

The Articulation of Power on *Newgrounds*
A Political Economy Approach to Internet-based Participatory Media

Jiyan Wei



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MSc in Media and Communications
Department of Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

In the past several years, there has been a steady growth in the prominence of participatory forms of media online. Many believe this trend represents a profound shift in which the Internet has a democratizing effect on society. The main objective of this research project is to analyze how power is articulated in Internet-based participatory media between participating users in a shared system, as well as through the system itself. Drawing on two related theoretical areas, political economy and critical constructivism, this study examines issues of power by focusing on a case study, Newgrounds. Newgrounds is a Web portal that hosts independently produced multimedia content and accommodates a range of interactive functionality. Two main research questions were explored: First, we studied how traditional media roles were shifting in participatory forms of media. Second, the potential for Internet-based participatory media to serve as a form of democratic rationalization was studied.

The Newgrounds users were the primary subjects of this research project. Using a semi-structured interview methodology, the perspectives of seven users who were pre-screened as 'ordinary users' on Newgrounds and six users who were pre-screened as 'producers' on Newgrounds were studied. The research findings indicated that the 'ordinary user' can be considered an empowered media participant when compared with the archetypical media consumer, but clear delineations still exist between ordinary users and producers of media. Furthermore, it was learned that in many ways, consumptive components of participatory media could actually serve a more democratic function than communal components.

Ultimately, the study concludes that although participatory media can serve a democratizing function, there is nothing that would suggest that it will dissolve power imbalances. A more underlying aim of this research project is to open new doors of inquiry into the study of how power is articulated in a form of Internet-based participatory media and update the parameters of the lense through which the issue is studied.

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1. Introduction

On October 29, 1969, the first host-to-host message was successfully sent from a computer at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), to a computer at the Stanford Research Institute. The event marked the first transmission of data through the government-funded network, ARPANET, which would evolve into the Internet. According to Leonard Kleinrock, a computer scientist at the UCLA engineering school who helped lead the project, “When we sent that first message...we knew we were creating an important new technology that we expected would be of use to a segment of the population” (Sutton, 2004). Kleinrock never anticipated the tremendous impact the Internet would have on society. The notion that the Internet is a key driver of societal change for those who have widespread access is not in question. What is in question is the nature of *how* the Internet is meshing with society and the social implications of this process.

The formative years of the Internet were dominated by utopian rhetoric regarding the social consequences of the medium. Many felt the Internet was facilitating a transcension of material realities, sometimes referred to as dematerialization (Sassen, 2004). Eternally optimistic, proponents of this stance concluded that the Internet would provide an egalitarian platform, upon which social interaction would take place beyond the constraints of material realities. No longer would sex, race, or ethnicity play a dominant role in defining an individual's voice. Rather, the quality of their interaction would be measured by what they said. Dematerialization also found a place in the sphere of political economy. McChesney (2000) describes this perspective as follows: “As the argument goes, if everything is in the process of becoming digital, if anyone can produce a site at minimal cost, and if that site can be accessed worldwide via the Web, it is only a matter of time before the media giants find themselves swamped by countless high-quality competitors. Their monopolies will be crushed.”

As the Internet continued to evolve as a technology and diffuse into a broader population, it became increasingly relevant to the commercial world. As corporate entities began implementing business models that integrated with the Internet, a sense that the early dematerialist perspectives were excessively optimistic began to set in. In the field of political economy, McChesney was one of the more prominent critics of the dematerialist perspective. His critical analysis, explored in more depth in the literature review section of this paper, focused on the material realities underlying the Internet. For McChesney and other critical

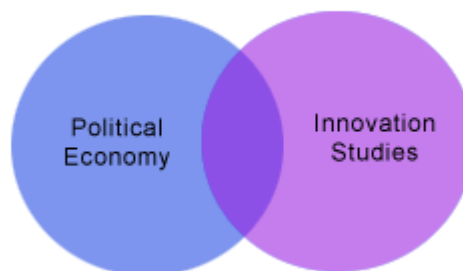
theorists (Crawford, 2002; Sassen, 2004), the belief in the Internet as a dematerializing medium was a straw house.

In recent years, there has been a revival of optimism in the democratizing potential of the Internet. In late 2005, Madden and Lenhart (Pew, 2005) reported that 57% of teens who use the Internet could be considered content producers in some way or another. In 2006, Fox and Lenhart (Pew) reported that 12 million American adults keep a Web log. This explosion in user-generated media, also referred to as 'participatory media', is not limited to text; it is a multimedia phenomenon. In April of 2006, it was reported that 35,000 new videos were being posted daily, by ordinary users, to the Web portal YouTube. In February 2006, YouTube attracted 9 million visitors who viewed 176 million pages (Liedtke, 2006). According to Paul Saffo (cited in Kluth, 2006) from the Institute for the Future in California, "people no longer actively 'consume' media but actively participate in them, which usually means creating content."

These recent shifts in the media landscape are due to a number of factors including technological innovations in media production technologies, continued domestication of media production and consumption technologies, and growing proliferation of broadband Internet access. In the midst of this change, there has been a renewal in the belief that the Internet has the potential to be a democratizing influence in society. At the same time, the threat that the Internet will continue to be appropriated by dominant commercial interests is ever-present. This research project will explore the social consequences of participatory media on the Internet, by studying the articulation of power on Newgrounds.

2. Literature Review

The key theme that will set the tone for this project involves the articulation of power. Specifically, this research will explore the manner in which power is articulated through Newgrounds¹, a Web portal that hosts independently produced multimedia content and accommodates a range of interactive functionality. This research project is interested in the articulation of power that exists between participating users on Newgrounds, as well as through the Newgrounds system itself. In order to study this double-tiered question, two interrelated theoretical areas will be drawn upon to provide background for the research: the political economy of communications (PEC) and the study of innovation.



First, the literature review will summarize traditional approaches to the Internet grounded in political economy, focusing in particular on the work of Robert McChesney (2000). Next, we will turn to innovation studies, focusing on a theoretical framework developed by Andrew Feenberg (1991) called 'critical constructivism,' which accounts for the roles of both power and resistance. Finally, I will lay out a synthesized theoretical framework that will be used to guide the research project, relying on critical points offered by Andreas Wittel (2004) and Elizabeth Van Couvering (2003), which provide support for a recalibration of both the aforementioned approaches.

Political Economy of the Internet

Practically speaking, the political economy approach to communications encompasses a broad range of theories and perceptions. According to Mosco (1995), "political economy is the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources." Similarly, Mansell (2004) explains that the approach is fundamentally concerned with understanding the

¹ A more comprehensive review of Newgrounds is provided in section 4.

circumstances that have led to systems of production and distribution of media and communications under capitalism, and the influences of these circumstances over the manner in which cultural commodities are consumed. To help illustrate the characteristics of the political economy approach to media and communications, Wittel (2004) has provided a list of assumptions that form the basis for this approach:

- Culture, communications, and media are thought of as *industries*.
- Culture, communications, and media are considered objects that carry symbolic value, and are considered commodities that can be produced, distributed, and consumed.
- Production and consumption of media, culture, and communications are viewed as being distinct practices.
- Those who control the means of production and distribution of media, culture and communications possess greater power than consumers.
- Those capable of higher levels of reproduction and distribution are considered more powerful than those capable of lower levels of reproduction and distribution.

As Wittel points out, the traditional political economy approach may not be adequately suited to studying new forms of media because much of the theory behind was developed within a broadcast paradigm of media and communications. Consequently, there has been a great deal of focus on the underlying production of cultural commodities, and a frequent neglect of other aspects of media processes. Deacon (2003) refers to this state as the STOP perspective: So There's Obviously A Problem. As he explains,

History is seen as a process of decline or intractable dominance. Although the cultural critic is powerless to reverse these processes, it is her duty to expose this entropy or repression.

