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Peer-to-Peer and User Generated Content: Flash in the Pan or the Arrival of a New Storytelling Paradigm?

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User generated content (UGC) is driven by two factors – Technology and Community.

As we've reached the tipping point in the deployment of core technology that facilitates content creation and sharing, it's easy to theorize that technology is the key driver.

But I'd propose a different analysis. An analysis based on almost 15 years of experience developing environments that foster the creation of User-Generated Video.

So let's jump back in time, and I'll explain the evolution of UGV in its formative stages, and how what I learned in the early 1990s can help us understand the current explosion in UGV and the likely path it will take forward.

Back in the early 1990s, I was running a company that had broken new ground in local and then regional news magazine television. *BROADCAST: New York* was a weekly half hour television program syndicated throughout New York State. The program was seen by and large on NBC stations at 6:30 on Saturday evenings. It had a large following, had won two Emmy's, and had a staff of smart, hard working, young storytellers who were driven to explore ideas and issues in new ways. We'd defined a community (New Yorkers) and created a market for both content and advertising. The consumer Internet didn't exist. Neither did local cable news. These were early days. But magazine television programming was

"hot" and both network and local stations were adding programs. Increasingly, as the program's Executive Producer, I felt that the stories we were reporting weren't breaking new ground. Some months earlier we'd put in place a rather expensive 800 number so that viewers could call in and record a "letter to the editor" response to our weekly broadcast. We were getting 40 or 50 calls a week, and we'd choose the most interesting calls to broadcast on the following week's episode. We thought of this as a unique use of technology (the 800#) and interactivity (the audience could respond to us). But as pressure increased to develop more unique editorial, we were short of new ideas.

In May of 1991, I wrote a short promotional announcement for the program's host to deliver on the following week's episode. It read something like: "We've run out of ideas. We don't know what stories matter to you. And we need your help. Call our 800 number and tell us what we should be covering." Though I didn't know it then, it was a critical moment in my development as a journalist and storyteller. A number of events transpired that couldn't have been projected. First, of my 26 staff one quit on the spot. They saw the promo as irresponsible, an abdication of our job to figure out what mattered to our viewers. In their mind that was our job – knowing what mattered. And the 800 number logged almost a thousand calls.

Lesson #1. People are far more interested sharing their ideas with you than in "commenting" on the content created and distributed by mainstream media. That was instantly obvious.

From that moment on, *BROADCAST: New York* was a television program that listened. It was a transformative moment. The calls that came in where passionate, angry, crazy, charming, but above all authentic. We listened to them all, called many back, and within weeks were crediting audience members with their story ideas, tips, and editorial direction in each episode. The call volume never subsided. The audience never got tired of suggesting stories.

At some point thereafter, a local newspaper reporter doing a story about our company suggested we were doing something that was "technologically groundbreaking." I remember correcting him at the time – and suggesting that the only novel thing we were doing was answering the phone. Something any media outlet could do if they so chose.

Things proceeded for almost a year – until I found myself at a consumer electronics store holding one of the very first Sharp Viewcams. These hi8 cameras hand a large LCD screen and were the size of a large paperback

book. They were no better than a VHS camcorder – save the fact that you could turn the lens around and photograph yourself. It was a "Max Headroom" moment. The next day I was on the phone to Sharp, who agreed to ship 5 loaner units to *BROADCAST: New York*. Once again, we gave our host the duty of inviting the audience to do our job – in this case replace the staff Videographer with first-person home-grown video.

The invitation took hold with instantly. And within two weeks we had a waiting list of viewers who wanted to do more than watch media, they wanted to make it. The segment, called "Viewers News" was an instant success. Our 5 loaner cameras were constantly in use. And while the quality of the material varied widely, we quickly learnt some key lessons that still serve us today. First, people knew what they wanted to say – they just weren't sure how to construct a coherent story with a beginning, middle, and end. After trying to get the show's producers to begin to mentor viewers, it became clear that anyone who thought of themselves as a professional storyteller wasn't going to be enthusiastic about handing those duties over to previously passive viewers. For a few weeks the stories that came in were authentic, but not dramatic. Then everything changed.

There was a call on the 800 number from a woman in Syracuse New York. She wanted to tell her story so that other women would be forewarned. She had had cosmetic surgery to increase her breast size. The surgeon used silicone implants. Both had ruptured, and she had been infected with a severe case of silicone blood poisoning.

