The hidden *prosumer*: consumer-citizens participation in the invisible economy of advertising

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Resumo

Este artigo foca a participação do *prosumidor* - enquanto produtor e consumidor-cidadão – na publicidade e as suas implicações na construção dos conteúdo e dos públicos publicitários, formatando a indústria, produtos e perfis de consumo e a ecologia dos meios de comunicação. Com base na definição de *prosumidor* de Alvin Toffler, a dupla condição do indivíduo como produtor e consumidor, e sua designação da chamada economia invisível, analisaremos como a indústria da publicidade enfrenta os desafios colocados por esta participação, incorporando contribuições de *prosumidores*, como fonte de capital criativo e ferramentas operacionais. Além disso, discutiremos como a interação entre *prosumidores* e média, especialmente a publicidade, denota um *empowerment* paradoxal: os *prosumidores* co-criadores conquistam a sua própria voz na esfera pública, influenciando o conteúdo e ganhando poder de edição sobre a sua substância; mas porque são também são consumidores dos média, isto é, audiência, os *prosumidores* constroem valor mediático para a publicidade tornando-se parte dos produtos destinados ao consumo. Refletindo além da co-criação sobre a participação *below-the-line*, menos visível, enuncia-se ainda seu o potencial de cidadania, como meio de construir e influenciar a paisagem quotidiana.

Palavras-chave: Prosumer; publicidade; participação; consumidor-cidadão; co-criação; ecologia mediática

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of prosumers due to new media technologies and their omni-presence in the everyday – forecasted by Alvin Toffler's Third Wave in the 80's — configure new usages of old and emergent media. Marked by awareness and visibility of the participatory dimension of communication, this awakening is often perceived and defended concurrently as a trend of citizenship activation and empowerment, giving a voice to the people, to the unheard and the unseen in mainstream media, thus raising representation issues and, at least at the discourse level, partially solving them. Although participation in the media is a frequent theme in academic research[1], mainly related to citizen journalism and social media participation, the more specific focus of participation in advertising is not as common[2], resulting in almost half (39,4%) of the references, compared to the previous search in Google Scholars. Furthermore advertising participation articles emphasise mainly on the

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[1] A Google Scholars search for articles, excluding citations and patents, in 2014, on "media participation" produced 3850 results. The same research for tittles only produced 118 results (12.8.14).

[2] A Google Scholars search for articles, excluding citations and patents, in 2014, on "advertising participation" produced 292 results. The same research for tittles only produced 5 results (12.8.14).

implications of cooperative advertising, the practice of sharing advertising and promotional costs along the marketing channel or supply chain, eventually resulting in stronger results with a lower effort for each participant — 26,9% of the articles concerning advertising participation[3] — thus leaving other dimensions of participation in advertising considerably uncovered. Is a purpose of this article to contribute to fulfil such a gap funded on the observation of the vast participation of consumer-citizens in advertising, not only framed by efficiency and procedure wise marketing perspectives, but by a broader communicational and sociological frame. Taking into account the interaction between prosumers and advertising, we will discuss its implications both to the advertising industry and society, elaborating further on its potential as a platform for citizenship.

Conceptual state of the art

Advertising influential power

Advertising is widely considered one of the must influential institutions of our time. This power is recognised mostly because of its economic, social and symbolic dimensions. Being one of the identified drivers of consumption and therefore of the whole economic system, advertising stands out as a mediator between offer and demand, having a regulating role in the market (Galbraith, 2007 [1967]). A connection between countries wealth and advertising expenditures has been well established with the Principle of Relative Constance (McCombs, 1972) that observes a parallel between national gross incomes and advertising expenditures. Advertising industry involves more than 600 billion dollars per year worldwide (Barnard, 2012; Evans, 2008). Taking this into account is safe to say that, to this extend, advertising mirrors the state of the economy. In addition, branding, the construction of meaning to products, services, institutions and even countries, is the territory of advertising. By making goods meaningful, that is, by transforming them into signs, advertising turns objects into consumable items therefore adding fake use value[4] (Baudrillard, 1995 [1981]) and building up the myths of our time (Barthes, 1984).

