ZEXE.NET, a Case Study of Video-Moblog

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ABSTRACT
The information and communication technology system is constantly creating new scenarios, but can still recognise a tendency in them: the blurring of the limits between consumers and producers and the passage from interactivity to participation (web 2.0). In this emerging cultural context, that is constantly redefined and remediated by individual and personalized forms of elaboration, it is important to understand the way in which every single person or group leads his/her own way towards re-appropriation of the technological realm.

My contribution aims to explore potential and real capacities of these new technologies to generate a creative use among individuals or collectivities. For this reason, I’ll analyse a case study, the mobile-blog communities in ZEXE.NET project. The aim of my contribution is to draw a portrait, to give a picture, of this social platform built by the artist Antoni Abad.

Categories & Subject Descriptors
H.5.4 [Hypertext/Hypermedia]; J.5 [Arts and Humanities].

General Terms: Performance, Human Factors.

Keywords: Social media, moblog, web-art 2.0, participatory culture.

1. INTRODUCTION
Individuals and groups themselves ‘perform’ using social network sites. Their profiles provide these subjects to put their own identity, representations and ‘friends’ to the test’. But social network spaces are not simply representational spaces: they are performance spaces. They are constructed social and relational spaces where identity is created, and where, above all, “we act”.

With the rapid growth of social spaces on the web (virtual communities, chat, forum, etc.), whose interactivity highlights its key ‘relational’ nature, the web as interactive space has given way to the web as a relational space.

Currently, social network sites has completed this shift from interactivity to ‘relational’ and from ‘relational’ to ‘participation’. Henry Jenkins [1, 2] defines typologies of ‘participatory culture’ as follow:

- Affiliations (Friendster, Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, or MySpace).
- Expressions (digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videogamming, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups).
- Collaborative Problem-solving (Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, spoiling).
- Circulations (podcasting, blogging).

Rheingold [3] anticipated this scenario with the definition of smart mobs: they represent a dynamic sociality, nomadic in mobility, a hybrid structure of social interaction - face-to-face and virtual - not only virtual community but social network, not only class but mobs, a dynamic and always changing agglomerate of people made aware through and by the technologies they use.

Social network sites, which is primarily organized around people and not interests, represent both a continuation and an extension of this concept. They have dramatically revealed the close relationship between virtual and real communities.

Participants in many of the larger social network sites are not necessarily “networking” or trying to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network [4, 5].

Social network sites have provided online communities with a new organizational framework. Early public online communities (and current websites dedicated to communities of interest) were structured by topic or according to topical hierarchies. Social network sites, however, are structured with the individual at the center of their own community and networks.

Some social networks cater for the production and sharing of specific media (youtube, flickr), we can say that they are media-centered; other web spaces are persons-centered or ties-centered (Facebook). The question here is how does the ‘production’ level (user generated contents) link to the construction of networks and participation level?

Participatory culture shifts the focus of attention from one of individual expression to that of community involvement. Web social network spaces are an important field of investigation when analysing the dynamics of collective elaboration of the representation of a group, which goes directly to the heart of production of the image and consciousness: social and collective practice [6]. On the web 2.0 platform, especially in social network sites, it makes the transition from imaginary to action; we pass from a representational space to a relational and performative one.

2. PERFORMATIVITY, A KEY CONCEPT
This line of thought can also be approached from the theoretical point of view of performativity [7,8]. The term performativity comes from the linguistic field of John Langshaw Austin [9] and I use its characteristics to explain the social network models on web 2.0 platforms. These characteristics are: act (an act implies making to exist, so creativity in action; the act creates a step between content and form, it is therefore subversive); satisfaction versus truth; and strength versus meaning.

Nowadays we talk about performative technologies and performative identity to stress the process and relationship involved. The performative activities are fundamentally processual, a part of them will always remain subject to transformation, and will be absolutely impossible to define [10].

The performativity is linked to the event, the event is linked to the bricolage and the bricolage is linked to the new technologies: the...
TAGS allow to link the individual mobile production of contents with collective elaboration of the same contents. Thus, we have the individualization of creation of contents on the one hand, the social re-shaping and redefining of the same contents on the other. Local and individual point of views establish ties with their local, real, communities by means of the digital space.

Zexe.net develops a network of “citizen ethnographers” [12], which means that users become critical investigators of their own community. Taxi drivers in Mexico City, prostitutes in Madrid, motoboy and motogirls in Sao Paulo are narrators of their experiences and broadcasters of their own stories. At the same time they aren’t mere annotators of their reality, they aren’t purely ‘ethnographers’. A very important consequence of this project is the modification of representations and the transformation of the common conception diffused in the real communities.

In that sense zexe.net represents a very useful tool to form a new active public sphere [13]; it’s a space for social criticism that starts from individuals and settles down in the real communities.

Zexe.net works through mechanisms of representation – video, audio, images, texts - but the result is not merely to give a visibility to specific socio-cultural groups and specific communities that usually are excluded from the traditional mainstream media. In Zexe.net individuals and groups develop strategies of sociability and subjectivity; the digital ‘place’ generates unpredictable social interactions, it’s a space for unexpected and reconfigured social relationships, it represents a discursive space more than a ‘representational’ space.

The core of the projects in zexe.net is not the creation of a representation of a group but rather the activation of the agency and production of social relationships. That is why the project has strong ‘political’ consequences and a strong value of ‘criticism’ (the act of dissenting). We assist to a redefinition of the collective identity through individual actions that correspond to a criticism of the rules assumed by the community (values, social roles, etc.).

In terms of John Thompson [13], zexe.net is a form of reinvention of public sphere: a space/place being independent from any Institution; a form of public life, or ‘civil society’ that performs its constitutive function of ‘criticism’; a form of ‘open’ public sphere that corresponds to a creative space in which new symbols, new images and new shapes of social and collective identity appear.

For example, one of the channels in zexe.net canal*GITANO (gypsy community of Lleida) has created many conflicting situations inside gypsy culture, like the redefinition of the man-woman role and a criticism of the de facto authority of patriarchs.

An other channel, canal*CENTRAL, created for and with the members of the large community of Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica, had to face political and technological constraints, finding temporary solutions in which the established rules were ‘suspended’. For example, there were legal problems with the mobile phones because they had been imported illegally from Miami and their software was not compatible with systems in Costa Rica; it was very hard to obtain phone contracts for 22 illegal immigrants when proving legal residency in the country is unavoidable requirement for accessing mobile telephone services.

In addition, the participants of canal*ACCESSIBLE (persons with limited mobility) in Barcelona created a map of architectural obstacles that was reproduced by local media, and city hall responded by distributing a map of “accessible Barcelona”. The strength of Zexe.net, structured as a video-mobile-blog 2.0, comes from its taking root in real communities with their ‘tensions’ and potentialities. The goal is to generate real life itself through interaction with the environment.

4. REFERENCES