A staff producer talked with her, and over the phone – there was no email – they outlined the story she would record. The camera was dispatched. And over the next 10 days she FedEx'd back tape so that the producer could give her feedback and constructive criticism. She had a checklist of scenes she was going to shoot, and she proceeded to record them all. She took the camera to work, where her disability left her unable to function on a full time basis. She recorded a trip to the grocery store, talking to the camera as it looked up at her from the shopping cart. And she interviewed her husband – an awkward and revealing conversation that had an extraordinary subtext.

Then she signed a footage release and returned the camera.

Once the camera and the last footage had been returned and was being reviewed, it was clear she'd done something beyond the original story proposal. The last day she had the camera she'd woken, as she did every morning, and made her way to the bathroom to get ready for her day. But

this day, with her Sharp Viewcam in hand, she'd placed it on the bathroom mirror. Then, she'd unbuttoned her robe. The tape was unflinching. There she showed the camera, and us, two horrible scars where her breasts had been.

A much shaken Segment Producer summoned me to the edit room.

I remember the moment. It was shocking, disturbing, and honest. Could we show it on television? A few things were instantly clear. Had our crew recorded these images they would have represented such a staggering breach of etiquette that most likely the producer and the photographer would have lost their jobs. Had a producer from our company prompted the tape, or urged this kind of personal revelation, it would have crossed the line. But that hadn't happened. What happened was that a woman wanted to tell her story, and knew intuitively that the image of her marred chest was far more impactful and effective than any number of words she could record.

She wanted to tell her story in a way that would impact other woman profoundly. And that she had most certainly done.

We did two things next. We checked to make sure she wanted us to broadcast the images, and we alerted our affiliates that we were going to air video that some might find disturbing. They weren't sexual, but they were horribly graphic.

Then we held our breath. The woman said, yes she wanted those images on TV. And our stations didn't flinch. We aired it on 14 stations… and waited to see how the audience would react. The feedback was instantaneous – after all we had the 800 number. Woman cheered our Viewer/Storyteller, they supported us, and they talked at length about the issues of sexual identity, cosmetic surgery, and the impact of the media on women's body image.

Something had changed.

User Generated Video was born that day. Technology was enabled… but not the driver. The driver was far more human. A person whose pain and suffering had made her keenly aware of the dangers of silicone breast implants. A person who wanted to share her experience with others in her community.

Today

YouTube is reporting 70 thousand uploads and 100 million video views a day.

YouTube is notable in a number of ways. Its fast start is both remarkable and inevitable. From November of 2005 until June of 2006 it launched, grew with an adoption cure that is unlike any other software product, website, or piece of consumer electronics in history. And yet, if you return to the lessons learned at *BROADCAST: New York*, it's hardly surprising. Current projections for broadband content consumption peg growth from 13 million US homes today to 131 million by 2010.[1]

This tenfold increase in just 4 years suggests a consumer demand and adoption cure that will reach far beyond early adopters and teen consumers.

And looking back at the evolution of User-Generated Videos helps us understand this phenomenon.

1995. New York.

The evolution of content on *BROADCAST: New York* had allowed us to explore consumer content creation behavior for almost 2 years. And the results were surprising. The content makers came from a wide variety of backgrounds. There were certainly underprivileged crying out of justice, but within the middle class story ideas and extraordinary video tape continued to come in week after week. Demand didn't trail off. It was – from the moment we offered viewers a chance to create media – strong and consistent.

And so I went looking for a larger platform to test the concept of Viewers News on a national basis. In its original pitch, the concept was called "Viewers News Channel," a consumer reported 24-hour cable channel dedicated to first-person storytelling. I presented the idea with a great deal of enthusiasm to Frank Biondi, who was then the CEO of Viacom. Sitting in his office on the executive floor of 1515 Broadway we dialled into our 800# and played call after call of passionate personal storytellers. To his credit – Biondi immediately engaged the idea of new content sources and was supportive. Later in his role at Waterview Advisors, Biondi would be an early source of capital for a number of groundbreaking Internet start-ups including Atom Films. But he cautioned that the "channel" was too big a first step – why not start with a national television program to test the concept further.

With his encouragement and a tape full of "ViewersNEWS" segments from *BROADCAST: New York* programs to prove out the concept, I made a pretty elaborate presentation to MTV. Biondi had warned me that I should pitch it "cold" (not using his endorsement for fear that his notoriously independent exec would back away from anything that came from a "suit."). I presented to Joe Davola and Linda Corradina – and to their credit they were immediately enthusiastic about embracing consumer

content. Yet they were wary. "Would people actually call in?" "Would the stories be interesting enough?" They wanted a test.