Another influence of advertising resides in the fact that, beyond all criticism over interference in editorial matters, it is still the most widely used source of income by the media industry, thus indirectly shaping and deciding the state of media corporations. The advertising role in the world's economy is especially evident in the recent years due to globalization and the subsequent convergence of media tycoons, resulting in a more patent role of the interaction triangle between advertising, market and media (Sinclair, 2012). Advertising has also a definite influence

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[3] A Google Scholars search for articles, excluding citations and patents, in 2014, on "cooperative advertising participation" produced 99 results. The same research for tittles produced 3 results (12.8.14).

[4] Criticising Marx's theory of use-value, that identifies the adding of value in production, Baudrillard argues that is consumption and not production that drives the economy.

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in media's content. Although frequently in a concealed manner, advertising's role in the agenda setting of the media (McCombs, 2004) — the power to determine what is relevant in the news and in our lives and how we value it — is broadly recognised (Ewen, 2001[1976]; Pardun, 2009; Turow & McAllister, 2009). Furthermore, agenda setting as an influential ground has been used by advertising with growing efficiency, as media bounds tend to blur and mix further and further. Hybrid forms like infotainment, product placement, sponsored events or some social responsibility strategies tend to conceal the power of content editing — and therefore the persuasive marketing agenda implied — under a speech of apparent openness and consumer friendly environment.

> "Increasingly, content comes to us already branded, already shaped through an economics of sponsorship, if not overt advertising. We do not know how much these commercial interests influence what we see and what we don't see. Commercial interests even shape the order of listings on search engines in ways that are often invisible to those who use them. Increasingly, opportunities to participate online are branded such that even when young people produce and share their own media, they do so under terms set by commercial interests" (Jenkins *et al.*, 2011:16).

As a socialization interface, advertising provides guidance. Setting stereotypes, advertising formats behaviours, attitudes and perceptions of the world (Leiss *et al.*, 2005; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007) and structures social organization. By aggregating consumers around specific interest groups it develops the sense of belonging and constitutes tribes and rituals of consumption, namely promoting what the industry calls brand communities: "A brand's future value, it could be argued, lies principally in the community it creates" (Welch, 2012). Advertising omnipresence has an evident imposing and summoning power in contemporaneity, resulting in the monopolization of cultural life: "(...) advertising systematically relegates discussion of key societal issues to the peripheries of the culture and talks in powerful ways instead of individual desire, fantasy, pleasure and comfort" (Jhally, 2005: 422). This alienating effect is assisted by advertising pervasiveness and persuasive discourse: all elements set up in a thoroughly well rehearsed show invite us to a numb yet hollow feeling of happiness (Lipovetsky, 2007). No questions asked.

PROSUMERS: THE ACTORS OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Alvin Toffler coined the term *prosumer* in the 1980´s, referring to a combination of production and consumption, bound to be taking place in contemporary capitalism, the so-called civilizational "Third Wave" (Toffler, 1989). Nevertheless he was already referring to the merging of these dimensions in "Future Shock" (Toffler, 1970) concurrently with Marshall McLuhan in "Take Today" (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972). *Prosumer* emergence is portrayed by Toffler as a rapidly growing movement centred on the double condition of producer and consumer: "(...) millions of people (...) are beginning to perform for themselves services hitherto performed for them by doctors (...) what these people are really doing is shifting some production

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from Sector B [the "visible economy"] to Sector A [the "invisible economy"]" (Toffler, 1989:267). Although some authors argue that *prosumption* as always existed (Ritzer *et al.*, 2012), it has become more visible in practice as well as in the academic field in recent years, frequently conceptualized as an empowering and revolutionizing movement with social, economic and political implications. Particularly in the media field, this outburst of visibility is undoubtedly related with the large flow of consumer-generated content, not only produced by consumers but also broadcasted and massively shared in infinite digital networks by them, especially in the web 2.0 context experience and forward.