One of the foremost proponents of this approach is Robert McChesney. In McChesney's view, the argument for the democratizing potential of the Internet relies on the belief that the current global capitalist system is a "fair, rational, and democratic mechanism." This perspective is based on the liberal notion that free markets always encourage healthy competition amongst social actors. Ultimately, there is a belief that this competition will fuel innovation. For McChesney, the 'inherent' fairness of the current capitalist system is a myth. The dominating influence of anti-competitive practices like consolidation and conglomeratization, have shifted the media industry towards an oligopolistic status. If a new media firm is fortunate enough to attain a modicum of profitability, McChesney believes it will be eventually bought out by one of

the conglomerates. In a perspective shared by other notable academics (Schiller, 1999), McChesney concludes that although several new players will emerge in the media market, the "content of the digital communications world will appear quite similar to that of the predigital commercial media world."

Ultimately, McChesney's deconstruction of the "mythology" of the democratizing influence of the Internet results in a broad critique of global capitalism rather than an analysis of how power is articulated on the Internet. McChesney's also does falls short of fully accounting for important structural characteristics of the Internet that differentiate it from previous media in various and substantial ways. Although he does preface his discussion by acknowledging the Internet as a "remarkable and complex phenomenon" that can not be "categorized by any previous medium's experience," he fails to elaborate on this original point. Finally, there is an excessive focus on structures of production, the commercial institutions involved in the media industries. Consequently, there is a neglect of the role played by other relevant social groups, most notably the 'ordinary user' (Bakardjieva, 2005). To provide a complimentary approach we will follow Mansell's (2004) advice and turn to innovation studies in the hope of more adequately accounting for the 'ordinary user',

Consumption and Community

Traditionally, two competing schools of thought have dominated the field of innovation studies. Technological determinism (as referred to by its critics) perceives technology as the fundamental driver of societal change. There are inevitable (determined) effects that a technology will have on society. The theory has been criticized for the manner in which it distinguishes the social from the technological; as well as for its subversion of human agency to the technology itself. It "focuses our minds on how to adapt to technological change, not on how to shape it" (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999).

The other major theoretical area in studies of innovation is often referred to as social constructivism. This theoretical area has been heavily influence by the social construction of technology (SCOT) model (Bijker and Pinch, 1987). SCOT relies on the premise that 'relevant social groups' will have different types of interpretive challenges associated with a technological artifact. Technological artifacts have 'interpretive flexibility', meaning that different social groups will be able to impose variant solutions and meanings onto a technological artifact. Ultimately, certain interpretations or solutions will become more widely accepted than others, and the

shape of the artifact will stabilize. Social constructivism has received various criticisms, most notably from Langdon Winner (1993), who has pointed out its lack of consideration of power in innovation systems.

Andrew Feenberg addresses many of Winner's critical points in his theory of 'critical constructivism', also referred to as a 'critical theory of technology'. According to Feenberg (1991), dominant actors push self-serving interpretations onto a technological artifact, with the goal of "sedimenting values and interests in rules and procedures, devices and artifacts that routinize the pursuit of power and advantage by a dominant hegemony" (Feenberg, 1991). The potential for alternative interpretations to be applied to an artifact is referred to as 'democratic rationalization'. Democratic rationalization seeks to undermine the dominant hegemony and force it to recognize the voice of subordinated groups in society. Feenberg's critical theory of technology serves as a background for his work done in collaboration with Maria Bakardjieva, which studies competing models of the Internet.

According to Feenberg and Bakardjieva, two models of the Internet emerged following its initial diffusion during the mid-1980s. Feenberg and Bakardjieva map the birth of the 'consumption model' to early attempts to use the Internet to facilitate search and retrieval of data in government and academic projects. It was not long until companies realized that this model could be applied to commercial transactions, and they began shaping the Internet to suit these requirements. Concurrently, dispersed groups of ordinary users were attempting to solve the challenge of communicating and online community building through the Internet. Efforts to meet this challenge resulted in the development of a 'community model' of the Internet evidenced by the success of online communities like the WELL, one of the first and most successful online communities. The goal of the community model is to provide a mediated environment where communications between people can take place, and where social relationships can form.

For Bakardjieva and Feenberg, the democratizing potential of the Internet is most fully realized in the community model. To support this belief, they refer to the work of John Dewey (cited in Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2002), who connects community with "participation, commonness, and shared beliefs." Conversely, the consumption model of the Internet has been molded by commercial interests and can be considered a dominant rationalization. Eventually, one of these models will influence the shape of the Internet to a greater extent, and this shape will

have a profound influence on whether the Internet serves as a tool for democratization or domination.

There are numerous strengths to this theoretical approach. First, Bakardjieva and Feenberg place a premium on the issue of power, a theme frequently neglected in studies of the Internet (Mansell, 2004). Secondly, ample consideration is given to the role of the 'ordinary user' in shaping the community model, a point that supports a belief in the potential for user agency to result in a democratizing outcome with regards to the technology and its effect on society. There are also several critical points that must be made in regards to their work. First, there is an unquestioned assumption in the democratizing potential of the community model. This attribution fails to consider how virtual communities are commodified or appropriated by commercial interests². In Hagel and Armstrong's (1997) landmark study of virtual communities, they explain that the "key to exploiting the new market opportunity in on-line networks" is through "content and communication." For them, virtual communities are the "kernel of a fundamentally new business model," rather than a driver of participation and democracy. They point out that "by creating strong virtual communities, businesses will be able to build membership audiences and use those audiences to bring in revenues in the form of advertising, transaction fees, and membership fees." The commercial appropriation of virtual communities is a phenomenon acknowledged by other noted theorists. Schiller (1999) describes how commercial entities are increasingly appropriating the Internet to cultivate 'economic and cultural' relationships with consumers. Borgmann (2004) suggests that by their very nature, the Internet and virtual communities commodify sociocultural interactions. A second critique of the theory is its polarizing view on community and consumption models and conclusion that one model will eventually dominate the shape of the Internet. This critique highlights a more underlying shortcoming with Bakardjieva and Feenberg's theory, stemming from an incomplete assessment of the complex nature of the Internet.

Theoretical Framework

The underlying question of power, as articulated between users and through the system, is conceptually framed in the areas of political economy and innovation studies. A review of these areas reveals some theoretical oversights that need to be addressed. We will now turn to the

² It should be noted that Bakardjieva (2005) does examine more critical perspectives on the commodification of community models in *Internet Society*.

work of two theorists, Andreas Wittel and Elizabeth Van Couvering, to help bring these aforementioned theories into a more contemporary setting, and to assist in the statement of the conceptual framework that will guide this research project.

According to Van Couvering (2003), the traditional political economy approach to studying the articulation of power on the Internet has been guided by theories developed within a broadcast paradigm of media and communications, which do not fully consider the characteristics of the Internet that differentiate it from other mediums. In order to accurately study the issue of power in regards to the Internet, its essence as a 'differentiated medium' must be taken into account. In Van Couvering's view, the Internet is fundamentally different than previous mediums because it facilitates a broader range of mediated activities. On one hand, it can resemble a telephone and function as a platform for point-to-point communications. Alternatively, it can resemble broadcast mediums like television or radio and facilitate one-to-many communications. By regarding the Internet as a differentiated medium, Van Couvering provides an alternative perspective to Feenberg and Bakardjieva's theory that the Internet will eventually sediment as either a community or consumption model. Building on this consideration, Van Couvering offers a framework for analyzing the articulation of power on the Internet, which involves the following points:

Van Couvering's Theoretical Framework for Studying Media Power on the Internet

- The blurring between media producer and media audience.
- The relationship between free choice and factors that structure choice.
- The Internet as technology, both as a discourse and as an object framing the use of the Internet.
- The complex and differentiated nature of the Internet.

