Produsage as experience and interpretation

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Abstract:
This article examines the changes in audience discourses that emerge at the intersection between the classical idea of the audience being active in interpretation of media texts, and new forms of audience engagement in text production and distribution. Focusing on produsage, a term that is frequently used to describe audiences' participation in online ecology, we argue for produsage to be conceptualized with regard to two aspects that are important for audience research: firstly, produsage as a form of relating to texts, and secondly, produsage as an experience in co-creation of texts. This overview of theoretical positions and empirical research is used to identify (in)stabilities in the conceptualization of audiences, thus arguing for greater recognition of produsage as a form of users' experience and an interpretative act, rather than an alternative model of production, which will allow audience research to better account for nuanced and varied degrees of produsage.

Keywords: audience research, produsage, produser, prosumption, interpretation, experience, reception, production

Introduction
The linear model of mass communication as one-way direct transmission of information (Shannon and Weaver, 1949) has been variously challenged (e.g. Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) and recognised as inadequate (Carey, 1989) for understanding of the complexity of mediated communication. Despite its simplicity that among other things neglects context on the side of production as well as reception, the model's focus on (linear) transmission can be useful for one thing: to remind us that there is no (intelligible) communication if both parties are producing at the same time. However complex the communication act is, involving various interaction between producers and recipients, at each individual moment of the communication there is only one side that produces and the other that receives,

listens, consumes, uses, but most of all interprets and makes sense of the content. That, of course, still does not answer the questions of the text, context and meaning, nor the question of the distribution of roles and positions within the communication act before and after that particular moment of exchange. Hence the recurring question of media and communication studies about the roles and their respective power positions within the communication act: who is and can be a producer and what actually is her counterpart.

The question of power over meaning led to a prominence of the audience research within the field of media research which established that recipients of media content, previously understood as (passive) receivers of media content by the linear model of transmission, must be conceptualised as audiences who actively interpret polysemic media messages and negotiate their meanings (e.g. Hall, 2001; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984), as well as active users of media as objects in their everyday lives (Silverstone, 1994). With the new media affordances such as various (participatory) features of media interfaces, social media buttons or wikis (see Ridder et al. in this issue), audience/user activity has become more visible and accessible for research leading to neglect of the active acts of interpretation. As Carpentier (2011:524) notices: 'when user, producer and audience become conflated, the user-component dominates the chain of equivalence, articulating all audiences as active participants; rendering passive consumption either absent or regrettable'.

At times, it seems that the term 'audiences' became somehow limiting for media scholars in their effort to address the rising visibility of audiences' productive practices, and new concepts have been proposed to cover particular aspects of being an audience. Most prominent in this academic vocabulary became the term 'produser', or its variant form 'prosumer' (and some less often used variations such as 'creative audiences' etc., see Ritzer, 2014). Needless to say, these two terms, despite being used interchangeably by some authors, are conceptualised rather differently, yet they both primarily refer to an alternative model of production rather than consumption. While Toffler's (1980) original concept of prosumption focuses on the involvement of consumers in the production of goods and/or content and is understood as an alternative business model most of all (e.g. Grinnell, 2009), Bruns' concept of produsage (see Bruns and Highfield, 2012; Bruns and Schmidt, 2011; Bruns, 2008a, 2008b, 2006) focuses on the creative aspect of the production. It sees produsage as grassroots-driven, rather than only extending consumers' involvement in the production, which is still driven by the producers as in the case of prosumption. The key characteristics defining produsage are then open access to participate in the production leading to improvement of the product, where the participants are heterarchically organised; and the product is continuously being worked on hence it is permanently unfinished; yet, the product is a common property and the participants' gains are more in the form of personal status rather than financial rewards (Bruns and Schmidt, 2011).

In general, however, what Bruns' concept refers to – a type of audiences' activity that involves production of alternative media texts, alteration of existing media texts, and their (re)distribution – is not at all a new phenomenon, as for instance fan studies can

demonstrate (e.g. Jenkins, 2007). Despite produsage being seen as a grassroots activity that might not have been possible before, Harrison and Barthel (2009) in their research show that the characteristics that we nowadays refer to as produsage can be traced in the offline and pre-Web 2.0 world too in the form of participatory public art (using examples of the AIDS Quilt, Ribbon Project and Clothesline Project). As well as pointing out that produsage is not a new phenomenon (Nakajima, 2012; Ritzer, 2014) and that audiences have always been productive, other authors remark that not all audiences are produsers and producing (Berrocal et al., 2014; Carpentier, 2011).