The revolutionizing dimension of the *prosumer* can be observed in thematic and political storytelling and some authors contextualize it as "an emerging hegemonic institution; one that effectively frames and contains truly radical imaginations while also tapping into existing predilections for commodity-focused forms of self-realization" (Comor, 2011:79). Whether portrayed as the new age hero, equipped with technological and creative super powers that know no bounds, or as the embodiment of digital capitalist democracy that allows and promotes participation, the *prosumer* congregates the romantic ideal of a liberating model conquering more than a voice to the people, a voice to the individual and its right to self expression, a victory won through the negotiated power surrender of the media system. Market wise, the *prosumer* emergence poses several questions, namely the fact that the market notion is irrelevant: *prosumers* prefer to produce the goods they consume themselves with no need for a mediator. Marketing guru Philip Kotler identifies two main *prosumer* profiles: the "Avid Hobbyist" that produces for exchange, and the "Archprosumer" that produces for self consumption (Kotler, 1986). Other authors are focusing on consumer generated content available online to value *prosumption* as central (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) and provide evidence of a *prosumer* capitalism, defined by unpaid labour, products at no cost and a new balance between abundance and scarcity. Yet the *prosumer*'s movement implications go far beyond the economy, having significant impact at the political and symbolic level:

> "All these different developments have one thing in common (…) not only increases our cultural diversity, it cuts deeply into the power of the networks that have until now so completely dominated our imagery. (…) A new info-sphere is emerging alongside the new techno-sphere. And this will have a far-reaching impact on the most important sphere of all, the one inside our skulls. For taken together, these changes revolutionize our images of the world and our ability to make sense of it" (Toffler, 1989:164-165).

Toffler also forecasts a demassification of the media and concurrent marketing segmentation efforts, opening new perspectives for the media, particularly for advertising, empowered by additional interactivity media technology and interaction with *prosumers*. Although being still media consumers, they become more and more manifest co-producers of media content, as well as of media structure (Andrejevic, 2004), inscribing a word of change, a word of self determination and self expression that settles a new power balance between media and their publics. This trend

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embodies as participatory culture (Jenkins *et al.*, 2011) by opposition to consumer culture, opening new potential for creative expression and civic engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Interpretative hermeneutics (Bickman & Rog, 1998; Jablin & Putnam, 2001; Prasad, 2002) is our main methodology process, relying coincidently on observation, specialized media reports, advertising industry insights, the literature review and the critical discussion of the reality and the observed phenomenon.

DISCUSSION

ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF ADVERTISING INTERACTION WITH PROSUMERS

Prosumer interaction with advertising is frequently referred to in terms of co-creation, implying the ideas of co-operation or co-optation, but in a wider scope it summons also the activation of civil society participation in the media sphere (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2005). Enterprise management uses co-creation associated with innovation to add value to conceptual and production processes (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2002; Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010). It relates to prosumers inputs in the sense that it sets a convergent ground for manager and consumer interests alike, binding together efficiency of production and added value experiences. This drive has known a visible increase in the new media ecology: "Spurred by the consumer-centric culture of the Internet — with its emphasis on interactivity, speed, individuality, and openness — the consumer's influence on value creation has never been greater, and it is spreading to all points in the value chain" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2002:27). Similarly the advertising industry absorbs prosumer inputs in several ways, driven both by efficiency, involvement and legitimacy interests. We will elaborate further on with a paradigmatic example. Since Doritos chose to air consumer-generated commercials as part of its advertising strategy, following the Crash the Super Bowl contest[5], in 2006, prosumer interaction with advertising hit the media flux and became in fashion, setting up a milestone in advertising history: it was the first time that such a noble advertising space — Superbowl involves some of the biggest advertising investors, budgets and audiences in the world — was given to prosumers, a risk never taken before; the commercials were subject to consumers approval as they were voting for the best commercial in a site, followed by millions of downloads and sharing to viral insanity; a significant increase (12%) sales was

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5 Doritos is a brand of the Frito-Lay corporation that set up a contest for consumer-generated commercials to be aired in Super Bowl in the United States, in 2006, with resounding success: 1065 commercials submitted; five finalists received a 10.000 dollars prize and a trip to the Super Bowl, in 2007, where the most voted commercial, "Live the Flavour" was aired. Later, this ad was considered by Time.com the 9th best of the year and strategists and public relations of this campaign won several prizes, setting up a tradition of consumer generated ads in the Super Bowl.