It is with this framework in mind that we turn to Wittel's (2004) critical points regarding the traditional political economy approach. He points out three 'holes' associated with the application of the political economy approach to the study of media and communications, and offers recommendations for how to address these holes. First, there is the tendency to study culture and communication in terms of structures. Referring to Mosco, Wittel calls for a shift in focus from structure to structuration, an increased acknowledgment of the balance between

structure and agency, and the perception of media as a process. Along these same lines, Wittel makes the point that when media and communications are examined as a process, new forms of activity begin to emerge, such as 'reproduction and re-contextualisation.' The second hole involves the monolithic perspective on production and consumption of culture and communications. Wittel calls for a recognition of the cyclical nature of the media process, and the 'fragile and blurred' lines between production and consumption particularly apparent in the new media landscape. Finally, there is the unquestioned assumption that culture and communications have a profound effect on society. Wittel does not openly contradict this notion, but points out that this blind faith obscures an interest in the '*operations of cultural commodities.*'

Wittel's points are exploratory in nature: his goal in presenting them is not to close discussions concerning the political economy approach, but rather, to open 'certain issues and conventions.' His critical points and Van Couvering's theoretical frame jointly serve as the conceptual background for this research project. Taken collectively, the work of these theorists provides a refined, contemporary approach to studying the issue of power. The combined approach takes into account the notion that the Internet is a differentiated and complex medium, and correctly perceives that traditional systems of media production and consumption must be re-evaluated.

Research Objectives

As the Internet continues to evolve neither the techno-populist rhetoric nor the STOP line of argument are fully capable of explaining how the Internet meshes within society. With the rise of participatory media, we find ourselves at a pivotal stage in the early development of the Internet. The objective behind this research project is to understand how power is articulated on Newgrounds between participating users on Newgrounds, as well as through the Newgrounds system itself. The objective will be approached through the study of two research questions:

R1 - Power relationships between users: How are media processes on the Internet affecting traditional roles of production and consumption, and what are the implications of these for power relationships between users?

R2 - Articulation of systemic power: How does the Internet's nature as both consumption and community affect the balance of power on Newgrounds?

As Boyd-Barrett (1995) points out, a “political economy of the media cannot focus only on the production and distribution of commodities but must also take full account of the peculiar nature of these commodities and the ideological work that they do.” The research questions that are studied in this research project place a greater emphasis on cycles of media production and consumption. This focus was a conscientious decision, driven by practical limitations associated with the execution of the research project. Consequently, the symbolic and ideological components of culture and communications are not given the consideration they deserve to complete this line of inquiry. Complimentary work in this area would provide a greater account of the symbolic and ideological components of Newgrounds.

3. Methodology

Traditionally, the political economy approach has lent itself to methodologies focused on studies of production (Deacon, 2003). As already mentioned, there is often an insufficient consideration of the role played by the ordinary user, although this situation may be changing. One of the leaders of the shift is Maria Bakardjieva, who chooses the 'ordinary user'³ as the fundamental unit of analysis in her research. Silverstone and Haddon (1996) have also played a pivotal role in recognizing the importance of the ordinary user in the technological innovation process. Other factors that have led to greater focus on the ordinary user include an increasing awareness of the economic role played by the ordinary user in media processes, and the increasing connections and blurred lines between systems of production, distribution, and consumption, place an increased importance on the role played by the ordinary user (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998). Still, there is widespread recognition that more attention is needed to assess the qualitative experiences of ordinary users (Wittel, 2004). Relying on work by Negri (1999), Wittel calls for a shift in perspective in the study of political economy, towards greater analysis of user subjectivity. As he states, "A political economy from below needs a methodology from below."

In order to study the issue of power from the ground up, this research project will use a semi-structured interview method, or as Lindlof (1995) terms it, "conversations with a purpose." There are numerous advantages associated with this method. First, semi-structured interviews are capable of providing a level of detail and depth about personal experiences beyond what is possible with more quantitative methods (Blee & Taylor, 2002). Second, this method allows the researcher to probe certain areas of interest based on the interviewee's responses, a valuable tool for researching an area that has not been extensively studied. Third, this method allows the interviewer to alter the phrasing of the questions based on the interviewee's responses, which is particularly relevant given the discursive nature of the research project (Alston & Bowles, 1998). Fourth, the semi-structured method lends itself to the building of rapport, which can in turn have positive effects on the quality of the interaction (Deacon et al, 1999). A further consideration was given to the scale of the research project. As Williams (2003) notes, semi-structured interviews provide a well-suited method for smaller scale exploratory research.

³ According to Bakardjieva (2005), the ordinary user is an actor who is "not involved as a professional (engineer, programmer, designer, etc.) or decision-maker in the industrial, commercial or service sectors developing computer-networking technology."

There are a number of key shortcomings associated with this method. First, because the interviewer is more closely linked with the research process compared to other methods, the quality of the research findings is strongly reliant on the professional abilities of the researcher. In this case, the researcher had limited experiences with the method and this may have negatively affected the quality of the research. A related point is the ability of the researcher to maintain objectivity throughout the interview process. This represents a further methodological issue because in this case, the researcher had been a member of the community for three years and his perspective on the community and its members may be consequently biased. A second shortcoming associated with the semi-structured interview method is that the lack of consistent structure makes it difficult to generalize on the basis of research findings. The research can be used to raise issues and make estimations, but in order for the interpretations to be validated, the research should be triangulated with a complimentary quantitative method. If more time and resources were available, a wide-scale survey method could have been conducted to help validate the findings.

Choice of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Computer mediated communication (CMC) through instant messenger (IM) was chosen over face-to-face (FTF) interactions due to both practical and methodological considerations. First, CMC allowed the researcher to communicate with a number of interviewees who were geographically dispersed, in a limited timeframe. Second, as Deacon et al (1999) explains, "free-format interviews work best when interviewees are placed in a comfortable (and comforting) environment and are given adequate time to elaborate on their views." From this perspective, CMC provided an opportunity for interviewees to respond to interview questions from the comfort and privacy of their homes. IM was chosen as the information and communication technology (ICT) for this research project. Its widespread adoption among users aged 18-27 (sometimes referred to as Generation Y) made it an acceptable choice. According to a 2004 survey conducted in the United States (Shiu & Lenhart), nearly two-thirds of Generation Y have sent instant messages and 20% use IM on a daily basis. Although no statistics could be found to validate this belief, it was thought that in an Internet portal like Newgrounds, the number of IM users would be even higher.

In theory, the technical aspects of IM would seem to suggest a form of communication that is synchronous. This may not be entirely the case: amongst members of Generation Y, nearly half (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004) of users multi-task on the Internet while communicating with IM, suggesting that the communication occurring through IM is not completely fully focused and synchronous. It can be said that the communication is more synchronous than other forms of CMC such as e-mail or posting in a forum. Based on this consideration, it was believed that IM would provide a more suitable ICT for the semi-structured interview method than a technology lending itself to more asynchronous forms of communication. The multi-tasking nature of IM users represented a methodological shortcoming due to the possibility that the interviewees would not be entirely engaged throughout the interview. This was confirmed during the research phase of the project as at times, the user seemed to drop out of the discussion for several minutes while at other times they seemed to respond in a more synchronous manner. A second shortcoming associated with CMC in interviewing is the lack non-verbal cues or signals. Short, Williams, and Christie (1967) social presence theory argues that the presence of non-verbal cues has a positive effect on the overall quality of communication and the building of rapport. This represented a profound methodological shortcoming considering the relevance of rapport-building to the conducting of semi-structured interviews. It has also been pointed out that the lack of non-verbal cues in CMC can lead to problems such as miscommunication of emotional signals (Kiesler, 1997). If more time and resources had been made available, FTF communications would have been a preferable alternative to CMC.

