

‘Future Fundamentals’ – Considering Communication

By Clay Shirky

Flickr, the photo-sharing service, has over a billion photos on its site. Twitter handles something on the order of 300 million words a day. YouTube gets nearly a day's worth of video uploaded every minute. What's going on?

One of the great puzzles of our time is why people are willing to commit so much of their free time to creating media for others to profit from, whether they are adding their photos to YouTube, uploading photos to Flickr, or editing Wikipedia. These users represent a huge volunteer labor force that has built many enormous fortunes, without the users themselves being paid. Why are they working for free?

All the public media we've known until recently has required an army of professionals to produce and distribute it, and the technology we've had, from printing presses to broadcast towers, have supported mass consumption, but not mass production. Media in that world, our world until recently, was stuff created by professionals.

We also assumed that we members of the audience weren't merely relegated to consuming, but that we actually preferred it that way. We were couch potatoes not because older models of public media, whether books and magazines or radio and television, gave us only one choice -- consume -- but because consumption was our preferred and even sole mode of behavior.

With this implicit theory of the media landscape in our heads, generous, public and creative behavior by people creating and sharing media for free does indeed look puzzling, at the very least. As with so many surprising behaviors, this one comes mainly from mistaking accidental patterns for deep truths.

People sharing their writing or photos or video are acting out of intrinsic motivations, motivations for the pleasure of the thing itself, rather than extrinsic reward. The people running the services that host this media, however -- the YouTubes and Flickrers of the world -- are often acting out of distinctly extrinsic motivations, e.g. making money.

It can seem unfair to see amateurs contributing their work for free to people who are making money from aggregating and sharing that work. At least traditional media outlets pay their contributors; with the new services that enable amateurs to share work, the revenue doesn't go to the creators of the content but the owners of the platform that enables the sharing. This is a pattern the writer Nicholas Carr has dubbed digital sharecropping, after the sharecroppers who worked the land but didn't own it or the food they grew on it. With digital sharecropping, the platform owners get the money and the creators of the content don't, a situation Carr regards as manifestly unfair.

One curiosity of this line of thinking, however, is that the people most affected by this state of affairs don't seem to be terribly up in arms about it. None of the people sharing photos or videos or writing expect to be paid, but that doesn't stop them from sharing anyway.

Some of the digital sharecropping complaint can obviously be explained by professional jealousy -- it's easy enough to see why professional media makers would be upset about lots of competition from amateurs. Setting aside self-interest, though, there's another explanation: viewing amateur creators as if they were unpaid versions of the old professional media class is a mistake.

Consider the phenomenon of lolcats -- cute cat pictures made cuter with the addition of cute captions. The world's premier outlet for lolcats is a site called "I Can Haz Cheeseburger?", named after the caption of an early lolcat image. If we view Cheeseburger as nothing more than a late-model version of the traditional (which is to say 16th century) publishing model, then it does seem not just strange but manifestly unfair that the workers are contributing their labor unpaid.

But what if the contributors aren't workers at all? What if the contributors really are contributors, quite specifically intending their contributions to be acts of sharing rather than production? What if their labors are labors of love?

It's natural enough to look at I Can Haz Cheeseburger as a media outlet, but that doesn't mean it has the same internal logic as media outlets like Time magazine. Once we set aside our theory-induced blindness about how media *should* work, a number of other models for creative behavior come into view.

Consider, as an alternative, a local bar. It's a commercial operation, the products it sells are invariably cheaper at home, often by a considerable margin, while much of the service offered by the staff amounts to opening bottles and washing dishes. If a beer costs twice as much from a bar as it does from a store, why doesn't the whole business just collapse as people opt for cheaper inebriation without the markup?

Like YouTube, the bar owner is in the curious business of profiting from offering us a platform where we can create value for each other. People pay more to have a beer in a bar than they do at home because a bar is a more convivial place to have a drink, drawing in customers seeking a little conversation or just to be around other people, rather than sitting at home alone.

This is a powerful enough effect that we find that difference worth paying for. The digital sharecropper logic would suggest that the bar owner is exploiting his customers, because our conversations in the bar are part of the "content" that makes us willing to overpay for the beer, but none of the customers actually feels that way. Instead, we willingly reward the bar owner for creating a socially welcoming environment, a place where they will pay extra for the opportunity to associate with one another.

Once you view a sense of connectedness as something humans value intrinsically, the digital sharecropping logic loses much of its explanatory power. If amateurs aren't just pint-sized professionals, if people are not just willing but happy to do things for reasons that aren't just different from, but incompatible with, getting paid, then amateur media is different than professional media. Services that help us share things with one another thrive precisely because they make it easier and often cheaper for us to do things we're already inclined to do. Indeed, compared to the bar, sites like Digg and Deviant Art are *subsidizing* users, by not charging us extra for the social value of the platform (unlike the bar owners of the world.)

With this in mind, it's obvious that the answer to the question "Why are people doing things for free?" is "That's the wrong question." If you frame the question that way, you've built in the assumption that doing things for money is the only sensible explanation, and if you start with that assumption, almost

nothing ordinary people are doing on the internet makes sense. If, instead, you start with the idea that behavior is just motivation filtered through opportunity, it becomes plain that the new opportunities for creativity and sharing are being fed by some kind motivation, and that motivation is different than the desire to get paid.

And here we see why the platform makers of the world, whether Google or Digg, FanFiction.org or Deviant Art, represent one of the essential new business truths of the era: we like doing things for ourselves, and we like doing things for each other. We like it so much, in fact, that if the cost of doing those things is low enough and the payoff is high enough, we'll produce and share and look at one another's work in a feedback loop powerful enough to generate the limitless volume of freely created material we see today.

One of the new business opportunities in the current media market, in other words, is to provide platforms for us to engage in the things we value *outside* the market, a business model that makes the owner money on our desire to have places and ways of being with each other. That's the logic of running a bar or a photo sharing site. The 20th century media model of media production didn't allow for that kind of sharing, because its inherent cost and risk meant professionals were required at every step. Now they're not, and as a result, businesses that allow amateurs to create things for each other have become one of the key surprises of the age.