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attributed to these commercials[6]. To summarize, all three drivers of prosumer inclusion in advertising — efficiency, involvement and legitimacy — mentioned above were met. The two former can be evident by the numbers involved, but the latter has a more symbolic yet relevant dimension.

At the discourse level, and to a certain extend, the authoring of advertising by *prosumers* legitimises the advertising message itself as it comes from a pair and not from a company that has a persuasive agenda and is admittedly trying to sell something. Nevertheless the use of *prosumer* generated content in advertising also poses some trustworthiness issues, because "consumers do not necessarily perceive consumer-ads as more trustworthy" (Thompson & Malavyia, 2012:33).

Therefore, interesting and relevant as it may be, *prosumer*'s incorporation in advertising sets both opportunities and challenges to the industry. From the brand's perspective, *prosumers* become brand ambassadors, performing a role in the brand's innovation, activation and recognition and therefore are invited to step in brands territory. This involves a transfer of media power and has to be done with a sensible amount of steering. Brand strategist best practices recommend so, after having endured their amount of communicational crisis, as Andrew Welch, from Y&R, testifies: "To some degree, 'co-creation' means 'letting go to take control', which is not easy or comfortable. Brands that embrace co-creation need to be prepared to open the doors and invite consumers in, listen, experiment and be guided by the community whilst accepting a significant change in company culture as a result" (Welch, 2012). From the advertising professional point of view, *prosumers* creative expressions embodiment in advertising might question the value of the advertisers work, mainly the one of the creative professionals, as a significant amount of prized campaigns (Mattos & Rossini, 2011) involve consumer inputs. For the advertising industry, *prosumers* work is also free, unpaid work. Concurrently it stands out as an infinite source of creative capital, especially significant in the ever more frequent practice of crowdsourcing. In addition, research indicates further marketing benefits: through crowdsourcing, brands can achieve greater consumer satisfaction and expenditure raise, as well as a more expressive and qualitative exposure of the advertising message:

> "With concrete evidence that crowdsourcing can drive revenue, increase satisfaction and build brand advocates, there's no question that marketers should have a stake in crowdsourcing initiatives (…) for marketers the real value from crowdsourcing stems from the act of giving consumers a voice" (Gibson, 2012).

On the intangible value of prosumer inputs bellow the line

Nevertheless all the perspectives mentioned above refer to tangible *prosumer* inputs that frequently are the most mediated side of their contribution to advertising, the result of a far more complex route. Yet, underlying next to it, there is also

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[6] www.doritos.com

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an intangible side of *prosumers* interaction along the advertising's process. Because is not visible, the media and society do not take notice or value it and the academy studies the theme in a discreet manner, focusing mostly in the above the line. We will elaborate further on this, focusing mainly in three vectors: product, strategy and audience. Assuming advertising involves the whole process of brand building we will argue that the involvement of *prosumers* starts in the very beginning of the process, in the concept of the product. Some of the most representative companies incorporate *prosumers* at this level, although involving mostly research and development teams instead of marketing and strategy ones.

Procter & Gamble, the world's largest advertiser, with more than 300 brands in more than 180 countries and whose products are used 4.6 billion times a day, set up in 2001 an innovation strategy with the program Connect + Develop, through which *prosumer* inputs are aggregated and partnerships established – "more than 2,000 successful agreements with innovation partners around the world" (P&G, 2013). This corporation assumes that "external collaboration plays a key role in nearly 50 percent of P&G's products. We've collaborated with outside partners for generations but the importance of these alliances has never been greater" (P&G, 2013). According to IdeaConnection, Procter & Gamble pro-actively searches for *prosumers* inputs at different process stages: "They are aggressively looking for solutions and innovations in packaging, design, marketing models, research methods, engineering, technology, etc" (IdeaConnection, 2007).