Method

One of the main research questions involved an inquiry into the shifting roles of production and consumption on Newgrounds. The preliminary decision was made to insure that the interview sample represented a range of Newgrounds users including users whose role was primarily as a producer of multimedia content; and users who primarily consumed multimedia content. In order to enlist potential interviewees, a two-tiered approach was taken. First, a message⁴ was posted in the 'general topics' Newgrounds forum, explaining the nature of the research and asking for volunteers to contact the interviewer directly through the Newgrounds private messaging (PM) system if they were interested in participating, or if they wanted to know more information before making a final decision.

⁴ A copy of this message is available in the appendix.

Seven potential interviewees responded to the initial posting through the PM system or directly on the forum, and a follow-up message was sent to the respondents through the Newgrounds private messaging (PM) system, asking about availability for a 30-minute interview over instant messenger. Only one user responded to this initial follow-up message and an interview was scheduled through IM. This initial interview served a dual purpose as a pilot for the interview guide, and in an informational capacity, to learn more about the site itself. After the pilot interview had been completed, the interview request was again posted to the on June 30, 2006, and then again on July 10, 2006. Interestingly enough, the second forum posting didn't elicit any response but the third request met with thirteen responses, of which six interviews were scheduled and successfully executed.

After preliminary communications were carried out with the six interviewees, a methodological shortcoming was revealed in the interviewee selection process. All of the interviewees had little or no experience with production of multimedia content for the site and instead, primarily visited the site to consumer new content or to participate in the discussion forum. These uses will be referred to as 'ordinary users' throughout the remainder of the discussion. The second component of the strategy for enlisting potential interviewees was designed to target users whose primary role involved the production of multimedia content, who will be referred to as 'producers' throughout the remainder of the discussion, to insure that the sample population appropriate met the stated research objectives. A list of contact information for producers was gathered by referencing a 'Top 50 of all time' list of multimedia content submissions. A PM was then sent to the producers on this list in increments of five. After six producers had agreed to schedule interviews, the researcher stopped contacting producers on the list. In total, six producers and seven ordinary users were interviewed.

Interview Guide Development

The interview guide was developed to reflect the research objectives already stated in this paper. Although several set questions were presented for each topic area, questions were removed or added based on the interviewee responses. The development of the interview guide represented a methodological challenge based on the broad scope of research as well as the heterogeneity of interviewees. A more traditional approach may have sought to develop one guide for producers and a separate guide for ordinary users. Ultimately, the decision was made to use the same research guide for both producers and non-producers based on the research

question inquiring into the blurring of lines between producers and consumers of media. The development of distinct interview guides would have the implicit connotation that these two distinct groups were fundamentally distinct from one another. If they were distinct from one another, it should be based on the content of their responses; not on the content of the questions posed to them.

4. Mapping Newgrounds

As stated in the methodology section of this paper, the researcher conducting the interview had been a member of Newgrounds for three years previous to the design and execution of the research project. His prerequisite knowledge about the community helped frame both the results and interpretation. In order to provide the background necessary to contextualize the research findings, this section will aim to provide the groundwork for understanding the subsequent sections of the research paper.

1. Areas within Newgrounds – One of the underlying research objectives in this research project is to understand how the Internet's identity as a differentiated medium influences the articulation of power within Newgrounds. Newgrounds provides an excellent target for this research objective due to its hosting of various 'spaces' within the Newgrounds.com domain. Within the various spaces of Newgrounds, users participate in different forms of mediated activity. The three spaces that provided the focus for this research project are as follows:

- **Flash Portal** – This section of the site is tailored around the submission and viewing of flash submissions. There are a number of interactive functions that registered users can perform in the flash portal, including voting on flash animations, and leaving comments about flash animations through a comments module.
- **Audio Portal** - The audio portal resembles the flash portal as far as system functionality is concerned. The only distinction involves the type of media that is submitted and viewed in this section of the site.
- **Newgrounds Forums** - Newgrounds contains a bulletin board system (BBS) that contains a number of forums devoted to different topics, where registered users can read and respond to existing discussion threads, as well as create new discussion threads. The forums are patrolled by a number of moderators, who have the ability to 'lock' threads (prevent members from commenting on threads; delete threads or individual posts within a thread; and ban users from the forum.

2. Membership system on Newgrounds - Throughout the inquiry into the concept of 'free choice', and factors that structure choice on Newgrounds, one of the key influencers was the membership system on the site. Any user can visit the site and watch the multimedia content without registering for membership, but in order for a user to fully participate in the site, he or she needs to register for a free membership. One of the key characteristics of membership in

Newgrounds is the systematization of power through the acquisition of experience points and 'leveling up.' Each time a user votes on a flash submission in Newgrounds, he or she then receives a certain number of experience points. Each day, a user is able to deposit these experience points into their user account, although it should be noted that a user can deposit a maximum of ten experience points into their account each day. Once a user has gained a sufficient number of experience points, he or she may 'level up'. Users with higher levels will consequently have more impact on flash animations they vote on.

3. Blamming and protecting - When a user submits an entry to Newgrounds, it is added to a submission queue and labeled 'under judgment'. When a submission is in this position, registered users will have the opportunity to vote on whether or not the submission stays in Newgrounds by rating it on a scale of one through five. An entry that receives a median score of less than five is 'blammed', or removed from the site. An entry that receives a median score of two or higher is 'protected', and placed within the site based on its genre and score. Submissions that receive extremely high scores are placed on the front page of Newgrounds. There are additionally a variety of awards given out for different flash submissions, such as an editor's pick, weekly user's choice, and daily feature. The fate of a flash submission also affects the user who voted on it. If a user's rating of a submission under judgment matches with how it is ultimately judged by the community as a whole, then that user is awarded blam or protection points. The acquisition of blam and protection points influences the user's voting power.

Results and Interpretation

Although the demographics of the user were not considered a key area of research, some general questions were asked at the outset of the interview in order to gain a general understanding of who the interviewee was. This data may also serve to guide future academic research on Newgrounds.

According to Tom Fulp, creator of Newgrounds, the typical Newgrounds user is a young male (age ranging from 14-22), who "enjoys video games and animation." Out of 13 users who were interviewed, only CremeFresh18 was female and only Fulp, Bitey, and Lokken were over the age of 22. All of the other interview participants fit into the demographic that Fulp had predicted. There did seem to be a general distinction between the average age of producers who were interviewed and non-producers who were interviewed, although this finding would have to be substantiated and quantified by a wide-scale survey.

As far as time spent on Newgrounds, there was a clear gap between producers and ordinary users. Ordinary users spent between one-to-seven hours each day visiting the site; while producers spent between twenty minutes and one hour on the site each day. It should be noted that this finding is somewhat skewed due to multi-tasking habits, discussed in more depth in the methodology section. Wastedwizard123 for example, responded that he spent three hours per day on Newgrounds during the week and about seven hours on Newgrounds during the weekend, but he was occupied with several additional activities (such as doing schoolwork) while on the site.

All interview participants were asked how long they had been a member of Newgrounds. Responses ranged from one-year to five-years and no clear trends could be detected between producers and ordinary users. Most interviewees responded that they had been a non-registered visitor to the site for several months before registering for membership.

Shifting media roles on Newgrounds

In order to study shifting patterns in production and consumption of media on Newgrounds, several areas of questioning were used. First, the interviewee was asked to define his or her role on Newgrounds. This question not only helped garner insight into how users perceived their role within Newgrounds, but also served as an indicator for which components of the interview guide should be used throughout the remainder of the interview.