And so weeks later, we put on a 30 promo for a pilot series called "*MTV Interact*" and invited viewers to suggest stories they would report. The promo played just three times, and the calls were delivered to our 800# to be tallied and transcribed. Just 48 hours later – we had 5,000 calls. The series was given a green light to go into production. Interact became "*Unfiltered*," despite my protests. I argued that *Unfiltered* sounded too much like Unplugged (it did) and that my title was better – "Free Speech." But the push back at the time was that Free Speech sounded like a high school civics class, and that no one would ever care about the fact that *Unfiltered* was in fact *filtered*. On that point they were most certainly correct.

Unfiltered was an extraordinary experience. The core staff, the evolving editorial philosophies, and some of the hard fought internal battles all served to teach me about the opportunities and complexities that lay ahead as use-created-content moved toward the mainstream.

The process was formal and detailed. Each episode would invite viewers with a story to tell to call our 800# and pitch their story to *Unfiltered*. Alison Stewart, the show's first host had a remarkable way of exuding both trust and passion, and seemed to be able to reach through the set and coax audience members to dial the phone. The calls were transcribed and printouts of the day's calls were distributed to the show's Associate Producers, Producers, and Executive Producers. Early on we decided to let associate producers "adopt" stories that caught their eye. Certain AP's tended toward more visual pieces, adventure sports, and stunts, while others were drawn toward socials issues and injustice, and others toward personal stories and journeys. As the show's lead producer and Exec Producer (along with MTV's Dave Sirulnick), I would make sure that the stories all got "adopted" by someone. Everyone who called got a call back (read ClueTrain Manifesto if you want to know why). Having humans connect with humans was critical.

The calls were as broad as you might imagine. A girl from Penn State wanted to document and object to an annual male "streaking ritual" on her campus. Skateboarders felt they were harassed by the cops. A boy had painted his room black and painted over the windows, he was afraid to go outside. A teen father complained there were no baby changing tables in men's bathrooms. A cross dresser graduated from Florida State in drag. And then there was Shaun.

Shaun was 15. He seemed like an average teen. Then he committed suicide.

His best friend, a 14-year-old girl, had called the 800#, sobbing. She was angry. Angry with Shaun for the pain he'd caused. Angry that he'd left his friends to deal with the grief. She wanted to record her anger so that any teen thinking of suicide would know the pain it caused. She wanted us to send her a camera to tell her story.

At that point we had 30 cameras. They were sharp hi8 viewcams, and they were constantly on the move… shipped from one story to another. Each story was allocated just 10 days to shoot… but people often kept them longer. And as tape came in, we would often send a camera back for additional shots or new interviews, coaxing the story from the storytellers in little bites.

Each week we met, discussed stories, and Associate Producers lobbied for access to the few cameras that had freed up from the week before to start their stories. The Shaun story had been adopted by Dina Kaplan (who had left the Clinton White House to join Unfiltered). She wanted this story to be made.

Others weren't so sure. Suicide was a touchy subject. Was this really the right show to do such serious material? What images could actually be photographed? The story had happened. It seemed likely to be a waste of precious camera resources. Dina was adamant. She wanted a chance.

It was a pivotal moment for Unfiltered and for User-Generated Content as well. Dina won, and the camera was shipped. The result is a story that haunts me to this day. Heartbroken teens, home videos of Shaun both happy and deeply depressed. Interviews with the father, the mother, the sisters, the friends. My older son is 16 now, and on days when he's dealing with complex teenage things, I never forget Shaun, and always remember to hug him and tell him I love him. The naysayers in the room that day were right, suicide is a touchy subject. And that's why it deserved to be explored by people who'd earned the right to talk about how it feels to lose someone you love.

Not every *Unfiltered* story was that important or successful of course. Lots of viewers lost interest and didn't finish their pieces. Our associate producer walked a tricky line… in building bridges without crossing the line. Each camera that got sent out included a recorded introduction by the Associate Producer who would be working with the viewer. "We're going to see you, so you should be able to see what we look like" the tapes always began.

One storyteller who lived near our office in New York insisted on coming to pick up the camera ("don't fed ex it, I'll drop by"). Disaster. Once they'd met their associate producer, they wrangled him into "helping him shoot" and the result was an icky local news piece.

