
Everyday Media Creators and Projected Audiences

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Introduction & Abstract

In this position paper, I build on the workshop theme of the "creative conversation" to argue my main thesis -- that everyday acts of creativity need to be viewed through a lens which focuses on the particular communicative and social relationships that they are supporting.

I ground this point in reference to ongoing research in the everyday creative domain of snapshot photography and media creation, as well as in socio-cultural models of creativity, which move us away from considering creativity as solely an individual trait, instead positioning creative acts in a larger social context of needs, resources and assessment.

I highlight an emerging concept of the *projected audience* in order to understand the assumptions and assessments which different categories of producers leverage in this domain of everyday creativity. After illustrating this via examples from my ongoing research, I suggest several theoretical framings that may be informative.

Background: Everyday P-creativity

In [4], cognitive scientist Margaret Boden asserts that for something to be creative, it must be *novel* (within a

given scope) and it must also have *value* in a given context. Specifically, value comes from expanding the domain or “conceptual space” in which the creative act is operating, either by exploring pathways within a space that were previously unknown or by transforming the space itself on a fundamental level. Most often, the domain of interest is localized in an individual’s personal context; Boden labels the acts that affect this domain space psychologically creative (“P-creative”) when it is “new to the person who comes up with it” (ibid, p. 2). Occasionally, this domain expansion can encompass and affect a whole field or area of human endeavor. Boden calls these historically creative (“H-creative”) acts, and impact at this level is often thought of as the work of genius that potentially transforms a conceptual space for a large number of people.

These two categories of creativity are not mutually exclusive, as every H-creative act must be a P-creative act as well. By defining and connecting these categories, Boden allows us to think about creativity along a generalized continuum of ability, relevance and spheres of influence. This in turn allows us to investigate and support everyday creative activities without necessarily distracting ourselves with the impressive, but by definition, fleetingly rare and perhaps unrepresentative creative practices of genius.

Background: Creativity as social & contextual

In Csikszentmihalyi’s socio-cultural perspective [9], creativity is inextricably situated in the interrelation between the domain, the field, and the individual. Here, “domain” refers to the preexisting set of knowledge, rules and symbols used by a type of endeavor. The domain can be viewed broadly

(mathematics), or narrowly (algebra, number theory), and are “in turn nested in what we usually call culture, or the symbolic knowledge shared by a particular society or humanity as a whole” (ibid, p. 28). The field includes the individuals, infrastructure and social conventions that serve as gatekeepers and evaluators for contributions to the domain (such as editors, art critics, norms of taste, and so on). The influence of field and domain is also highlighted in related literature, such as Becker’s influential sociology of “art worlds” [3] which explored the largely invisible but important connections between artists and the broader cultural and technological factors (ranging from the locations and sizes of museums and galleries to production decisions made by paint manufacturers, for example) that direct, channel and limit the production of art and culture.

Because an individual is always informed by and acting in relationship to their field and domain, this socio-cultural view asserts that it is necessary consider the individual’s creativity in the particular context in which it is enacted. Indeed, this perspective asserts in “rich social settings...individual cognitive processes were so deeply embedded in group practices that it was difficult to identify what was ‘individual psychology’ and what was ‘group process’” [15]. Thus, creativity rests not just in one individual’s abilities, but also in the window of opportunity presented to them by their historic, cultural and social positioning in relationship to their setting. A socio-cultural perspective also implies that creativity is inherently collaborative and enacted on multiple simultaneous levels, encompassing interactions between direct collaborators and communicative participants, overlapping communities of practice, accumulated symbolic structures of the domain,

audiences real and perceived, and the individual creator's own self-referential reflection on their own past activities. In all cases, it "grow[s] out of the relationship between an individual and the world of his or her work, and from the ties between an individual and other human beings" [2].

Together, these literatures suggest both the value and necessity of considering the individual and their socio-technical context in an analysis of creative practices. In addition, they underscore the notion that human creativity is fundamentally communicative. If we are to successfully design the next generation of information systems that support the creativity of millions, we should not focus just on genius-level H-creative exemplars, but rather on the types of P-creative activity and work that millions already engage in every day. Similarly, if we are to get an accurate representation of the types of issues, affordances and tensions that impact everyday creative activity, we must consider that creativity in context, where the context includes tools, audiences, peers, and the broader culture.

Empirical example: Home Mode media

My current and ongoing research examines a particular type of everyday p-creative activity, snapshot photography. Rooted in the production and use of media that are collectively mundane but individually salient, this activity is fundamentally communicative, underwriting social activity and providing both support for and a location of retelling of memory, interpretation and reinterpretation of memory.