The key finding from was that users on Newgrounds identify themselves according to several attributes, but in general, ordinary users perceive themselves as ordinary users while producers perceive themselves as producers. When asked to define her role on Newgrounds, CremeFresh18 responded that she was just a 'user'. This seemed to be the general consensus amongst interviewees who were pre-selected as ordinary users. Users also tend to identify themselves according to the areas they frequent on Newgrounds, with the majority of them responding that they spend the bulk of their time in the forums. Furthermore, ordinary users on Newgrounds identify themselves according to the length of time they have spent as a member on Newgrounds. Kakashi623 for instance responded as follows: "I'm no noob, but I don't think I'm a regular yet. Some people recognize me." All producers on the other hand identified their role according to the multimedia content they had submitted. Several even pointed out that they were not active members of the community because their activity was more or less restricted to the submission of content. For example, HeReTik responded as follows:

I'm a great fan of the site and used to be very active in the forums for a while. . . .
Currently I'm not very active in the NG community, but I'm still a contributing author and I keep myself up-to-date on what's going on the site."

These findings were supported by Fulp's observations of membership within Newgrounds. When asked what most people do on Newgrounds, Fulp defined producers (contributors) on Newgrounds are those who "submit their games and movies," whereas he defined the 'typical user' as an individual involved in the blamming and protection of content on the site, and by their participation in the forums.

On the surface, the responses from both producers as well as ordinary users seem to contradict both Wittel and Van Couvering's postulations about blurring lines between producers and consumers. More extensive questioning into the nature of usage on Newgrounds however, revealed a more complex picture of media roles and processes on the site. For one, there was a noted absence of behavior that could be classified as 'consumption' by any of the users who were interviewed. This may be in part due to a methodological hole. According to Fulp, "most people come to Newgrounds to watch movies and play games. Fulp estimated that Newgrounds received 500,000 unique visitors each day, and that it claimed a total membership of 1,000,000 registered users. It could not be estimated how many visitors to the site could be considered passive media consumers, although it is safe to say that there is a substantial number of visitors who do not interact within the site and whose primary role is as a passive

consumer of media. The 'passive media consumer' represents a demographic not covered by this study and a shortcoming of the methodology used for identifying potential interviewees. If there was more time and resources available for the research project, this hole could be addressed through some form of advertisement on the Home page, which may have an enhanced ability to reach some of the passive consumers on the site. At the same time, the feedback from ordinary users in the study represents data that can not be explained in more traditional political economy models. In the next section, we shall explore the rise of a third category of actor in the media cycle.

Rise of the Ordinary User

When questioned more extensively about their usage habits on Newgrounds, it became clear that interviewees who had identified themselves as ordinary users could not be classified strictly as media consumers. Most spent the majority of their time engaged in the forums. Further research into their activities in the forums revealed a highly interactive form of usage. To help distinguish their usage from that of a traditional consumer of media, it is useful to examine the distinction between a 'reactive' and 'interactive' experience. According to Williams (1974), a reactive experience involves choosing from a range of predetermined options; while a truly interactive experience involves the ability to affect a two-way system of communications.

Along the same lines, Kiouisis (2002) explains that interactivity can "be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many) both synchronously and asynchronously and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency)." The integration of interactive elements results in what Harries (2002) refers to as a shift from 'viewing' the Internet to 'using' the Internet. Viewing the Internet involves "a mode of watching typically anchored in the process of 'narrative immersion' in which text from other media, such as a movie, a television clip or a radio broadcast are 'inserted' into the online exhibition venue." On the other hand, refers to "spectatorship anchored in the realm of computer 'interactivity', the pushing of buttons, the typing of answers, the moving of objects or the solving of riddles. . ."

Evidence clearly indicates that ordinary users on Newgrounds 'use' the Internet in a number of ways. In addition to participating in the forums, ordinary users also directly influence the placement of multimedia content within the Flash portal. Even users who defined themselves

as primarily forum denizens spent time reviewing content in the flash portal and many of them had achieved levels indicating substantial time spent reviewing content. The influence of the ordinary user in determining placement of content was indicative of a broader shift in power in the media cycle.

Continuum of media roles

Exploration into the usage habits of producers and ordinary users revealed that a class of actor empowered over the traditional media consumer, although it did not necessarily reveal a drastic blurring of lines between producers and ordinary users. Further research into usage *histories* of both producers and ordinary users did however provide evidence for this phenomenon. At the core of this finding is a theory that ordinary users and producers can be viewed as existing along a continuum of media participation. The interactive elements within Newgrounds facilitated the tightening of this continuum in a manner that can be interpreted as the blurring of lines between producers and consumers.



Most producers had come to Newgrounds with little or no experience in media production. Lokken for example, one of the first contributors to Newgrounds, had originally come to the site with no knowledge of media production. He had become interested in the process and began experimenting with macromedia flash (the software used to produce flash animations). Over seven years, he had come to be one of the most recognized multimedia producers on Newgrounds. When asked how his experience with Newgrounds had helped him develop as a Flash artist, he responded with:

I've taken inspiration from the portal a number of times. I see different drawing styles that other artists use and try to incorporate that into my work on some level, from pixel graphics, line drawing tools, freehand, and importing graphics. .
.My animations have shown an increase in quality over the years due to that portal quality standard that keeps rising. Now I've reached a level that my work might be sellable, I've won a few film contests/awards, featured on a local PBS station, and was paid to make a flash commercial for a film festival. Without my involvement with Newgrounds, I don't think I could have had that good fortune.

Clearly, Newgrounds had played a pivotal role in his development as a media producer. Turning to an example of an ordinary user, feedback from Wastedwizard123 indicated that he could be considered an example of an ordinary user transitioning into a producer. When he was interviewed in April, 2006, he had recently become involved with the production and submission of audio content to the audio portal. When asked about his motivations, he responded that he was interested in "get[ting] some feedback and see[ing] if they were any good." Newgrounds had served in an educational capacity for WastedWizard123. His most recent audio submission had received one of the highest votes in the portal and he attributed his success to "advice from other people." When asked about Newgrounds' influence on his overall interest in music, he responded that it had played a "big" role, and that he doubted he would have carried on with audio production if not for his interaction with Newgrounds. WastedWizard123 was the most glaring example of an ordinary user transitioning into a producer, but six out of seven of the other ordinary users interviewed had participated in the development of content for the site at least once, and most responded they had participated in the development of several submissions.

Power in Numbers: Formation of Crews

Several of the ordinary users alluded to the influence garnered by participation in a 'flash crew'. A flash crew is a collective of Newgrounds members who have willingly agreed to join and support that particular crew. When a member of the flash crew submits a piece of content to the portal, then all of the other crew members will vote positively for the submission in order to increase its chances of being placed within the site. According to Smeergo, "Being in a group like the clock crew, one of newgrounds "crews" you can harness the power of getting through judgement quite easily as your fellow group members will get you through."

As Kazera169 explains, the presence of flash crews can have a negative effect on the overall quality of content on the site: "A lot of flash groups just make terrible and usually offensive flashes to try and irritate someone." The organization of crews is also indicative of a social process in which the intended nature of the democratic voting system is circumvented by ordinary users and producers. Through participation in a crew, a Newgrounds member could potentially receive prominent placement within the site regardless of the actual quality of his or her work. Based on responses from ordinary users, it seems that participation in the flash crew

has the most benefit for Newgrounds members who could be more accurately described as ordinary users rather than producer. From this perspective, it seems that creation and engagement of flash crews actually serves to increase the overall power of the ordinary user on Newgrounds.

Although crews can serve an undemocratic role within Newgrounds, they can also have a beneficial effect on the quality of work in the portal, as well as on the development of production skills for Newgrounds members attempting to make the conversion from ordinary users to producers. As Kazera169 explains,

There are a few groups that just like to produce quality animations. They positively influence other flash artists because the veteran flash artists of a group will help the newer, less experienced members in the group, helping them reach their full potential.