Johnson & Johnson's – one other leader of consumer and personal product brands – version of this *prosumer* inclusion effort in innovation is called Intelli-Ideas and invites for insights and ideas: "We want to hear your innovative patented/patent pending ideas and partner with you to bring to market products that will improve people's lives" (J&J, 2012).

Unilever, another giant corporation whose products are daily used by two billion people[7], hosts an open innovation platform and uses *prosumer* insights to develop not only their products and brands but also consumer's experiences. Being one of the major manufacturers of health and beauty products it challenged *prosumers* to reinvent the shower experience – where incidentally most of their products are used – by creating an environmentally friendly shower. Appealing to the social responsibility rationale, Unilever turns to *prosumers* ideas hoping that it "would allow for the potential of crowdsourcing to deliver a coherent solution to a complex challenge (Unilever, 2013).

This trend has opened a window for specialization and some companies dedicate themselves entirely to the connection between *prosumer* ideas, corporations and brand's needs, whether by organizing or aggregating contests or simply putting ideas together. They frequently organize themselves as communities but they have

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[7]   Unilever's site argues that "on any given day, two billion people use Unilever products to look good, feel good and get more out of life" (www.unilever.com).

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a sense of business, providing strong arguments for both corporations and *prosumers* to join in. Eyeka is one example. Created in 2001, this organization positions itself as the "world's largest creative playground, a world of ideas for better brands" and matches as an example of this phenomenon. According to the company's site it "enables marketers and their agencies to accelerate the creation and marketing of more relevant products by leveraging a wealth of creative ideas developed by a community of 250,000 creative individuals in 154 countries (…) the most creative people, among the 1% of content creators on the web to participate in creative challenges for brands" (Eyeka, 2013). In another part of the site, the promise-like statement reveals the reason why *prosumer*'s inputs are relevant:

> "Failure rates when a product hits the market remain too high. This is because consumers are mostly involved periodically as validators, and not as co-creators (…) Co-creation with consumers will allow you to create new categories, new products or transform existing ones in a matter of weeks" (Eyeka, 2013).

Prosumer's motivation to engage in such contests is also explicit: "they participate in our challenges to express their creativity and to connect with leading brands to solve real-world problems with fresh ideas" (Eyeka, 2013). Amongst the corporations and brands that already connected and used this community to absorb *prosumer*'s input we can find Procter & Gamble, Kraft, Coca-Cola, Unilever, Nestlé, Danone, Hyundai, Citroen or Microsoft. *Prosumers* inputs are present along the whole marketing and branding process where strategic decisions have to be made, looking for consumer insights, the best strategic way to converge the benefit of the product, the desired positioning and the consumer's potential motivation to be impacted by the message, that is, a unique and relevant approach. Once again this is not an innovative practice.

Advertising and marketing have been using all kinds of studies from focus groups to *vox populi* to evaluate consumer's insights and attitudes, both prior and posterior to airing a campaign. Yet the new media ecology provides different and more insidious processes to obtain valuable data. Mining and monitoring digital search and consumer profiles constitute *prosumers* not anymore as public but as an audience (Livingstone, 2005), that is, as an active and capital part of the advertising and media industries: "Don't make the mistake of thinking you're Facebook's customer, you're not. You're the product. It's customers who are the advertisers" (Millard, 2013). Such practices suggest the unawareness of *prosumers* of this condition. This poses immediate questions about the transparency and social responsibility of advertising and its role towards media sustainability and equity. Concurrently this condition also raises issues on the *prosumer* side, as its liberation from the consumer chain through production is also its enclosure in the media value system, frequently without its consent or awareness, resulting in a less than paradoxical empowerment (Mohan, 2006; Sinclair, 2012) from which literacy of the new media ecology is the obvious escape.