We learned something from that. We could provide assistance, help, tools, and a framework. But people needed to tell their own stories, in their own way. Technology was clearly part of what was driving the emergence of first-person storytelling. We'd be the first show at MTV to be cut on non-linear Avid editing equipment in large part because the stories came to gather in a non-linear way. And once the first crop of DV cameras came out, we shifted slowly from hi8 to DV improving picture and sound quality.

But Unfiltered's innovations weren't technical. They were philosophical. We thought what people had to say was more important than what we had to say. We thought our role was to create a framework, a support system, and a mentoring relationship. We trained our staff to this. If a viewer would say, "how should my story end?" we would say… "well, what do you think?"

We were more like shrinks than TV Producers.

By 1998 the Internet was clearly providing new opportunities for storytelling. And 3 years of producing Unfiltered at MTV had had only one drawback – the media had happily labeled User-Generated Content as "teen" or "Gen X" news. Despite my constant reminders of the early experiments with *BROADCAST: New York* and the large number of adult contributors, the power of the MTV brand (and the popularity of the show) had dwarfed the early days and the concept of Viewers News Channel.

This is worth a moment's consideration.

When consumers shift their function from consumption to creation, the impact is significant. And for content companies, the results will be earth-shaking – and potentially disastrous.

So when I approached MTV after 3 years on the air and suggested it was time for a change, I proposed a radical re-invention of the channel and its relationship with the audience.

In a meeting with Judy McGrath, then the President of MTV, I suggested that *Unfiltered* should end its run as a program and instead that the process of inviting content submission and content creation should be shifted to a wider network strategy. My proposal was to turn MTV into UGV. To invite viewers to submit stories about their world, their music, their fashion, and the trends in their town. Judy was willing to listen, since the early trend lines of the Internet were clearly being drawn. But months later, the decision was that it was "too early" and that MTV wasn't prepared to shift its focus from telling teens what was hip to having teens tell them. McGrath was right, in a way, because empowering the audience does have the potential to make MTV less central to the equation. Teach a man to fish, they go fishing. Feed a man a fish, they come back for dinner tomorrow night. MTV wanted to make sure it had return customers to its content buffet. And 8 years later, as MTV shifts to new delivery platforms –

there's no doubt that McGrath was right to continue to run the old model for as long as she did. The open question still remains, "can MTV morph into YouTube, or do those three magic letters not mean as much to today's teens?"

What drove *BROADCAST: New York* and *Unfiltered* and how does that connect to the emerging user-generated content trends we're seeing today?

Passion v. Profit

In August of 2005, I traveled to Oxford, England for a gathering of world changing thinkers called TED. TEDsters, as they're known, travel from around the world to hear talks from world-changing individuals and contemplate the nexus of technology, entertainment, and design.

The days are long. The topics are intense. And the pace somewhat blistering. By the end of the first day I'd been convinced that architecture, engineering, solar energy, and political photography all had world shaping potential. But it wasn't until 8 a.m. the next day that I knew why I'd come to TED.

Yoachi Benkler is a bearded bear of a man who teaches Law at Yale by day… and thinks deeply about consumer created content the rest of the time. In Oxford he had just 20 min – as do all TED presenters – to tell his story. It was Benkler who for the first time connected the Open Source Software moment to User-Generated Content. As Benkler sees it… its all consumer created content. And he makes a pretty compelling argument for the fact that something significant is changed. He points to server software like Apache, which is the work of an army of volunteers, and now has 66.9% of the server marketplace,[2] dwarfing Microsoft. Why do people participate in open source projects? Is there some hidden profit motive? Benkler says no. Instead, he says that people are creative, and people enjoy making things and people want to participate within communities of enthusiasts who have a passion for their craft. Stop and think about the explosive impact on Benkler's thesis. While software is a highly developed skill set, the impact on the content industry could be far more dramatic. Not everyone can write code. But *everyone* has a story, an idea, a project, or a skill that they can share in a video. Benkler's thesis promises a future of enthusiast content makers that latterly disassembles the current content creation/distribution/consumption eco-system. And talking to him, you can't help but get the sense that he thinks that can't happen soon enough.