Although this example shows the potentially beneficial effects of crews on Newgrounds, the overall impression seemed to be that flash crews can serve to shift the balance of power between producers and ordinary users on Newgrounds, and may serve an undemocratic function.

Multi-faceted Nature of Usage on Newgrounds

One additional finding that seems to contribute to the theory of blurring lines in the media process, results from further inquiry into non-production usage habits from producers. Although as mentioned previously, all producers identified themselves according to the production of content, when pressed about their other habits, they all indicated that they engaged in other forms of participation. Several of the producers acknowledged the importance of participating in the forums. Sarkazm referred to the forums as a “treasury of information about modern day American teenagers.” Lokken admitted that he had actually become more involved with participation in the forums over time. Several of the producers also indicated their participation in reviewing content in the flash portal, to varying extents, although it was interesting to note that most producers primarily engaged in qualitative feedback as opposed to numeric scoring of multimedia submissions. This may be indicative of their perception of the flash portal as a *tool* to facilitate the development of production skills, as opposed to an entertainment channel. This distinction may explain a divide that was perceived between producers and ordinary users.

When asked whether some Newgrounds members were more influential than others, Fulp responded by saying, "Members who submit great games and movies tend to get a lot of respect, although they can also draw a lot of negative criticism from the "haters" who don't think they earned it." Despite the evidence pointing to blurring of lines in media cycles, it seemed there was some evidence of a divide between the two groups, evidenced by conflict manifesting through the placement of negative feedback in the flash portal. This finding was substantiated by a general disagreement between producers and ordinary users over the quality of the flash animations in the portal. Some ordinary users believed the overall quality was actually decreasing in the Flash portal. Kakashi623 mentioned that he had stopped reviewing flash content because "the time and quality people put in their flash have dropped through the years." Conversely, most producers felt that the overall quality was increasing. Fulp for example mentioned how "The threshold for quality is becoming increasingly high."

Producers also seemed critical of the responses left by many ordinary users to their work. When asked if there was anything he would change about Newgrounds, Lokken responded that he wished "the majority of the reviewing audience was mature and had an open mind." Similarly, when asked how he could tell if he had done a good production job, Sarkazm responded, "By the number of insulting reviews from shocked, offended and completely mislead Newgrounds viewers."

Articulation of Power in a Differentiated Medium

Shifting to the second research objective, our goal was to study how power is articulated in a differentiated medium. The community/consumption divide served as a tool to help develop the interview guide to facilitate responses that would enlighten this area of inquiry. Newgrounds served as an ideal space for this line of inquiry due to the presence of various spaces that within the Newgrounds.com domain. The community/consumption divide was substantiated by feedback from both producers and ordinary users. Both groups agreed that the Flash portal served as a consumption-oriented space while the forums served as a community-oriented space. According to Tom Fulp,

Traffic-wise, the forums are a small part of Newgrounds traffic. Financially, they play no direct role in advertising revenue. From a community standpoint, however, the forums are vital. They are the place where all the fans can hang out

and have an ongoing dialog. Without the forms (sic), NG would just be a showcase of movies with no real feel of a community around it.

Ordinary users seem particularly convinced in the community value of the forums. Kakashi623 referred to the forums as the "voice of Newgrounds," while SalviaMuscaria stated that the forum "brings things together [on Newgrounds]." Among ordinary users, there was also evidence that participation in the forums was considered a higher form of participation on Newgrounds than participation in the flash portal. According to Kazera169, "There are quite a few people who only review movies and songs. They don't seem to be as active on Newgrounds, and usually don't contribute as much." This perspective was echoed by Wastedwizard123, who stated, "Most of the people on the forums are the people most dedicated to Newgrounds." Their belief in the importance of the forums may be connected to an underlying perception that the forums in Newgrounds are a more democratic system of participation, which would substantiate claims made by Bakardjieva and Feenberg who equate participation in community with a form of democratic rationalization. This interpretation is supported by an observed pattern of usage.

Many of the ordinary users had initially been drawn to Newgrounds by the flash portal and spent the majority of their time watching and reviewing media submissions, but had slowly begun gravitating towards the forums. When pressed to explain the shift in their usage of Newgrounds, many ordinary users expressed frustration with the ranking system, due mainly to the perception that it excessively favored users who had been Newgrounds members for a longer amount of time. As Smeergo stated, "It's not nice having a feeling that it will take at least 3 months to change your [level], whereas 5,000 posts can easily be reached within that time." Similarly, Kakashi623 mentioned, "you can level up by depositing but I stopped at level 9 because I couldn't be bothered to deposit every day." On the basis of these responses, it seems that not only are their power differentials that may exist between producers and ordinary users in the portal, but additionally power differentials that exist between ordinary users in the portal. It can be inferred that for many users, these power differentials are less apparent in the forums.

Producers had varying perspectives on both the community functionality as well as the overall relevance of the forums. HeReTik stated that the forums provide an important place for the Newgrounds community to meet, but felt that the relevance of the forums was secondary to that of the flash portal. Lokken viewed the forums as an 'alternative' space for users (to the flash portal), who might not have the production capabilities to participate fully in the flash portal: "For

members who don't have the ability to submit flash content, they [Newgrounds] offer other alternatives to entertain people via the BBS." This undercurrent of producer opinion further reinforces the notion that power relationships may be more evident in the flash portal compared to the forum. It also reveals that production capabilities and production histories are a key component in the acquisition and articulation of power within the flash portal. This perception may be linked to broader differences in the overall perception of Newgrounds between producers and ordinary users. It might be postulated that ordinary users perceive the true value of Newgrounds to lie in the social interactions that take place within the site, while producers perceive its primary value to be as a channel for the distribution of content.

Democratic Rationalizations in Community and Consumption

When viewed in the scope of the overall domain, or in comparison to the flash portal, it would seem that the forum on Newgrounds can be considered a democratic rationalization. Closer examination of user experiences within the forums reveals a more complex picture, in which issues of exclusion and power imbalances are manifest. The most glaring issue seems to result from the permissions granted to moderators in the forums. According to gumonshoeorig, "There is a huge divide between moderators and regular users. That is probably the largest and most important of all the divides." Many of the users who were interviewed felt that moderators abused their privileges. Kakashi relayed an anecdote about how one moderator had continually renewed a ban on an ordinary user over a "grudge" stemming from a forum exchange. When SalviaMuscaria was interviewed, he reported that he had just come off a seven-day ban for posting a topic that a moderator had seemingly arbitrarily considered 'spam'. Additionally, many users feel that moderators had a negative influence on the quality of participation within the forums. Gumonshoeorig explained how "Modship drives a lot of the users here to a lot of things." This belief was echoed by Kazera169 when asked whether he wanted to become a moderator. He responded negatively because of his belief that "People won't be as honest [with moderators] and will suck up to them in hopes of getting on their good side."

To a lesser extent, there is evidence that in the forums, power imbalances also exists between ordinary users. As Kakashi623 explains, "It's usually about stats, when people are level 25 and have a post count of 6000 they are usually more respected than other members." Similarly to 'modship', the influence that comes along with having a high level or post count in Newgrounds may have a negative effect on the quality of participation in the forums. As SalviaMuscaria

explains, “[quality] is usually over-looked, if a newbie sees someone with 20k posts they automatically think they're an awesome contributor.”