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ON THE CITIZENSHIP POTENTIAL OF PROSUMERS INPUTS IN ADVERTISING

Prosumers inputs are used and promoted by advertising for several different reasons, from creating a positive atmosphere towards an idea or to activate a product in the end of its life cycle. Yet *prosumers* have grown more and more conscious of their status in the communicational environment, their importance in the marketing added value and their rights as digital and social citizens. They have become more empowered and their inputs may, and frequently do, reach the advertising system without an invitation: "(…) in today's new marketing paradigm, participation is a powerful new currency. Particularly in emerging markets, consumers see themselves as fans, co-creators and champions of the brands in their lives, and they're weighing in on corporate promises and practices – whether asked to or not." (Floyd *et al.*, 2012). This phenomenon is well characterised by the unsuccessful Gap's logo switch, in 2010, with the pressure of consumers demanding — and succeeding — the return to the old version in less than four days (Hampp, 2010). Despite the diplomatic reaction of the fashion brand that opened a crowdsourcing to get *prosumers* insights, this case states the power of *prosumers* over brands and how their passion overlaps and surpasses marketing strategies that do not take them into account (Walsh, 2010). It states an active drive from consumers whom, by resisting to the brand's strategy, provide and stamp their input in the brand. Such turning point denotes what could be described as consumer-citizen participation in the media, through the media and by the media (Carpentier, 2011), thus activating and imprinting their own voice in the media sphere. Considering that consumer participation has been valued and recognized as a form of civic engagement (Berger, 2011; Papacharissi, 2011) and using the specific case as an example, one could argue that *prosumers* interactions not only prove their growing power and engagement in the strategic communication, but also configure advertising as a potential platform for citizenship and the engagement of civil society.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering advertising is widely recognized as one of the most influential institutions of the contemporary — economic, social, political and symbolic wise —, a privileged connection platform between producers and consumers of goods, services and messages, on one hand, and approaching *prosumers* as the main actors of participatory culture, on the other hand, it stands out that the interaction between *prosumers* and advertising is a relevant field of interest and dynamic power relations, empowered by recent participatory trends in the media sphere.

Prosumers interaction with advertising comprises a series of implications and poses opportunities and challenges to the industry, both to manufacture corporations and the advertising system. Although *prosumers* inputs are mostly portrayed as co-creation — mediatised at that level in contests, campaigns, common interest groups and digital communities of fans aggregated around brands —, there is a significant part of *prosumers* interaction with the advertising and market system

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that go by almost unnoticed. These take place prior to advertising mediatisation but have a relevant role and influence in the economy and society — possibly more than any other media interaction with *prosumers*, due to their pervasiveness and omnipresence in the everyday — definitely determining the way the media sphere is structured and activated, but also defining products, services, preferences and tastes.

These are the hidden *prosumers*. Their power and influence is valued and concurrently used and tamed by advertising and corporations; their participation as been recognized as a drive of civic engagement, as a means to give a voice to the people. Therefore *prosumers* interaction with advertising stands out as a potential platform for the exercise of citizenship and the engagement of civil society towards communicational and social sustainability.

Paradoxically, as consumer-citizens grow more empowered and conscious of their rights in the market and advertising universe, they appear to be unaware of their own contribution to the system as *prosumers*. Moreover, a significant part of *prosumers* interaction with advertising is taking place without the consent and/or the awareness of consumers, raising ethical dilemmas, private *vs* public safety and identity rights questions, consumer literacy issues, thus configuring this theme as worthwhile of in depth study. Therefore further research is recommended in order to a deeper understanding and evaluation of this phenomenon. The monitoring and critic observation of further developments on the *prosumers* interaction with advertising is strongly suggested by its relevance to a significant number of potential stakeholders on this status quo, namely brands and consumer-citizens, but also public policy decision makers and regulators.

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