After TED I contacted him, and we spent some time via email and then over coffee talking about the future of content, what's clear is that he is a passionate theorist. At one point I asked if his groundbreaking thesis on the web (coasespenguin.com) would be made any simpler when he published his book. His answer was a simple "no." And when you ask him to engage in an exploration of the slippery slope between "enthusiast" media and "pro-summer," he demurs. For Benkler, free is the single most interesting operating principal. And he may well be right. More and more I find that I'm relying on user-reviews, Google group comments, and Wikipedia for information and opinion. Sure, I consume some mainstream media, but it tends to be more "big" media that is as much a social phenomenon – the water cooler effect – and less for knowledge and information.

What is clear is that Unfiltered is very much driven by what Benkler calls Peer Production. And his thinking, combined with the motivation that drove Unfiltered and now YouTube, is creating an economy that increasingly leaves networks and distributors without a place to stand. No longer gatekeepers, no longer pipe owners, and no longer taste makers, the future of the current keepers of the media eco-system have much to be worried about.

In October of 2004, the Editor of Wired Magazine penned a thesis about how the connected word changed the content distribution equation. It was called The Long Tail. And much like Benkler, Chris Anderson's work clicked and fell into place. If Unfiltered had taught a generation that they could make content, and Benkler had developed a thesis that consumer content was likely to create a new model for content makers, then Anderson galvanized the future of micro distribution.

Simply put, The Long Tail re-imagines content distribution in a world where there is no cost of storage, no limits on shelf space, and highly evolved systems to discover and receive the media you want when you want it. It is both breathtakingly simple and wildly imaginative at the same time. It images a world without hits, without mass marketing, without mainstream distribution. Anderson might debate the scope of my summary (he does after all work for a company that prints and distributes a magazine), but it is my take on his analysis.

It is the future that Judy McGrath had hoped to postpone when she kept the Unfiltered phenomenon in its box, back in 1997.

And so, when the Wall Street Journal declares in a page one story in August of 2006 that "MTV can't seem to find kids online" they're actually chronicling a much more important underlying trend. The media wrongly presents MySpace traffic as a collective audience, when in fact the pageviews on MySpace are in fact thousands (more accurately hundreds of thousands) of niche channels made by and for young people. The Journal

suggests that Viacom missed a critical moment when it didn't purchase MySpace, but that's hardly the point, because in the emerging world of Me Media, any attempt by a single company to capture and commoditize that audience will result in a defection to a new, less consolidated platform. Teens know what mass media smells like and they run the other way. And, they're not alone.

And so – we stand at a content crossroads. Not a moment driven by technology, but rather a moment powered by technology. Human beings tell stories. They gather and share knowledge. They entertain. They teach. There have always been gating factors that have separated community speakers from amplified speakers. The printing press, the radio license, the TV transmitter.

But those gates are gone.

And now the flood begins. Content made on the fly, content made by professionals. Content created by communities for communities. The impulses that drove people to call our 800 number back in 1994 are if anything more prevalent today than then. The world has become more complex, the news media more consolidated in its ownership and it's tenor. And the economics of cable and broadcast forces them to reach for broader and more disposable programming choices at the moment when media consumers are increasingly looking to highly specialized niche content sources including web sites and blogs.

In February of 2005, Chad Hurley and Steve Chen put online a web site to solve a problem they were having. Video sharing was difficult and they thought a public site was the solution. It was called YouTube, and it was neither slick nor complex. In fact, it was pretty bare bones. But in the aesthetics of web 2.0, it was extremely open and provided few barriers to upload and storage. It's pretty clear that the guys at YouTube didn't expect that they'd be lighting the fuse on the final explosion of conventional television as we know it. But it's pretty clear that's what is happening.

People formerly known as content "consumers" (or less kindly as "couch potatoes") began to turn their thoughts, hobbies, humor, and voices into a massive content creation engine. And the discussion of "exploding TV" became the hottest topic on blogs that debate the evolution of the net from text and pictures to full motion video.

Fred Wilson, who's influential blog AVC.Blogspot.com had been a bellwether for music technology and personal media, turned his attention to Television.

said Wilson: "I think the advent of the media-centric PC will cause this trend (bit torrent 'downloaded' TV) to accelerate. If my family room is driven by a PC with a DVR, set top box, and web browser built into it, connected to cable

for both programming and high speed data, and then connected to a nice big flat panel display, the option to watch a show via live TV, VOD, DVR, or BitTorrent is just a click of the remote. And when it's that easy, why will my girls choose to watch One Tree Hill via DVR when they can just as easily get it via BitTorrent?"

