

ANALYZING CORPORATIZATION OF USER GENERATED CONTENT IN THE CASE OF TURKEY

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Abstract

User generated content phenomenon is recently a very popular topic in researches about today's emerging new media landscape. Due to willingness of users' and to some technological progresses, amount of user generated content applications like blogs, social community networks and content sharing websites is rapidly increasing worldwide and also in Turkey. For some, user generated content applications are challenging both the conventional understanding of what journalism is and the established media business. For others there is a complementary relationship between user generated content and professional content production. In this paper how mainstream online news organizations are integrating user generated content will be examined using empirical data on the case of Turkey. Although this is an ongoing study first results show that there are similarities and differences between methods applied by Turkish online news media and methods used by media organizations worldwide.

Keywords

User generated content, blogs, convergence, online media landscape in Turkey, active user, Internet

1 INTRODUCTION

Internet, a multimedia communication network suitable for carrying all kinds of information coded in different media formats globally (Geray, 1996: 11) is today the most widespread example of technological convergence which can be described as the integration of various communication forms like point to point, face to face and mass communication into the same, single infrastructure. In other words, technological convergence of telecommunication infrastructure and ICTs caused the erosion of traditional distinctions between point to point and mass communication (Basaran, 2005: 32). Technological convergence, emergence of broadband internet access and some socio-economic factors led to significant transformations in media environment. Brandtzaeg (2007: 15) listed some characteristics of this emerging new media landscape as follows:

- From user being passive consumers to users becoming active participants and content producers.
- From local to more global online services.
- From user consuming mainstream professional content to consuming non-professional content.
- From text based applications to rich, multimedia ones.
- From single use design to community design.
- From a traditional one-to-many model to a many-to some model.
- From digital divide to a digital production divide.

The reach of the internet also gave rise to demassification of users, more interactivity between and among users and medium, and customization of content and services. These transformations gave the opportunity to researchers to be able to explain changing communication process using network based communication-mass communication dichotomy and to discuss each component of communication process with new concepts and questions. For example with the release of internet, established theories about media users were questioned and users are now to be understood as more active in communication process (Livingstone, 1999: 63-64).

Users' participation to content creation activities generally explained with the term user generated content extensively referring to the changing position of user in communication process. However, the discussions about the increasing participation of users in online communication applications are not totally new. The optimistic expectations and claims about the technological merits of internet -interactivity, hypertextuality and multimediality- can be given as the prime examples of such discussions. The technological merits of the internet were generally associated with a more participative communication process and considered as the ways of allowing users to take an active role to get full benefit from the communication process (Aydogan, 2007: 685-687).

However it will be unfair to ignore the novelty in recent discussions. Formerly participative activities of users in communication process were thought as a result of technological merits of internet and of media organizations' interests for applying them. In other words, users' participation to communication process was conditional upon media organizations' attitudes. But today it has been assumed that the driving forces behind the users' participation are exactly the users' motivation, willingness and interest for being a more determining individual in communication process; with the professionals' words "the media can no longer just be gatekeepers. People aren't interested in just being media consumers" (WAN, 2008: 96). The technological progresses like user-friendly, low cost content creation and management tools, numerous interfaces suitable for creating and sharing content and broadband internet access are instrumental factors.

Due to willingness of users' and to technological progresses amount of blogs, social community networks and content sharing websites maintained by non-professionals is increasing rapidly and there is an exponential rise in the number of people using these platforms to express themselves. Since their emergence, user generated content applications especially the news-related ones like *Indymedia*, *OhmyNews* and *Wikinews*, have been the subject of discussions about today's changing media landscape. As Paulussen et al. (2007: 132) mentioned the literature about online participatory media has mainly focused on the weblog phenomenon and collaborative online news sites. These websites are comprehended as they are emerging outside of the existing media sphere and have the potential for affecting established media business.

How mainstream online news organizations are reacting to the user generated content trend in Turkey will be examined in this ongoing study. First I will try to define the user generated content term and show the ways and strategies used by established media to be able to integrate user generated content following related literature. Next, I will explain the conditions under which online news applications were emerged in Turkey. Following this, the methods generated by Turkish mainstream online media for incorporating with user generated content will be examined using data collected by website analysis. As a conclusion I will list some questions that need to be answered in order to understand the motivations of Turkish mainstream media while they are integrating user generated content.