In particular, I deploy anthropologist Richard Chalfen's concept of the *home mode* [6] as a framing to

delineate the types of participants, relationships, and social contexts in which to effectively interpret these creative acts. In Chalfen's definition, the home mode is a form of pictorial communication (such as snapshots, home movies and home video) that supports "a pattern of interpersonal and small group communication centered around the home... This concept of mode allows us to place pictures, as symbolic forms, into a process of social communication." The home mode then can be viewed as comprising a set of particular process characteristics (production and usage) and object characteristics (content, form and functionality). The scope of "home" in this framing is that of home as a social context, not just a geographical one. Rather, home denotes the symbolic participants that this mode of production serves, addressing familial functions rather than marketplace logic.

Chalfen positions the home mode in contrast to mass communication modes. Photographers in the home mode typically know whom they are taking pictures of, and the images and representations of the home mode are not meaningful without access to localized information. Such images both rely on and serve the common ground that already exists with their subjects and audiences. The concept of the home mode emphasizes the social functions of snapshot media; that such media serve not primarily as containers of information, but instead serve as both support for and a location of sociality.

Through dissemination of digital photography via modern ICT, we are rapidly seeing the movement of these P-creative and communicative activities into computer-mediated spaces. I assert that we may view this as the emergence of the *virtual home mode*, a

perspective which both addresses modern changes in current contexts of amateur home media production, while simultaneously connecting with a century-long lineage of snapshot photographic practices.

In my dissertation work, I am developing and describing a perspective of the virtual home mode via qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, home observations and content analysis. I research how people use amateur media to organize and make sense of their lives, to build and support their well-being. In parallel, I ask how these biographical activities are facilitated, hindered and altered by current technology.

Developing theoretical concept: the Projected Audience

As my dissertation research has progressed, several themes have begun to emerge from the data analysis. In particular, one developing theme I wish to flag for discussion in this workshop is the role of the imagined or anticipated audience for a creative product: the *projected audience*.

By 'projected,' I mean the imagined and anticipated audience toward which a particular creative product is targeted. As the producer projects an imagined audience (or audiences) for a given creation, that hypothetical audience serves as a organizing and structuring force on the producer. In turn, I propose that the creator will both intentionally and tacitly adjust their creative output to leverage shared experiences and shared frameworks of interpretation with those projected audiences. The projected audience is not necessarily the actual audience. Retrospective audience feedback iteratively informs the shape of

projected audiences, but conceptually these two notions of audience are distinct, and appear at different points in the timeline in the process of creation and dissemination. A projected audience may be also be internal rather than external, including the self as well as other. Self-as-audience can also include multiple aspects, both the present self and an imagined future self. Thus this concept addresses communicative and reflexive activities alike. (See [17] for further discussion of personal media production and the imagined future self.)

Some of the clearest examples of this process in my dissertation research appear in cases when individual creators intentionally address multiple audiences concurrently through careful leverage of shared history and an awareness of the particular frames of interpretation that will be brought to bear on a given photograph by different viewers. Two participants discussed this in the context of seemingly straightforward pictures of their offices that they had posted publicly on Flickr.com.

In the case of participant "Bob," the image was of his new home office. This participant had recently lost his job, and had begun doing freelance consulting. For Bob, the office image was "doing multiple things at once...like a good book." The messages that he intended it to convey depended on the audience viewing the image. For geographically distant family members, the image was a message that he was coping emotionally with the loss of his job, and moving forward. For local professional and light-weight friend contacts, the home office image was intended to be interpreted in conjunction with other images Bob posted around the same time, showing activities such

as trade luncheons and industry workshops that he would not previously have had time to attend. In Bob's account, these images were public signals that he was available but also still professionally active, without having to explicitly state that he was unemployed. Bob labeled this as "sideways" maintenance; he was able to send distinct but related signals to both of these audiences at the same time, but without the social embarrassment of having to address the topic head-on.

In the case of another participant "Clara," the image was of her in her new work office. The text and photo were chosen, she said, to cast it as an "announcement," a small bit of "news" that would be of mild interest to the mix of family, friends and casual acquaintances that made up her general Flickr audience. Yet despite the innocuous nature of this announcement, she also intended the picture's message to be especially relevant for "people who know me well." For that group of viewers, Clara stated she was relying on their background knowledge of an ongoing but private conflict she was having with her old office-mate. Posting a picture of a new office was intended as a signal to this more intimate audience that the issue had been resolved. Aware that some of her other co-workers might look at her Flickr photos, Clara said she relied on those with the appropriate shared background to infer this more subtle bit of news.