And Jeff Jarvis, who blogs at buzzmachine.com and is the creator and founding editor of Entertainment Weekly, and TV critic for TV Guide and People magazines, has pretty strong feels about this as well.

> Jarvis sees the "exploding" of TV in a number of critical ways. First, he proclaims "At some point, soon, content producers will get rid of all middlemen" and there's lots of reasons to believe this is true. But then Jarvis goes on to connect all this to Madison Avenue seeing a battle ensuing between old media companies moving online to complete and new media outlets.

> Says Jarvis: "What excites me most is that reduced cost of production. That's really what drove weblogs: history's cheapest publishing tool reduced the barrier to entry to media and allowed anyone to produce and distribute text content. Now this will come to video. I've said it before (warning: I'll say it again) ... A half-hour of how-to TV that now costs X hundreds of thousands of dollars to produce can be done quite respectably – and probably with more life and immediacy – for a few thousand dollars. New content producers will pop up all over (just as they did in blogs) and now they can distribute their content freely (thanks to BitTorrent). That is where I want to play."

Jarvis sees a future in which citizen journalists and consumer content creators become central figures in the creation and consumption of editorial material. What makes his perspective so rare, and refreshing, is that he had a full-on membership in the ruling media elite. For him to set outside, and go from a TimeWarner/Conde Naste creator of MSM (mainstream media) to a blogger – a position of some less authority and power – is a sign of just how intoxicating the promise of personal publishing is.

Both Jarvis and Fred are on the money – the transformative changes that are roiling the media industry go deeper than technology or personal expression. At the core of the growth in first-person media is a passion that challenges the promises of the Democracy.

Big media, like Big Government, thrives by being able to monopolize the conversation. Media companies need to be able to control the conversation, set the agenda, and manage whatever role community members may want to have in the conversation. But consumer generated media isn't a parlor trick that's given credence by corporate media. It is in fact a Peer-to-Peer system that thrives on networks that fall below conventional radar.

That brings us full circle. *MTV Unfiltered* meets Tool replace networks, people replace search. We're standing on the eve of a new era in person-to-person storytelling. It is an era in which institutions that have for the past 50 years been at the center of mass media may find that they need to rapidly re-invent themselves or slip into obsolescence.

That brings me to Unfiltered 2.0, and one potential set of events that could unfold to create the new media landscape.

As I write this chapter the collective wisdom and mistakes of 12 years of work have been organized into code. Since my first day on the job at Unfiltered, I've been testing and evolving theories about UGC and the environments that foster the highest quality content. Over that time, content creators have proven time and time again that certain environment features stimulate the "network effect" in content creation. And turning those ideas into a set of web based tools and processes have the potential to nurture nascent content creation communities.

The code is a software platform called Magnify.net,[3] and it's available to any web based publisher or content entrepreneur. It – like all consumer driven products – will evolve as users teach us about how they interact with and modify the platform. But as of today, it is solid, growing, and increasing virally.

Can it be that software based rules and tools improve UGC? You decide. Here are the rules (more guidelines) that drive the Magnify Peer Production Platform.

Shared Spaces, Shared Stories

Communities used to be geographic. You were a part of a community where you lived, where you worked, or maybe where you found recreation or hobbies. But they were all driven by proximity. No longer. The web has changed that forever. I'm a member of a group of web-based entrepreneurs so secretive that I'm not allowed to even write the group's name down. They are some of the most well known leaders in web design, e-commerce, and technology. There are 68 of us. And I've only met one of them face to face. Yet I email all of them every day, read their blogs, and share private business concerns and questions with them. Why? Because we're a community. And as I catalog my interests and connections, it's clear that I can map my life as a series of concentric circles (communities of interest) that I subscribe to. These communities are shared spaces, and within them, much if not all of the value of these communities are the shared stories that

reside within them. I drink from this well of knowledge often, and return to it knowledge that I think is useful and pertinent to others. Whether it is by commenting on other posts, or posting my own… these engagements are without a doubt editorial enterprises. The evolution from centralized knowledge creation and distribution networks (TV, Radio, and Print) to community based knowledge collectives is already underway. Whether you count on Wikipedia for research or Amazon reviews for consumer advice or Google Groups for tech support, chances are you're already dipping into knowledge networks for an increasingly large portion of what is your content diet. Video will be central to this change.