The broad adoption of these terms by multiple scholars within media and communication research shows the persistent need for a concept that would address and reflect various degrees of users' involvement in media content production and distribution, from sharing and enhancing content produced by others through random and/or casual contributions in the form of comments, to regular dedicated content production. Moreover, the visibility of production leads to a neglect of the actual central focus of audience research: the question of meaning-making – interpretation. Hence, so far the debate surrounding produsage remains predominantly concerned with production – access to, involvement in and influence over production and audiences' empowerment through production. Rare is the research that asks what is audiences' experience of produsage (Picone, 2011).

The lack of audiences' perspective in the research of produsage is addressed by Picone (2011) in his research of those news users who engage in producing content only casually and who are still predominantly audiences (their consumption outweighs their production), which he calls casual produsage. Speaking of audiences' practices of productive news use, rather than produsage *per se*, he argues that these should be understood as an alternative way of using information.

In this polemical essay we aim to revise and learn from the existing body of literature – and especially from the journal articles from the last decade (2005-2015) that deal with produsage / prosumption – in order to further appropriate the concept of produsage for research into audiences. We ask: what are the theoretical potentials, challenges and limits of the concept of produsage from the perspective of audience research? We are primarily preoccupied with two positions – produsage as a form of audiences' experience; and produsage from the more text-centric stance, looking at produsage as a form of interpretation and reception. Yet our literature review, driven by the aim to collect studies on audiences' varied productive media practices and involvement, revealed that the terms produsage and prosumption are not employed by scholars as rigorously as their original definitions suggest and that what they refer to is a grey area of various audiences' productive practices and degrees involvements. Thus, despite adopting the term produsage over prosumption here, omitting the economic and business aspects of audiences' involvement in production for other occasions at places, we use the term prosumption/prosumer if that's the vocabulary employed by the literature to which we refer.

Produsage as experience

The question 'are we all producers now?' asked by Bird (2011) seems to be answered negatively in various contexts of produsage (Bergström, 2008; Van Dijck, 2009; Horan, 2013). The burden of produsage as active content creation is carried by a small percentage of the internet population. However there is abundance of practices that can be characterised by some productive force but that do not necessarily lead to original content or collaboration. These 'small' contributions can range from sharing, linking and liking to commenting, sorting, and recommending. With a prolific term such as produsage they all become lumped into the productive logic instead of being treated as varied and specific ways of engagement with media and content.

Different types of engagement are probably best described in journalism studies, which build around the well-established notions of the professional tasks of journalists, and compare audience activities against them. On the one hand, there is citizen journalism (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Canter, 2013) as a practice that includes selection of events, creation of stories and their distribution on different platforms. On the other hand, there are other activities that do not replace mass-produced news, but work with them and around them. Those include citizens' input in newsgathering phases (Singer et al., 2011), selection of news or gatewatching (Bruns, 2005), distribution of news through social networking sites, as well as making news interpretation public either by liking or by commenting.

There are also other studies in which authors aim for a more nuanced approach towards different types of user engagement. For example, investigating celebrity gossip bloggers, Meyers (2012) opts for the term 'audience/produser'. As her study shows, users who blog do not see themselves as producers, rather they 'act as a public mouthpiece for certain audience segments' (Meyers, 2012:1036). Their activity originates from audiencehood which already existed and which gained new (more public) form with the possibilities of digital technology. In a theoretically quite different study, Laughey (2010) uses the label 'productive consumption'. Author examines it among eBay users/consumers and describes it as 'a type of work born and embedded in contexts of consumption' (Laughey, 2010:110). While Meyers places emphasis on hybridity of audience roles, Laughey draws attention to the fact that authority of product and its meaning can be achieved even if it is confined to the site of consumption, such as eBay.

