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Generating Audiences for Public Television through Virtual Communities[1]

Are Virtual Communities "Communities"?

At the CISAN seminar about virtual communities[2] a recently hired colleague expressed what the term "virtual communities" made me feel like when I joined three years ago: skepticism and incredulity. Like my colleague, I thought of some of the most famous socio-digital network platforms as having ephemeral, fragmented, disperse, and heterogenous user participation: it was impossible that they could generate a sense of community!

And, yes, not all interactions generate a sense of community. However, we forget that in the "real" world, not all of them generate community either; and even when

they do, they are varied and we don't necessarily participate in them in person; for example, in linguistic, religious, cultural, national communities or, even those more dispersed and conflict-ridden, such as international communities. These levels of social relationships are broader than those that occur in smaller communities, such as our usual day-to-day exchanges, based on personal, closer relations, in the neighborhood, sports centers, workplaces, friends, family, etc. In any case, what communities have in common is precisely that their members share characteristics and interests, although the degree of interrelations, connection, homogeneity, and purpose varies significantly from one to another.

Once convinced of the importance of the term, the second question arose: To what extent do these virtual communities influence "real" life? For that reason, this

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article will deal with how communities on the "new media" are changing the way we experience or produce content for "traditional media," specifically public media.

Credence Goods

Since the 1970s, economists have observed that we cannot know if we are going to like a book, a song, or a television program before consuming them, and sometimes, not even afterward, because we judge and evaluate them depending also on what other people think of them. This is what it means when people say that cultural products are "credence goods." To the contrary, the quality of apples and carrots, which are regular commodities catalogued as "search goods," can be known before consuming them. Lastly, the quality of "experience goods," such as vacations or restaurants, can be determined after experiencing them.[3]

This means that our desire for or enjoyment of cultural products depend more broadly on social interactions that reduce the uncertainty about what they are going to trigger in us. This explains, therefore, many practices and forms of behavior, from book reviews, prizes for television productions, fashionable musical styles, to movie sequels and franchises and the effect they have on people's desire to consume certain cultural products.

The comment section on the YouTube streaming platform has been created for each video, boosting the creation of a virtual community. Their existence on socio-digital networks and sharing platforms constitutes spaces for social interaction where "We want to discuss, rave, slaughter, and define ourselves by the things we like."[4]

Public Television: From the Old to the New Media

For decades, public television has been an alternative to mainstream commercial television, given that it produces content with cultural, educational, and recreational aims. In addition to following ethical guidelines to represent society's plurality and diversity, one of its objectives has been the creation of communities. Even in today's media ecosystem, saturated with titles by the big studios and content generated by users of television screens, movie house screens, and streaming platforms, public media

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services continue to offer differentiated products made by professional teams, something lacking in user-generated content.[5]

Whether we are referring to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (cbc), the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (pbs), or the Mexican Public System of Radio Broadcasting (spr), we find them limited by their funding, the geographic limitation of their broadcasting nationwide, and the pressure to increase audience size. Another major limitation for conventional tv broadcasters is unidirectional communication with audiences. However, as long as these public television networks offer streaming services on their own or shared platforms, they manage to increase interaction with their audiences, and the life cycle of their content —since it can be seen on demand indefinitely— and they have more opportunities to expand their audiences and be seen beyond their borders.

Content as a Starting Point for Generating Communities

Public television stations often produce content that commercial networks commonly ignore or deliberately marginalize; for example, shows touching on environmental issues, apart from a few subscription channels. I will review a couple of cases of non-fiction television series: *Green Agenda*, produced and broadcast by Mexico's Canal Once, and *Growing a Greener World*, by Agrivana (sm) Media, aired on pbs. What's interesting is that the episodes of both series have been uploaded to YouTube, the largest exchange platform in the world, with a huge infrastructure in the form of servers and cloud services and the capability of reaching very broad audiences.[6]

YouTube has the value added of artificial intelligence for inserting subtitles into the content, making recommendations so people can discover videos, and offering

content search tools. It also has the advantages of a platform for exchange in which users can utilize the comments section to interact with others. All these benefits can be taken advantage of without raising costs as appreciably as the producers' having their own platform would; for this reason, these public channels and independent television producers use YouTube to reach their audiences.

Beyond that, YouTube's advertising models don't clash with public television rules, which forbid them from using the conventional model, which may compromise or condition the kind of content produced and broadcast to attract advertisers. This does not happen because the advertising model is personalized and subjected to profiling individual accounts and the history of the material being watched.

The series mentioned above deal with environmental issues in thirteen twenty-five-minute episodes per season. The hosts are also special: *Green Agenda*'s Max Espejel has worked at Canal Once since he was a child, and Joe Lamp'l on *Growing a Greener World* is an expert in horticulture and gardening. Both series have enthusiastic viewers who participate in the respective comment sections. But, what has to happen for an online video to generate a virtual community based on the comment sections?

Building a Sense of Community

The YouTube comment section in some cases reflects the process of construction and expression of a sense of community. This can be perceived in different ways:

- First, people participate in discussions over several episodes; that is, they are recurring users of the sections.
- Second, real dialogues take place among users, who respond to each other and give "likes" to the comments of others. This may even lead to the hosts or program guests to "chat" with the audiences; and this close-

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ness generates a dynamic that reinforces the motivation to continue watching the programs.