In summary, when compared with the flash portal, the general perception from ordinary users is that the forums represent a more democratic space. But when questioned about their experiences within the forums, we see the emergence of power relationships that prevent us from categorically labeling the forum as form of democratic rationalization. Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that in many ways, the flash portal may more accurately depict a democratic rationalization than the forums. First, as indicated in a previous section of the paper, the flash portal has served as a tool to help producers cultivate their production skills. Second, Newgrounds has helped many producers in a professional capacity by helping them to gain exposure. As Bitey explains, “I gained enormous exposure from submitting my work to NG. I think it's safe to say I'd still be a complete unknown if it weren't for Newgrounds.” Newgrounds has also helped producers leverage their popularity into who could be considered professional success. Both HeReTik and Lokken explained that they now ran their own sites, through which they generated revenue from advertisement and product sales. Lokken and Diecoke had managed to leverage their exposure on Newgrounds into distribution deals. When analyzed in comparison to mainstream media, the flash portal could be equated with a form of democratic rationalization, because of the manner in which it allows independent media producers to gain exposure and financial success.

Ultimately, this perspective is tempered by the fact that for many producers on Newgrounds, the end goal is to achieve success in the mainstream media industry. As Die_Coke, explains, “If you get good enough the trick is to give up the drug, LEAVE NG and make some cash out of your skills.” This sentiment was echoed by many of the other producers. As Fulp explains, “The exposure [from Newgrounds] leads to advertising revenue for their websites, sponsorship and licensing opportunities for their creations, and job offers for companies looking for talent.” Fulp serves as an example of how an independent producer achieves success. He collaborated with another producer on the site to create the flash game, ‘Alien Hominid,’ which is widely considered one of the most popular flash submissions on Newgrounds. The game achieved such visibility it prompted Fulp and his collaborator to develop a console version of the game, which was commercially released in 2004. According to Fulp,

I like to think that Alien Hominid serves as inspiration to anyone with a dream of making video games. It shows how far Flash has come, that a Flash programmer and artist can use their skills to make a game for console platforms. As Flash continues to improve, it becomes more and more viable as a platform to produce mainstream, marketable games. More and more companies will be looking to Flash artists for fresh ideas and new characters.

Fulp's observation on the success of Alien Hominid serves to highlight the limitations of perceiving the Newgrounds flash portal as a form of democratic rationalization. If success on Newgrounds is defined according to what is achieved by producers in the mainstream market, then its ability to undermine the current social hierarchy is dubious at best.

Conclusion

With the continued development of Internet-based technologies and increased diffusion of broadband access, we are witnessing continued dynamism with regard to the shape of the Internet. A rise in the prominence of participatory media is one of the key characteristics of the Internet's most recent iteration. The question over how participatory media influences power within society remains unanswered. Much of the conventional discourse on the effects of the Internet and participatory media remains excessively polarized. This research project took two well-developed approaches to the question of power, political economy and critical constructivism, and used more recent theoretical work to contemporize these approaches. With this framework in place, the paper explored the articulation of power in a form of participatory media, Newgrounds.

Based on the research findings, several key insights into issues related to the articulation of power online were extrapolated. First, it does not seem completely accurate to talk about blurring lines between producers and consumers because with interactive mediums, consumers have a tendency to evolve into users. The 'ordinary user' is a new class of media participant not accounted for in the traditional political economy approach. While empowered in comparison with traditional consumers of media, a distinction still exists between producers and ordinary users although there is evidence that these groups may be intertwined in new and complex ways. Second, from studying the subjective experiences of both producers and ordinary users in various spaces within Newgrounds, it was extrapolated that there are varying and complex relationships of power in community and consumptive spaces. Instead of community being the source of democratic rationalization, it was concluded that there are clear hierarchical relationships within a community and furthermore, that in many ways, a consumptive model can serve as a form of democratic rationalization. Third, it was concluded that ultimately, Newgrounds is limited as a democratic rationalization because of the general perception that success is defined by participation in a broader, mainstream arena.

At its core, the guiding aim of this research was to open new doors of inquiry into the study of participatory media online, and update the parameters of the frame through which we examine the issue. Consequently, there are numerous possibilities for further research. First, as mentioned previously, the research methodology used in this project was highly qualitative in nature. In order to triangulate the findings, a more quantitative methodology such as a wide-

scale survey could be used. Second, one of the conclusions was that Newgrounds facilitated the development of ordinary users into producers. This was based on a static inquiry into the experiences of Newgrounds members. A longitudinal study of ordinary users on Newgrounds could more accurately represent the manner in which their role shifts over time. Third, although it was determined that online communities can manifest hierarchical power structures, the frame for this observation was tightly focused on the online world. Determining the overall social consequences of this phenomenon could involve further exploration into how these power imbalances influence the offline world. Finally, it was determined that Newgrounds' potential as a democratic rationalization was limited by the equation of 'success' with 'mainstream success'. This finding was also limited in scope, due to its isolating focus on Newgrounds. Further research into how mainstream media outlets are being influenced by participatory forms of media would present a more holistic perspective on how these two areas are meshing.

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Appendices

Item A: Interview Request

Hey guys,

I am writing this post as someone who has been a member of Newgrounds for almost three years. I am currently working on an academic research project that is exploring Newgrounds, and am looking for members of the community who would be willing to discuss their participation in the community.

If you would be interested in participating in this research project, please respond by PM. If you are unsure of whether or not you want to participate and would like to learn more about the project to help make your decision, I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Regards,

Jiyan

Item B: Interview Guide

Preface

I would just like to inform you that your responses are going to be autosaved to a local file and used for academic research purposes.

General Information

1. What is your occupation?
2. Where do you currently reside?
3. How long have you been a member of Newgrounds?
4. How would you define your role on Newgrounds?

Consumption

1. How often do you visit the site?
2. On average, how much time do you spend on the site?
3. What do you do on the site?
4. What are your favorite types of content on the site?

Production

1. Have you ever submitted content?
2. Did you gain anything from submitting content?
3. What is your end goal in producing the content?
4. How can you tell if you have done a good job?
5. How long have you been producing flash?

Reviewing

1. What types of animations do you blame?
2. What types of animations do you protect?

Forums

1. How important are the forums on Newgrounds?
2. What do you discuss in the Newgrounds BBS?

Influence

1. Are some members more influential than others on Newgrounds?
2. Do you consider yourself an influential member of Newgrounds?
3. What are the advantages to having a high level?

Control

1. Do you wish anything were different about Newgrounds?
2. If you could, what changes would you make to Newgrounds?
3. Would you say Newgrounds is a democratic system?
4. Do you ever feel constrained in Newgrounds?
5. Do you feel that those in charge of the site are doing a good job?

Preferences

1. What do you like about Newgrounds?
2. How would you (briefly) describe Newgrounds?

Item C: Sample Transcript

Session Start (AIM - jwei17:Kazera169): Wed Jul 05 11:46:05 2006

Kazera169 : My name isn't Stephen, actually. That's just my parent's e-mail/paypal account I use.

JWei17: Oh, sorry

Kazera169 : Well, I'm not busy right now, so go ahead and interview me.

JWei17: Great

JWei17: I looked at your profile, it says you are a 15 year old male,

JWei17: so that would make you a sophomore in high school?

Kazera169 : That is correct.

JWei17: How long have you been a member of NG?

Kazera169 : Since 2004.

JWei17: How would you define your role in Newgrounds?

Kazera169 : I mostly just post on the BBS.

Kazera169 : Not exactly a role, though...

JWei17: I suppose not.

JWei17: How often do you visit the site?

Kazera169 : Daily.

JWei17: Every day?

JWei17: Would you say once/day?

JWei17: Or multiple times each day?

Kazera169 : Multiple times each day. That's because I take online homeschooling courses.

JWei17: Gotcha

JWei17: If you had to estimate, how much time would you say you spend on the site every day?

Kazera169 : Depends on how busy I am. I usually visit Newgrounds for a couple hours a day, although I do other things while on NG.

JWei17: So, you keep a window open with NG and then just periodically check it?

Kazera169 : Yeah.