Peer Feedback Keeps the System Honest

There is no doubt that not all content is created equal. In fact, community-based peer review is critical to keeping both creators and critics honest. As we learned at MTV, no one-community member can assure that content submissions are accurate and honest. But dispersing the job to a wider group of community members assures that not one vote or voice will drive the process. Peer Filtering relies on anonymous distribution of contributed content to volunteer community reviewers. In the spirit of eBay, it's critical that both reviewers and submitters participate in reputation system that allows both comments and content that doesn't meet community standards to be identified and removed from the community.

Not all Community Members Have the Same Stature or Goals

There is currently a debate within the UGC world about the need to provided payments or revenue sharing with content makers. But not all communities are driven by the same motivators. And even within communities, not all creators have the same motivations. Compare the web sites Slashdot and Digg to the UGC created network "Current". Both of the tech-focused sites have extraordinary member involvement, both as submitters and as peer reviewers. Yet they don't pay anything for submission or participation. Current, on the other hand, pays submitters a flat $250.00 for each video submission that is used on the air. Yet as a ratio, members of Digg are far more engaged to contribute than Current. Why is that? Because members of both Digg and Slashdot are driven by their status in

the community and reputation, and Current's decision making is centralized (and therefore not democratic). [Disclosure: Current's founder Al Gore was an early fan of MTV Unfiltered, and I was an early advisor to Current before its launch.]

Communities Organize Around Sparkplug Issues

In the old world of video content, programs were organized around channels. But in the emerging world of content communities, Sparkplug Topics drive contribution, collaboration, and community. The idea that small groups of people can be deeply passionate about narrow enthusiast niches is clear to anyone who has looked at Alexa.com to try and determine the key verticals emerging on the net. The quick answer is – they can't be deciphered based on conventional metrics. For example, www.rcuvideos.com has a very large base of users and more than 300,000 registered users. They are the best location for Radio Controlled model airplanes and helicopters. And, not surprisingly – they are also a terrific destination for the purchase of parts and supplies for that hobby.

The impact on these changes will be profound and unparallel. The coming changes will reshape marketing, sociology, journalism, and politics.

UGC will create powerful new voices from previously unheard minorities. As audiences organize around media made by their peers, the importance and value of commercially created content will be called into question. Already Wikipedia is roiling education as it's community curated editorial grows with breathtaking speed. Craig's list has gutted the cash-cow of local classified ads, and now Craig Newmark, the founder, says he's going to tackle local journalism. And YouTube has almost overnight snatched hundreds of thousands of video views away from Cable and Broadcast – forcing once mighty media companies to scramble to rethink how they can engage formerly passive media consumers in the content creation process.

It's a new media word. And "Bigness" may no longer be the gating factor. I'm not surprised.

Remember the first time you stopped by a farm stand and purchased big, fresh, red tomatoes right off the vine? Then remember the next time you tried to buy a tomato at the local super-market?

Well – UGC is fresh off the vine. And once consumers get a taste, the content grown in corporate-hot house environments just won't taste the same.

Back in 1992 it was entirely clear. Give people the tools and the platform and they'll make media that is personal, passionate, and compelling for others in their peer group. They'll do it for love rather than money. They'll put every ounce of their soul in the work creating media that has that indefinable "x" factor that connects with people on a gut level. It's the thing that a handful of Journalists, Filmmakers, Writers, and Poets can do. It's also the thing that corporations do poorly. Authenticity can't be produced by the pound. It just doesn't taste the same.[4]

Notes

1. http://www.instat.com/press.asp?ID=1758&sku=IN0602976CM
2. http://news.netcraft.com/archives/web_server_survey.html
3. Magnify turns web sites into community based video sites. The tools are simple to deploy and easy to modify and update. It's based on everything I learned with MTV, CBS Class of 2000, my project "Free Speech" at USA Networks, and more. It presumes that some communities will have the membership, sparkplug topics, and peer-driven feedback necessary to create new living, breathing, dynamic content communities. And others will simply be interested in searching and syndicating content from other like-minded communities to provide video for their sites. Unlike YouTube, Google, Yahoo, MSN or others – Magnify isn't a destination – and an enabling platform. And unlike sites that require submitters to play by a certain set of rules, Magnify can be configured to be highly vetted for established media brands, and provide a wide open publishing environment for sites interested in providing all comers with an unrestricted place to submit and engage in consumer created content.
4. Steven Rosenbaum is the CEO of Magnify Networks. Email: steve@magnify.net