2 USER GENERATED CONTENT – GROWING PHENOMENON

The literature related to user generated content applications and their impacts is getting broader (Gillmor, 2004; Matheson, 2004; Thurman, 2008; Platon and Deuze, 2003; Atton and Meikle, 2006; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008) due to growing popularization of these applications and to a trend towards the integration of contents created by non-professionals into the content production processes of established media organizations day by day. In spite of this abundance there isn't a widely agreed definition of user generated content. For example Brandtzaeg (2007: 14) preferred the term "users as innovators" and stressed the new and productive usage patterns of new media to explain user generated content. Another scholar Örnebring (2008: 772) discussed the user generated content phenomenon focusing on the blurring distinction between (media) producers and (media) consumers. Like Örnebring, Axel Bruns (2006, 2007) also explained the term with the help of producer-consumer dichotomy. The term "produsage" is used by Bruns (2007) as a model of describing new, user-led content creation environment. According to him in contrast to traditional producer-consumer conceptualization today users are increasingly participating to content creation process so they can be named as user-producers or in other words as "producers" (2006). He listed the applications and opportunities like social networking, knowledge management, creative practice, multi-user online gaming, citizen journalism, collaborative filtering and open source software development as the key drivers of the development of user-led online environments (2007: 99-100). Another user-centric explanation is made by Cardoso and Espanha (2008: 65). They emphasize the changing position of users in the value chain of media. According to them "users are no longer 'end users' because they moved into the heart of the very own value chain, that is, to the creativity arena". In addition to these, the term has been examined as a process by some. According to Hermida and Thurman (2008: 344) "user generated content is a process whereby ordinary people have an opportunity to participate with or contribute to professionally edited publications". Another attempt for achieving a comprehensive definition of user generated content can be followed from a report published by OECD (2007). In the report, "user created content" terminology is used and defined as "content made publicly available over the Internet which reflects a certain amount of creative effort and which is created outside of professional routines and practices". Based on this definition, publication requirement, creative effort and creation independently from professional routines and practices are appeared as three central characteristics of user created content (8). Following this research cluster, in this paper user generated content is understood as original content which is created by non-professionals independently from a commercial market context and which is the result of users' contribution to professional content produced by mainstream media.

In an environment where everyone can easily relay facts and opinions on any subject, produce and disseminate content individually or participate in collective creation processes, it isn't odd to say that user generated content has significant impacts on established media market. As a response to this challenge media giants are now generating methods and trying to find the ways of reacting to the user generated phenomenon. One of them is -as always applied- using commercialization methods. For example in September 2005 *News Corporation* invested \$580 million to buy *Myspace*, in October 2005 *Viacom/MTV* invested \$49 million for *iFilm*, in June 2007 *CBS Interactive* bought *Flickr* and in November 2007 *Agence France Press* purchased a 30% stake in *Scooplive* which is a citizen journalism platform for video and photos (OECD, 2007: 23; WAN, 2008: 95; Petersen, 2008).

Date	Acquirer	Acquired	Price in USD millions
March 2005	Yahoo	Flickr	-----
September 2005	News Corporation	MySpace	580
October 2005	Viacom/MTV	iFilm	49
August 2006	Sony	Grouper	65
August 2006	Viacom/MTV	Atom Films	200
September 2006	Yahoo	Jumpcut	-----
October 2006	Viacom/MTV	Quizilla.com	-----
October 2006	Google	YouTube	1580
November 2006	Google	Jotspot	-----
November 2007	Agence France Press	Scooplive	-----
June 2007	CBS Interactive	Last.fm	280

Table 1: Acquisitions of Some UGC Platforms

Besides these, media giants are increasingly establishing partnerships with user generated content applications. For example *BBC* signed a partnership with *MySpace* and *The Associated Press* partnered with citizen journalism site *NowPublic* to improve its regional news (WAN, 2008: 95-96). This kind of agreements can be categorized as new business models of mainstream media to be able to integrate with user generated content applications, new ways of saving time and money. Another method for reacting to user generated content used by mainstream media is providing space for users. Like Örnebring (2008: 771) mentioned, today “users are invited to create their own blog, submit their own news, photos and videos under the auspices of and generally via the website of an established media organization and today a significant portion of these creative activities is ‘channelled’ through mainstream media corporations”. Thirdly, mainstream media organizations are using some formats which can be considered both as a way of increasing interactivity to get contributions from their users and a way of integrating user generated content. In a recent study these formats were listed as “polls”, “messageboards”, “have your says”, “comments on stories”, “question and answer”, “blogs”, “reader blogs”, “your media” and “your story” by Thurman (2008: 140). But with which motivations? Does user generated content generate great profit or the main reason is something else?

According to Lowrey and Mackay (2008: 65) user generated content, for example blogs aren't serious competitors in online advertising market for mainstream media in circumstances advertisers spent \$49.4 billion on US newspapers and approximately \$15 million on blogs in 2005. So they don't have the potential to challenge mainstream media financially. Although Lowrey and Mackay accepted the financial potential of blogs and possible financial competition between mainstream media and blogs in the future, according to them the mainstream media's interest is primarily at the occupational level. The assertion that blogs also have the right/power to decide which story is newsworthy causes awareness about blogs among professionals.