What the mentioned studies show is that, starting from the concept of engagement with media, the key task is not (solely) to describe the ladder from use to production, looking at the each rung as a separate and disconnected activity. Following the cultural studies audience tradition, it is more important to understand how and why people move in different directions on that ladder – where, when and why they become productive, and how they experience the movements. There seems to be a solid amount of studies explaining individual motivation at the top of the ladder – on user-generated content (Markman, 2012; Farinosi and Treré, 2014). However, rather little is known about what is happening on previous stages. A good model can be found in the work of Picone (2011) who

examines how casual produsers' experience contributing to news, and what factors shape their experience. What differentiates Picone's approach from other produser studies is that he is interested in the users who occasionally make smaller contributions such as voting, sharing or commenting. These practices are also different from typical produsage as they encompass 'personal productive use of information' (Picone, 2011:105), and not collaborative engagement with other users. The main finding of Picone's methodologically complex research is that, even though small, these activities are experienced as investment. Whether or not this investment will be made depends on factors related to mass-produced content, social context (e.g. altruism, raising awareness or potential impact) or personal motives, attitudes and skills.

Denegri-Knott and Zwick (2012) ask similar questions to Picone but in the context of eBay. The authors are interested in how experiences of prosumers change over time. Their findings point to

> a trajectory from 'enchanted prosumption' to 'disenchanted prosumption' as, over time, the collective social production and consumption of desires, daydreams, and fantasies give way to a sense of eBay as a place for routine, efficient, and habitual buying and selling activities (Denegri-Knott and Zwick, 2012:439).

Studies into what it means for users to participate in media content production are still very rare within media studies, apart from the area of fan studies (Milner, 2010), where the various degrees of readers/viewers/users engagement with the media texts have been long studied (e.g. Gray et al., 2007). Despite putting the users' production at the centre, produsage paradoxically overlooks the users themselves. The questions gaining prominence are those of changing dynamics between the professional and amateur producers (Bruns and Highfield, 2012); or the legitimacy of belonging to the media field (i.e. music in case of Cole (2011)); or questions related to expertise and what it constitutes (Ross, 2011). The users' productive activity hence serves as a tool to understand other aspects / actors / relations within the media landscape, but not necessarily the users and their position within the same landscape. Conceptualising produsage as a user's experience allows audience research to understand the above-mentioned questions of empowerment, power relations, knowledge-production and expertise in more complex way – from the perspective of the users who are actually objects as well as subjects of these transformations.

Produsage and/as interpretation

More than ten years ago Livingstone (2004) already outlined the 'old new' questions for studying the changing audiences: are new practices of reading emerging and how do people variously 'read' the world wide web? Nonetheless, a decade later, the research inquiry into use (of media, deriving from the notion of media as an object) majorly overshadows the interest in 'reading' (of media messages) referred to by Livingstone (2004). It is precisely the

interpretative activities that are being neglected by looking into produsage as an audiences' experience of production rather than their experiences as reception.

Based on a model aimed to accentuate the shift from usage to production, produsage research is predominantly oriented towards what people do in online environments. The broader critique of the lack of studies about users' interpretation of technologies and mediated content (Livingstone, 2004; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012) is equally applicable to produsage, as it is to similar concepts that emphasize use at the expense of other aspects of user-engagement. This critique is usually formulated by contrasting the conceptions of audience and user. With the emergence of active user the idea of passive audience re-emerged (Carpentier, 2011).

The special issue on prosumption of *American Behavioral Scientist,* published in 2012 (56(4)) and edited by George Ritzer, Paul Dean, and Nathan Jurgenson, is organised into three sections, one of which is Meaning and Prosumption. The articles published in this section are one of the rare examples of integrating the questions of meaning-making into the research of produsage. One of them is the already-mentioned study of prosumption of eBay (Denegri-Knott and Zwick, 2012). The second study brings questions of identity into prosumption and shows how interpretation and social interaction among the online community for sufferers of body integrity identity disorder (BIID), gathered around the website Transabled.org, play important role in produsage (Davis, 2012). Reading personal stories of others, as Davis demonstrates, plays an important role in identity-construction and identity-expression arguing that the identity prosumption begins 'with the consumption of others' words and ending with the production of a consumable identity category (i.e., transableism)' (Davis, 2012: 64). In the third study Woermann (2012) analyses freeskiing subculture, and the production and dissemination of freeskiing photographs among its members. The meanings attached to the very acts of taking photos play important part of the subculture and its consequent online produsage. Recuber's study (2012) in the same special issue, of digital memory banks for people to record their own memories and understanding of the past event (i.e. September 11 and Hurricane Katrina), deals with the issue of online commemoration. Unlike Davis's (2012) example where produsage is a form of collaborative construction of identity, in the case of online commemoration, the act of produsage serves as a form of therapeutic self-help. In this instance, the produsage emphasizes individualism and fragmentation that leads to the lack of political mobilisation usual for offline commemoration. What the studies from this special issue have in common is orientation towards produsers as interpretative subjects whose produsage originates in meanings attached to the actions of the other produsers, produsage contexts (platforms) and produced context. Still it should be noted that none of them explicitly originates from audience interpretation studies.

