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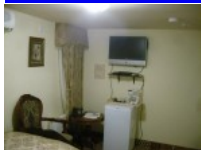
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In today's exciting world of the prosumer, readers become writers, listeners transform into speakers, viewers emerge as stars, fans are academics, and *vice versa*. Zine writers are screenwriters. Bloggers are copywriters. Children are columnists. Bus riders are journalists. Coca-Cola hires African Americans to drive through the inner city selling soda and playing hip-hop. AT&T pays San Francisco buskers to mention the company in their songs. Urban performance poets rhyme about Nissan cars for cash, simultaneously hawking, entertaining, and researching. Subway's sandwich commercials are marketed as made by teenagers. Cultural-studies majors become designers. Graduate students in New York and Los Angeles read scripts for producers then pronounce on whether they tap into the *Zeitgeist*. Internally divided—but happily so—each person is, as Foucault put it forty years ago, 'a consumer on the one hand, but ... also a producer.'^[1]

Bitcoin and Bakhtin, creativity and carnival, heteroglossia and heterotopia—they're all available to the prosumer. Vapid victims of ideology are now credible creators of meaning. Active audiences are neither active nor audiences—their uses and gratifications come from sitting back and enjoying the career of their own content, not from viewing others'. They resist authority not via aberrant decoding of texts that have been generated by professionals, but by ignoring such things in favor of making their own.

Whether scholars like to attach electrodes to peoples' naughty bits to establish whether porn turns them on, or interview afternoon TV viewers to discern progressive political tendencies in their interpretation of courtroom shows, they're yesterday's people. It doesn't matter if they purvey rats and stats and are the consummate quantoid, or eschew that in favor of populist authenticity as an acafan and credulous quantoid. Their day is past.

"Media effects" describes what people do to the media, not the other way round. People in all spheres of scholarship

say “My children” like this, that, or the other by way of media use—which are held up as predictions of the future. (No-one says the same about, for example, their children’s food preferences, as if abjuring vegetables at age seven will be a lifetime activity.)

Who made all this up? Reagan’s people, of course.

Alvin Toffler was one of a merry band of futurists who emerged in the 1970s. A lapsed leftist Reaganite, he coined the term ‘prosumer’ in 1980 as a dream of a newly technologized future.^[2]

The prosumer was a return to subsistence, to the period prior to the Industrial Revolution’s division of labor—a time when we ate what we grew, built our own shelters, and gave birth without medicine. The specialization of agriculture and manufacturing and the rise of cities put paid to that, as the emergence of capitalism distinguished production from consumption via markets.

But Toffler discerned a return, or at least a blend of the two eras, with the French invention and marketing of home-pregnancy tests in the 1970s. These kits relied on the formal knowledge, manufacture, and distribution that typified modern life, but permitted customers to make their own diagnoses, cutting out the role of doctors as expert gatekeepers between applied science and the self.

Toffler called this ‘production for self-use.’ He discerned it in the vast array of civil society organizations that emerged at the time in the name of ‘self-help’ and the popularity of self-serve gas stations when franchises struggled to survive after the 1973-74 oil crisis and automatic teller machines, which proliferated as banks sought to reduce their labor force.

Both instances involved getting customers to do unpaid work in addition to paying for goods and services. In this sense, Toffler acknowledged the crucial role of corporations in constructing prosumption—they were there from the first, cutting costs and relying on labor undertaken by customers to externalize costs through what he termed ‘willing seduction.’

This was coeval with, and just as important as, the devolution of authority that emerged from the new freedoms.^[3]

The argument that we are simultaneously cultural consumers and producers, i.e. prosumers, is clearly an idea whose time has come, as Toffler’s fellow reactionary Victor Hugo almost said.^[4] Before we celebrate it, let’s learn its history, both in coinage and use.

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^[1] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 226.

^[2] Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, New York: William Morrow, 1980; George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson, “Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital ‘Prosumer,’” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10. 1 (2010): 13-36.

^[3] Toffler, *The Third*, *op. cit.*, 266, 269-70, 275.

^[4] Hugo wrote ‘On résiste à l’invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l’invasion des idées’ in *Histoire d’un crime: Déposition d’un témoin* (Paris: Nelson, 1907), 554, which is often rendered in English as the *cliché* I have just used. The next sentence is, ‘La gloire des barbares est d’être conquis par l’humanité; la gloire des sauvages est d’être conquis par la civilisation,’ which translates as ‘The glory of barbarians is to be conquered by humanity; the glory of savages is to be conquered by civilization.’ Thanks for sharing, Vic.

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