

**Mirko Tobias Schäfer**

*Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*  
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The rhetoric of community and user empowerment celebrated by popular discourse on social media tends to look at technology as a neutral means without questioning the social, organizational and design processes that constitute the architecture of participation. In addition, despite the pervasive presence of technical devices and web 2.0 platforms in social relations, many media scholars seem to underestimate the performative role of technology in shaping participative and convergent aspects of culture and society.

*Bastard Culture!* by Mirko Tobias Schäfer tackles this shortcoming in social theory and research, exploring the role of user participation in cultural production dynamics related to new media. Since the title, the book stresses the heterogeneous nature of participatory culture that mingles social, political, technical engagement and connects hacking practices, leisure and business models.

Schäfer's work developed within the context of Dutch media scholars community - as based at the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam and at the Department for Media and Culture Studies, University of Utrecht - that since the 1990s investigated and reflected into the critical aspects of net cultures. The book, distributed with Creative Commons License, belongs to the series "MediaMatters", on "current debates about media technology and practices". The style is witty and fluent, the detailed notes enrich and extend the empirical analysis, although they can require to break the flow of reading. The two appendixes represent a useful resource both for digital media scholars and people unfamiliar with hacking and digital vocabulary.

The volume starts outlining the theoretical framework and describing the analytical components of the "hybrid 'dispositif' of participation". Schäfer's approach combines Media Studies and Science & Technology Studies, especially drawing on Actor-Network Theory. The author introduces the concept of socio-technical ecosystem that acts as a lens to explore and disassemble the black-box of participation. The purpose is to rethink participatory culture as built upon discourses, social uses and technologies that simultaneously involve technical affordances, appropriation and design processes.

The subsequent chapters analyze case studies which concern global corporations, emphasizing the relations between user communities, technological devices and business models. Participation processes are studied across the three domains of construction, accumulation and archiving that are constituted respectively by creative, re-mix and structural prac-

tices. Here the author follows the action of different socio-technical ecosystems involving game consoles and consumer electronic products, where user media practices are observed as an extension of culture industries. In fact, when culture industries shift from content creators to platform providers, users start populating such platform creating, modifying, organizing cultural products. Thus, participation takes place within a nebula of practices often interconnected although not necessarily compliant with corporate and legal framework: on the one hand, such practices are challenged by the global, emancipatory and conversational promise of computer, software and the Internet; on the other, they cope and struggle with the limitations, commodification and black-boxing of digital devices and infrastructures. As a result, spheres of production and consumption, expert and lay knowledge, professionals and amateurs, users and designers, interact and overlap generating new design solutions, grey markets, platforms for sharing knowledge, software and how-tos. The case of the popular Microsoft game console xBox as well as the case of AIBO, the dog-robot toy produced by Sony, are particularly emblematic of the complex entanglement of organized team of hackers, user communities, business strategies enacted by participatory media practices: whether devices are hacked in order to play cracked or homebrew software; whether hackers are motivated by playfulness, commercial interests or activism; whether corporate companies repress or allow specific forms of appropriation, the study shows how users are involved as agent of technological change and innovation that affect social relations, while companies engage in, learn from, and benefit of users' tinkering for further product development.

Having analyzed cases where participation is explicit, namely enacted by intrinsically or extrinsically motivated practices, the study uncovers implicit aspects where participation is delegated to technological devices, automated by information system design, embedded in software and Web 2.0 platforms. Here information management and software design channel media practices, thriving on massive participation and allowing specific participation regimes. Focusing on common media practices such as file sharing, social networking and tagging contents, the analysis sheds light on the agency of system wide infrastructures and Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) that track and learn from user generated data. Meta-information added by a plurality of users is thus organized to improve management of information retrieval and produce tailored advertising.

Going on with the book, the reader may notice that the more familiar media practices appear, the more design information management works in a complex way respect to media practices, rising relevant issues of privacy, exploitation and control. Thus, aside the explicit production and mashup of creative content, from the culture industries' point of view "the most profitable user generated content is data" (p. 107). However, the book rejects the "Orwellian" vision towards participatory culture as

well as the romanticized version of homebrew culture production. Rather, participatory culture emerges from the study as a contested landscape, an open battlefield where relations between company and consumers, lay users and professional designers, socio-political mindset, policy framework and technological engagement collide and are continuously reconfigured.

The author identifies different strategies at stake by culture industries. Confrontation strategies, mostly adopted by music industry, criminalize user production in the desperate attempt to defend old business models through copyright enforcement, aggressive campaigns and design affordances such as Digital Right Management. In a subtler manner, strategies of “implementation” aim to frame media practices into graphic interfaces as well as end user licenses and terms of use do, in order to control user participation: they are adopted – among others – by film producers and popular social network providers as well as by web storage repositories. Finally, the integration strategies thrive on open participation and are adopted by socio-technical ecosystems such as Wikipedia, employing transparent and responsible policies and information design in order to foster user participation.

*Bastard culture!* remarkably unfolds the complexity of popular discourse and media practices, producing a genealogy of participatory culture as taking place in multiple socio-technical ecosystems. The author weaves together history of computing, business strategies, common media practices and hacking practices in a well conceived account that insists in the controversial and ambiguous nature of participation. He offers an original contribution unfolding the dark side of implicit participation and taking symmetrically into account both explicit and implicit participation as blurred and intertwined components of participatory culture. Perhaps, the emphasis on user participation and design shades the aspects related to the organization of work inside global companies themselves, where practices of appropriation and design processes seem as controversial and relevant as those occurring in the wild markets.

To conclude, this fascinating book helps to critically reflect on the effective emancipatory potential of new media as well as on the role of design, technical affordances and appropriation in shaping collective action and in technological change. Within the battlefield of participatory culture, the book clearly advocates for rethinking corporate policies and for the importance of appropriation and participation in media practices, to hold the public debate and achieve social awareness of the political dimension of technology.