- Third, it has been surprising to find comments offering emotional support to participants in the virtual community, and between them and the content creators. For example, most of the comments thank the producers for making the programs and sharing them on the platform; but users also express support or empathy for each other. This could be seen in a couple of cases in which participants expressed their frustration and grumbled about not having enough money to be able to have a lifestyle with ecological practices like buying a piece of land to cultivate endemic plants and help ecosystems. Both participants received encouraging responses, asking them not to give up and to do other kinds of environmentally friendly actions that were not as expensive. One participant wrote, "Accept what you can't change, and change what you can."
- Fourth, in the communities, there are also criticisms and conflicts. However, they are dealt with empathetically and with information exchange. For example, someone complains that people who work in permaculture, that is, a lifestyle that allows for humans to live with their natural surroundings in a way that is beneficial for both, act as if rats don't exist and they weren't a problem in gardens, farms, and vegetable plots. Someone responds that cats are a good natural solution.
- Fifth, another surprise was finding that, despite how ephemeral communities in this kind of forum can be, given that there is no incentive to return to the forum often after participating, in some cases, they do manage to create and bring together a vision of common history that can coincide with that of physical communities and contribute to maintaining a sense of community.

Several participants talk about the issue of the media and public alternatives through YouTube, remembering their experience as viewers and express their opinions about this. For example, some *Growing a Greener World* fans mention a subscriber television gardening channel that no longer exists.

One user comments, "I have always wondered if [the channel was canceled due to the fact that] the early gar-

dening shows were done by outstanding gardeners — who happen to tend organic. So, there was no way to market the biocides corporations wanted marketed." And, along those same lines, the dialogue continues with the users complaining that the commercial stations let advertisers dictate what people are going to watch. In the case of *Green Agenda*, another viewer wrote, "Congratulations to Canal Once, as always, the best option. More proposals like this one and fewer programs with junk content (TV Azteca, Televisa, Imagen 3)."

Another person thanks Canal Once for covering ecology, whose presence is sorely urgent on open, broadcast television. These kinds of exchanges show how users refer to themselves as an audience that can tell the difference between commercial television and public television on YouTube, building a virtual identity based on their common experiences and culture.

- Sixth, the participants exchange technical and practical information, asking and advising about how to solve problems and start to "do something" in the "real" world. These comments range from advice about how to recycle, how to comply with really organic and ecological guidelines, or even suggesting to meet up in the physical world and carry out activities to benefit the environment. Many participants also say they are encouraged and motivated by the programs and the participation in the comments section.

Conclusions

The sections of public television networks that permit interaction with their audiences on socio-digital networks are valuable spaces for evaluating whether they fulfill their institutional objectives of generating communities. What can be observed is that when program producers interact frequently with the audience in these spaces, they spur greater participation and dialogue with users and among themselves. They also build an emotional atmosphere that promotes the confidence to be able to ask for and give information as well as emotional support. Audiences also involve themselves more when the program's content is more specific instead of being too general, when it is more practical and produces knowledge that can be applied and put into action by viewers, be-

cause it takes into account their interests and problems that they are trying to solve.

These factors mean that, compared to the incipient *Green Agenda* community, the *Growing a Greener World* comment sections show a more consolidated sense of community, and even build a practical community whose impact goes beyond the virtual world.

When virtual communities are forged on socio-digital networks, they give content producers feedback from their audience, allowing them to learn from it to design better quality and more successful future programs. In addition, they are spaces where people socialize, and this reduces the uncertainty about how viewers are going to react and what they will take away from the programs, since we must remember that these are cultural products, and, as such, credence goods, which means that people's opinions matter. Thus, virtual communities are spaces that would help public media to increase their audiences without big costs.

Lastly, perhaps the most revealing thing about this is that virtual communities are also real, since they exert an influence (positive, negative, or neutral) on our daily lives. We need to continue researching them to understand how the line between the real and the virtual is dissolved and how the communities in the virtual world influence the physical world and vice versa. **VM**

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Notes

1 This article is based on a longer essay: "Comunidades virtuales de la tv pública en YouTube. Análisis de los comentarios de dos programas ambientales," Alejandro Mercado, ed., *Comunidades virtuales en las industrias culturales de Norteamérica* (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM, 2024), pp. 229-252.
2 The author is referring to the CISAN Seminar on Creative and Cultural Industries (SEMICC). For more about it, see http://www.cisan.unam.mx/seminarios_investigacion.php#gsc.tab=0. [Editor's Note.]
3 M. Kretschmer, G. M. Klimis, and C. J. Choi, "Increasing Returns and Social Contagion in Cultural Industries," *British Journal of Management*, no. 10, 1999, pp. 61-72.
4 Ibid., p. 63.
5 This does not mean that we should view public media uncritically, since sometimes the lack of a balanced programmatic diet and guaranteed editorial autonomy and independence can result in biased content.
6 *Agenda Verde*, Canal Once, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRs1I_HQT8s&list=PLrFkZrRQk9nm-bc6cWxMpaCL9iECNxk3x&index=13, and *Growing a Greener World*, https://www.youtube.com/@ggwtv/playlists. [Editor's Note.]