Implications

This concept is relevant for research because we need to understand the specific and particular communicative goals of everyday creative producers in order to address them in their own contexts and on their own terms. Developing the concept of the projected

audience allows us to deal with everyday p-creative acts as distinct from purely fine art aesthetic standards and conversely, from consideration framed in purely commercial terms. So too is this concept relevant for technology design, because both feedback and assessment mechanisms need to be properly aligned with the projected audience.

To contextualize this point, consider again the snapshot photographer. This class of user is engaged in a form of everyday creativity, through which they participate in ongoing in-group communication with intimates. In this case, the social activity of sharing pictures and telling stories with and around those pictures dominates over concerns about aesthetic or marketplace appeal. Such communicative creative media are likely to have a high degree of importance for members of the intended audience, but a much lower value to outsiders. Contrast this with the professional photographer, seeking to build a new customer base, convince their peers of their competence and receive professional accolades.

Current systems for photographic dissemination and communication have deployed a variety of approaches to deal with audience access by tackling it as a concern about privacy controls. However, issues of audience models are related but distinct from those of privacy models. Public versus private access does not map clearly to professional and amateur audiences. For example, professionals using user-generated media systems may want to encourage wide dissemination of their work (for publicity), but with a reduced level of quality or functionality to protect their economic interests (such as watermarking on pictures, digital-rights management (DRM) control on audio, and so on). Amateurs may want variable levels of control,

which do not map clearly to a hierarchal privacy model; family, friends and contacts are not just nested categories, and each contains a complicated set of sub-audiences to negotiate.

Distinctions between different categories of users and their accompanying audience models can be revealed when breakdowns occur, forcing a response and/or some sort of repairing behaviors. Later in this conference, I will present a poster on categories of end-user response to perceived unauthorized reuse in Flickr, emphasizing the gap between legal regimes of ownership of intellectual property and the personal regimes of meaning invested in images by P-creators.

Future directions: Theory development

Certainly concerns of audience in relationship to media production and consumption are not novel; they appear in many literatures and research traditions. However, most of these views on the concept seem inappropriate or insufficient. Audience studies are a persistent sub-field of Communication studies [11], but these are rooted primarily in television research and mass media models of consumption. Starting with a 'few-to-many' production model, these studies do not directly inform our understanding of the creative, communicative process of everyday media *producers*. Anderson's examination of "imagined communities" in his work on nationalism [1] may provide similarities to the notion of imagined audiences that I outlined above, though his argument is also constructed at a level of scale that is much higher, clouding it's re-appropriation and application in the context of individual media creators. Goffman's perspectives on presentation of the self [12] are frequently used in recent studies of user-generated

media and social networking activities, but his perspective is rooted fundamentally in a performative model of interaction, which breaks down when discrete media items (such as photos) and more asynchronous communications are considered.

So one question I would propose to discuss in the context of this workshop is: "what theoretical models are appropriate and useful in considering the creative conversation?" What are effective lenses for understanding individuals engaged in P-creative acts that are social and communicative, taking their contexts of production, use and dissemination into account? One might be that of *sensemaking*. Several models of sensemaking appear in the literature; for instance, Dervin [10] focuses on information seeking, while Russell et al's [14] version of the concept emphasizes how the cost structure of actions guide behavior. Perhaps more informative might be Weick's version [18], which highlights seven key characteristics of the sensemaking process:

1. Grounded in identity construction
2. Retrospective
3. Enactive of sensible environments
4. Social
5. Ongoing
6. Focused on and by extracted cues
7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

While a full discussion of the application of Weick's conception of sensemaking to P-creative media production is beyond the scope of this document, it should be apparent from the list above how aspects resonate in the P-creative context. To take one example, the retrospective nature of sensemaking points to how photographs are always interpreted after

the moment they represent has passed; with this consideration in mind, we begin to find a path away from Goffman-esque notions of performativity. Point seven's focus on plausibility over accuracy echoes Linde's studies [13] on the contextualized nature of life stories, the construction of which personal media supports in several ways.

Other theoretical concepts are also potentially useful in this problem context, and I look forward to the opportunity to discuss them with the other workshop participants. For instance, the concept of boundary objects [5, 16] clearly resonates with notions of addressing and navigating between multiple concurrent audiences. Clark and Brennan's examination [7] of the factors which support or hinder common ground formation in different communication settings may also be useful. An examination in the workshop of the applicability of these as well as other conceptual models would be welcome.

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