It is possible to identify another type of research that links produsage and interpretation. Ritzer's (2014) claim that prosumption is not historically a new phenomenon builds on the logic of political economy, while similar conclusions are offered by studies that are dealing with the creative aspects of produsage, yet locating it in the offline rather than

online space. For example, Harrison and Barthel's (2009) analysis of public participatory art is arguing that the contribution and production of one's account to a bigger collective project is a process of prior consumption of other accounts followed by productive response as a form of interpretative activity. Nakajima's (2012) study similarly refers to artistic practices as a form of produsage – where meaning is co-produced by the artist and the audience, both positioning the artistic object within their understanding of art and other artistic references.

The tradition of audience research establishes the notion of media as a material object as well as symbolic message (Silverstone, 1994; Livingstone, 2004). Speaking of produsage it is hence important to also understand how produsers interpret the technological affordances at hand. Siles' (2012) account of evolving articulation of technology (i.e. weblogs) through its (early) use offers a historical excursus showing mutuality in defining what weblog is for its users, and at the same time defining who the users are through the particular ways of their practices of use.

Conclusion

The two foci – produsage as an experience and produsage and/as interpretation – discussed here are not exclusive, existing alongside each other, but rather very closely interwoven. Produsage as an experience of productive use is inevitably an act of interpretation at the same time. One has to interpret media, media genres and other media content in order to produce one's own contribution to the ocean of the mediated world. The multidimensionality of reception and interpretation on the part of productive audiences is complex and still very much unexplored by the media research.

The majority of contemporary research related to produsage is oriented towards the content produced by the many. As others have already noted: 'The notion of audience comes into play only in an indirect sense, when using a meta-perspective that assumes that the multitude of individual users form a considerably influential and powerful public' (O'Neill et al., 2013:160). Research informed by the concept of produsage provides valuable insights into collaboration and new types of authorship, it stresses openness and heterarchically organised production. What happens at the individual level, and the interpretation that comes before both usage and production, should be explored using and modifying already-developed concepts in audience reception studies. Looking at the last decades of research into audience and produsage, there seem to be several possible research paths to be explored.

First, produsage does not need to be conceptualised purely through full-blown user-generated content. It is casual produsage that should gain more prominence in audience research, these small engagements with mediated content – endorsement of media texts in the form of 'liking', re-posting and other forms of sharing; comments and publication of brief / irregular posts – could offer a more profound and nuanced understanding and answers to the old but no less important questions of audience research: 'what people do with media?'.

Second, there seems to be space to link the existing orientation towards communality of produsage with audience interpretations and experiences. As the body of knowledge on audiences teaches us, acts of reading are interwoven with social and cultural belonging. What are the characteristics of produsage communities and, more importantly, what role does situatedness in these communities play in motivation to produse and in the prodused contribution? As several already discussed papers have shown, shared experiences are important for engagement. What they do not show – and for this audience studies are well equipped – is how shared experiences translate into texts, textual fragments and other types of productive use.

Third, the text-reader metaphor in new media environments (Livingstone, 2004) could be extended and nuanced to account for varied degrees of produsage. Since some of the prodused content is fragmented and granular (Bruns, 2008a, 2008b, 2006) the important question is how this granularity is interpreted and experienced. How is collective autorship understood? What kind of content, and for what reasons – content-related, social or psychological – becomes experienced as 'deserving' of casual produsage?

As highlighted at the beginning of the essay, produsage emerged as concept to explain the changes in production modes. Focusing on decentering of the (mass communication and mass production) centre, it looks at the way people organize (or are organized) to produse. In many respects the individuality of these people remains unaccounted for. Following the tradition of audience studies, all the questions asked in the previous paragraphs should be answered by looking at individuals and the communities that they belong to.

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Acknowledgments:

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