as the main activity. On the other hand, if we consider “prosumption as consumption”, we consider those activities in which individuals produce something while performing the act of consuming. The reader can easily detect the similarity of this idea with the concepts explained above, where consumption is considered a productive activity (Leadbeater, Miller, 2004). Notwithstanding his critique of classical social theorists and of their tendency to focus either on production or on consumption while being concerned with both of them, Ritzer seems to have the same tendency in part of the last development of his theorization.

Consequently, prosumption succeeds in its attempt to consider all the involved actors and production practices emerged and emerging in digital worlds, but seems to fail when it comes to maintaining a simultaneous focus on production and consumption. In reality, in Ritzer’s continuum there seems to be a prosumption that is production-oriented and one that is consumption-oriented. What is then its difference from other approaches? Only the label used to describe the analyzed phenomena? And again: is there something innovative in the last development of this concept in comparison with other theorizations?

The real difference and innovative aspect, besides the declared and proved transgression of the classical production-consumption division, probably lies in the notions of “means of prosumption” (Ritzer, 2014: 13) and “balanced prosumption”. Inspired by Marx’s notion of means of production (Marx, 1981) and the one of means of consumption implicit in

the work of Baudrillard (1998), Ritzer claims that the existence of the current prosumer is made possible by the emergence of what he calls the “new means of prosumption” (Ritzer, 2014: 13). This appears to be fruitful for the development of further paths of research regarding digital worlds. For instance, if we consider certain online production practices (e.g. user-generated content, user-developed applications etc.), the notion of “means of prosumption” could lead to a redefinition of the concept of alienation regarding digital prosumers and the exploitation of their labor. On the other hand, it could help us to further investigate those practices in which the users acquire digital goods and services (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google, Gmail) apparently simply as consumers, but at the same time they are exploited and controlled because of the production and overexposure of data made possible by their patterns of online consumption. Not only does this approach provide us with an alternative lens through which to look at the emerging phenomena in digital worlds, but it could also give us the possibility to rearticulate classical sociological approaches and tailor them for digital environments.

While the notion of “means of prosumption” appears able to stimulate new research paths or to foster a further development of the existing ones, the “balanced prosumption” turns out to be a fascinating as well as critical aspect of the theorization proposed by Ritzer. If we consider the idea of “balanced prosumption”, a particular visualization of it invariably comes to mind. “Balanced prosumption” should be a prosumption in which production and consumption activities are not only strictly interrelated but symmetrical. If we do not want to be strict, we could think about it as an activity in which they are more or less balanced (Ritzer, 2014). Nevertheless, it is hard to understand whether a “balanced prosumption” is really possible and if it is applicable to current productive paradigms in digital environments.

Ritzer himself, in his attempt to give examples of more or less material or digital “balanced prosumption”, admits that current activities go just towards the middle of the continuum (*ibidem*), and fails in giving even one example of real “balanced prosumption”. He presents instead cases that remind the reader about the two ends of the continuum rather than the middle. For instance, he provides as examples those activities as collecting food and then disposing garbage in a fast food restaurant, or the act of assembling IKEA furniture. With regard to digital “balanced prosumption” he proposes examples related to users who take care of part of the selling process as buyers on Amazon or eBay. There is also space in his argumentation for that kind of prosumption in which material and digital worlds complement one another. In fact, Ritzer provides

examples adverting to the analysis of Chris Anderson (2012) of those phenomena in which people bring manufacturing to the desktop and materialize digital design through the usage of 3-D printers.

Taking these examples into account, it is difficult to regard the concept of “balanced prosumption” as applicable to current digital environments. While Ritzer succeeds in understanding that prosumption will be increasingly important, especially with regard to ICT, his idea of users going towards a “balanced prosumption” seems, even if fascinating, difficult to share. In reality, if we consider productive paradigms in digital environments, we are witnessing the emergence of socio-technical arrangements to which we can certainly refer as prosumption activities, but in which there so far does not actually seem to be balanced prosumption. Indeed, most of the time, users’ online activities lean towards one end or the other of the continuum, rather than towards the middle.

However, even though the concept of “balanced prosumption” remains critical, it certainly creates new expectations with regard to the future changes of productive paradigms in digital environments and their evolution. Surely, technological progress and the advancements of ICT provide users, prosumers, with increasing possibilities to place their activities towards the middle of the “prosumption continuum” proposed by Ritzer. Notwithstanding these possibilities, whether a real “balanced prosumption” will be achieved or not it is difficult to say. The future will tell us.

Conclusion

Several approaches are employed in the attempt to reach a deep and broad understanding both of the ontological status of the digital user and of the fading of the production-consumption dichotomy in digital environments. Emerging socio-technical arrangements and the increasing new forms of digital and immaterial production challenge these theorizations and their ability to include heterogeneous users and a wide range of online production practices. The concepts themselves are forced to evolve at the same pace at which already existing productive paradigms are changing and new ones are emerging.

Overall, the majority of the analyzed approaches seems to be limited when it comes to covering a wide range of users and practices. Among the current most renowned theorizations employed to analyze the changing of the user’s role and the blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption, the one of prosumption appears to be the most comprehensive. Especially the last development of this

theorization, proposed by George Ritzer, seems to have the necessary characteristics to keep pace with the continuous changes and emerging unpredictable patterns which characterize digital worlds.

Notwithstanding the ability of the prosumption approach to consider the entire user base participating in online production as well as emerged and emerging practices, it certainly needs to be further improved or revised. It is indeed its recently reworked version that in certain cases seems to propose a renewed focus on production or consumption; both of them declared theoretically outdated by the approach itself. Moreover, the concept of “balanced prosumption” turns out to be as fascinating as it is critical. On one hand, it appears to be innovative and challenging in comparison with other concepts, while on the other hand, the early stage of its theorization limits its own real applicability.

The criticism of the prosumption approach, and especially of its recent evolution, show that there are rooms for improvement. Nevertheless, this theorization seems to be fruitful in terms of reaching a more comprehensive perspective on production practices in digital worlds and stimulating a further development of existing concepts. It also seems to have the potential to generate new paths of research into productive paradigms in digital environments, which would in turn lead to the emergence of new approaches.

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