On the other hand according to Petersen (2008) user generated content applications for example social networking websites are bringing joy for their users and make them feel themselves important and significant and today economic currency is floating around within this culture. Because of the hype occurring around participation notion and the changing definition of content -defining content as content if it was uploaded by users- social networking websites are increasingly becoming subjects of acquisitions and users are turning into commodities that can be sold on the market. Another financial-related approach focusing on employment strategy mentioned by Torenli (2008). According to him involving bloggers' labor force into the news production process gives the opportunity to mainstream media to reduce labor costs and apply e-work models which are highly profitable.

It will be said that we are still in the early stages of increasing relationship between user generated content and mainstream media so today it is difficult to explain the motivations behind this integration process in a very definitive way. But it is not odd to say that economic expectations and financial interests are important factors in this relationship. In the following section first I will try to analyze how Turkish mainstream online media are reacting and integrating user generated content. Then I will list some questions that need to be answered in order to understand the motivations of Turkish mainstream media while they are integrating user generated content.

3 ONLINE NEWS APPLICATIONS IN TURKEY

In Turkey by the mid-1990s online news applications were considered as a new commercial arena by actors both from in and outside the communication sector and online news platforms were supposed to generate great profit. With such an expectation pioneer examples began operating and the business models which have been used in the world were copied and tried to be applied also in online news business in Turkey's media landscape. It can be said that investments –especially ones realized by mainstream media organizations- in online news business by numerous actors were investments realized compatible with the picture foreseen as the commercial benefit of convergence. Another determining factor of the development of online news applications in Turkey was related to Turkey's economic condition by the beginning of 2000s. In 2001 an economic crisis emerged in Turkey and lots of journalists employed in traditional media organizations lost their jobs. So the internet emerged as an alternative medium for them and many of them built their own news websites which can be categorized as “online media watchdogs” or started reporting news for existing online news applications (Aydoğan, 2007: 687). Although these trails were quite amateur and were not dealing with the original content in the beginning, these were actually hopeful experiments of using web technology to produce and disseminate news over internet.

Since their emergence, online news websites have been applying various methods for allowing their users to be able to act as active participants. One of them is implementing new applications to measure popularity of certain topics or news stories. Not only clicks are counted by expert software but readers are called to vote for different news stories. Others were writing comments to news, forwarding “popular” stories to friends by e-mails, supplying polls on any subject and publishing e-mail addresses of reporters and columnists. All these methods were presented as the methods of creating more “reader friendly” websites that led to a more democratic and participative communication environment and understood as the positive consequence of diffusion of internet in newsrooms of media organizations by the media elites. Some said that these methods were applied by mainstream online news organizations in order to connect with their users more effectively. On the other hand these methods were also used to generate managerial strategies. For example writing comments to news or forwarding “popular” stories to friends by e-mails were also the tools of creating a consumer base and knowledge gained from popularity index of news on the websites were used by managerial elites of traditional media in order to consolidate their market base. Although there is a conflict in explaining these applications' impacts in the context of our study these methods can be considered as the early examples of integrating user generated content applied in Turkish media landscape.

Today same methods are still being used and new ones are being developed. The data used in this study to explain methods applied by mainstream media organizations in order to generate a response to user generated content relies on website analysis of four different media organizations which are well-established brands in Turkey. With such a research I am going to test if the formats which were considered as the most common ones by Thurman as discussed above are being applied or not and to find out if there are any new emerging one in Turkish media landscape. The first results of this research can be followed from Table 2.

Website	polls	messageboards	have your says	comments on stories	question and answer	blogs	your media	your story
<i>hurriyet.com.tr</i>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>milliyet.com.tr</i>	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
<i>sabah.com.tr</i>	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
<i>radikal.com.tr</i>	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

Table 2: Methods Used by Turkish Online News Organizations to Integrate User Generated Content

As shown in table “commenting on stories” is the most common method used in Turkey and “question and answer” method is not being used. Another result is that although “polls” was a commonly used one in the beginning of online journalism applications in Turkey today it is not being used nowadays. Following the Table *Hurriyet.com.tr* can be considered as the most offensive organization.

The motivations behind these attempts are going to be studied with the following questions:

- Does user generated content gives them the opportunity to get quicker and better coverage of news?
- Does user generated content let them to be closer to the people and their concerns instead of relying solely on market research to find out what their audience is interested in?
- Does user generated content lead to a more representative news coverage?

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