JWei17: What types of content do you prefer?

JWei17: Or do you mostly just talk in the BBS?

Kazera169 : mostly just post on the BBS, but I do have some preferences. I'm mostly interested in the techno music in the Audio Portal and some noir flash.

JWei17: What types of things do you discuss in the BBS?

Kazera169 : All sorts of things.

Kazera169 : Too many to list.

JWei17: Can you give me some random examples?

Kazera169 : One minute.

JWei17: Okay, no worries

JWei17: I'm right here when you're ready

Kazera169 : I discuss music, prejudices, and sex-related topics, although I often post about other things.

JWei17: So they aren't really related to the animations or music in the portal?

Kazera169 : No.

JWei17: Why do you post in the NG BBS as opposed to another BBS?

Kazera169 : Because there's a good amount of intelligent people there, and quite a few interesting threads. Plus, it's extremely active.

JWei17: Interesting, it does seem like people post a ton in the forums.

JWei17: Does that ever get overwhelming?

Kazera169 : Sometimes, yes.

JWei17: Do you think there are differences between people who post in the forums and those who spend more of their time in the portal?

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: Can you explain?

Kazera169 : There are quite a few people who only review movies and songs. They don't seem to be as active on Newgrounds, and usually don't contribute as much.

JWei17: When you say 'active', do you mean in the forums?

Kazera169 : Just in general.

JWei17: Do you review movies and songs/

JWei17: ?

Kazera169 : I used to, but not anymore.

JWei17: Why did you stop?

Kazera169 : I'd rather spend time posting on the BBS.

JWei17: Is that because you enjoy interacting with people more?

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: Have you ever met someone offline, who you met on NG?

Kazera169 : Not really. I know quite a few people who frequent NG, but none of them bothered to make accounts.

JWei17: You post mostly in the forums. Do you find that some members of NG are more influential than others?

Kazera169 : Yes, mostly people who post very often.

JWei17: Are there any advantages to having a higher level?

Kazera169 : Not really, although a higher level shows that the user has been active on NG for a long time.

JWei17: Do you think that people are more likely to respect his opinion?

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: Are you an influential member in NG?

Kazera169 : No.

JWei17: Okay, I'm going to ask you some different types of questions now, more about the system...

Kazera169 : Shoot.

JWei17: How important are the forums in NG?

Kazera169 : To me?

JWei17: Well, in your opinion.

Kazera169 : I think they aren't that important, but I still enjoy visiting and posting in them.

JWei17: Do you wish anything were different about NG?

Kazera169 : Not really.

Kazera169 : It's fine the way it is.

JWei17: You wouldn't make any changes, huh?

JWei17: Do you ever feel constrained in NG?

Kazera169 : I might add an option to edit posts and some other minor changes like that.

JWei17: Wait - you can't edit posts?

Kazera169 : No.

JWei17: I can see how that can be frustrating.

JWei17: Do you ever feel constrained in NG, by the system?

Kazera169 : No, only by some moderators.

JWei17: Really? Have they deleted your posts before?

Kazera169 : Yes, but that's not what I meant.

JWei17: What did you mean?

Kazera169 : They are sometimes biased, and can get away with violating rules and such because of their moderator status.

JWei17: How do they get to be moderators?

Kazera169 : They get nominated by other mods and admins.

JWei17: Why do they get nominated?

Kazera169 : They are chosen for being model posters. However, none of them are perfect, and make an occasional terrible post or spam topic.

JWei17: What is a spam topic?

Kazera169 : A topic that is complete nonsense.

JWei17: This is really fascinating stuff by the way - I haven't heard much about this from other people I've interviewed

Kazera169 : Pointless picture spam, random gibberish, etc...

Kazera169 : Hooray.

JWei17: When they are moderators, what types of priviledges do they have?

Kazera169 : They can lock and delete threads, delete posts, ban users, and they have access to the moderators only forum.

JWei17: Do you want to be a moderator?

Kazera169 : No.

JWei17: Why not?

Kazera169 : I just don't want to have to be responsible for making sure all is well in the forums, among other reasons.

JWei17: So it is the responsibility you don't want.

Kazera169 : Plus, the moderators are viewed differently once they are modded.

JWei17: How are they viewed then?

Kazera169 : People won't be as honest and will suck up to them in hopes of getting on their good side.

JWei17: So you would say the moderators are your biggest gripe with NG?

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: Do you think NG is a democratic system?

Kazera169 : Somewhat, with the voting system and all.

JWei17: Can you think of ways in which it is not democratic?

Kazera169 : Not everyone has an input for things such as nominating new moderators, and some people have a higher voting power than others.

JWei17: How do you get a higher voting power?

Kazera169 : By depositing experience points and blamming or saving movies that have not passed judgement yet.

JWei17: How do you describe Newgrounds, in brief?

Kazera169 : A place where people can voice their opinion, critique other's work, submit their own, etc.

JWei17: Do you watch TV?

Kazera169 : Not really.

JWei17: What other types of things do you do on the Internet?

JWei17: for fun?

Kazera169 : I watch porn. :P

JWei17: hah.

JWei17: You don't really do much blamming or saving in NG, anymore, huh?

Kazera169 : No.

JWei17: What about producing content?

Kazera169 : I'm currently working on a flash collab with two other people. However, I know nothing about flash. I'm just directing it.

JWei17: Ah..I would say you are still producing the content.

Kazera169 : And I also occasionally submit my terrible music to the Audio portal.

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: What do you get out of submitting your work to the portal?

Kazera169 : Feedback.

JWei17: Do you think it has helped you?

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: Do you have any overarching goal in music?

Kazera169 : Not at the moment.

JWei17: In regards to Tom and the others who run NG,

JWei17: do you feel as though they are doing a good job?

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: Great.

Kazera169 : They survived the .com crash, and have come a long way.

JWei17: Do you think NG is 'for the user'?

Kazera169 : Yes.

JWei17: How would you feel if they sold NG do Sony or some other big company?

Kazera169 : I'd be indifferent, as long as it stayed the same.

JWei17: How do you feel about the advertising on NG?

Kazera169 : It's better than paying for membership.

JWei17: Gotcha

JWei17: Well, Kazera

JWei17: Those are pretty much all the questions I have

Kazera169 : Okay.

JWei17: You've been really helpful.

JWei17: Listen, would you mind if I kept your AIM name

JWei17: in my buddy list?

JWei17: As I'm writing my dissertation

Kazera169 : Go ahead.

JWei17: I may have more questions pop up

JWei17: or may want to explore certain of your answers in more depth

JWei17: great.

JWei17: Once I am finished with this dissertation, I will be posting it on the Web, and letting NG post it as well if they would like.

JWei17: I am also happy to provide you with a copy

Kazera169 : Okay.

JWei17: when I am finished.

JWei17: Great, thanks so much.

Kazera169 : So you're going to use this in your dissertation?

JWei17: Yes, I will use the findings from this and other interviews in my dissertation.

JWei17: I will be synthesizing a lot of what people are saying.

JWei17: In some cases I will be quoting people.

JWei17: by their IM name

JWei17: not their real name

JWei17: if you would like I would be happy to anonymize your name

Kazera169 : What is the point of your dissertation? To find out why people use the internet?

Kazera169 : That's not necessary.

JWei17: Actually, my dissertation topic is 'participatory media'

JWei17: with a focus on internet protocol television

Kazera169 : Ah.

JWei17: I am saying that NG is a form of internet protocol television

JWei17: and I am looking at the social implications of IPTV

JWei17: of participatory models of media in relation to IPTV

Kazera169 : Okay.

JWei17: I'm happy to answer any other questions you have, okay?

JWei17: I'll talk with you later...

Session Close (Kazera169): Wed Jul 05 12:28:38 2006