Does Rotten Tomatoes Spoil Users? Examining the Effects of Social Media Features on Participatory Culture

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The movie experience does not begin when one buys a ticket or turns on the television; similarly, the movie experience does not end when the credits roll. Before seeing a film, viewers have been exposed to advertising, media coverage, or heard word-of-mouth discussions. After the film ends, viewers may discuss it with friends or family, buy soundtracks or collectibles, write reviews, or produce derivative artwork or fiction. More internally, viewers, in their role as "consumer co-authors," participate in the creation of meaning before, during, and after the movie (Real, 1996, p. 268). Increasingly, all of these practices are occurring on the Internet, in what can be seen as online manifestations of our overall participatory culture.

The concept of participatory culture was developed by Henry Jenkins, who described it as enabling "average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation and recirculation of media content" (Jenkins, 2006d, p. 554). According to Jenkins, popular culture is a natural fit for participatory culture for two reasons, "on the one hand, because the stakes are so low; and on the other, because playing with popular culture is a lot more fun than playing with more serious matters" (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 246). The effects of fostering an online environment conducive to participatory culture are not limited to merely entertainment websites; Jenkins believes that what we learn from popular culture participation "may quickly get applied to political activism or education or the workplace" (2006b, p. 246). Skills and behaviour learned and developed through these websites can be applied to other facets of cultural and political life, as they give people not only the technical means to participate but the confidence to expropriate culture and voice their own expressions. From an economic standpoint, businesses have much to gain by encouraging participatory culture on their sites, as social media have the potential to increase the duration of website visits and webpages exposed, thus offering expanded advertising opportunities.

In this paper, I will examine, first, whether Jenkins's notion of participatory culture is observable on the movie website Rotten Tomatoes (RT), and second, whether this culture is flourishing. The following case study of RT shows that despite the site's popularity and suite of social media tools, participatory culture is not flourishing to the fullest extent possible, due in part to insufficient encouragement and lack of content filters.

Background
Participatory culture online
While participatory culture existed prior to the Internet, the Internet has succeeded in facilitating its development and growth by lowering geographic barriers for participants to find one another. As Baym states, "the Internet makes audience communities more common, more visible, and more accessible, enabling fans to find one another with ease" (2000, p. 214). Various studies have shown that the Internet is fostering participatory culture, demonstrated by Internet users who are forming interpretative communities, extending or creating new narratives, or creating original works to add to or modify the original media text (Baym, 2000; Bury, 2003; Ito, 2007; Jenkins, 2006c; Taylor, 2007). Participatory culture online is visible in the form of blogs, social bookmarking, user generated content, social networking, message boards (also known as forums), and wikis. These media, tools, and the resulting content are referred to in various overlapping and occasionally nebulous terms, such as user-generated content, social media, the participatory Web, and Web 2.0. Despite the recent hype in business and consumer media over social media and Web 2.0, some of these features, such as message boards and user generated content, have existed for many years on the Web. For the purposes of this essay, I will use the term social media, as it entails both the online media and the content derived therein (Solis, 2008).

Social media depends on users to create content, normally without payment, which, it has been argued, is corporate exploitation (Petersen, 2008 & Scholz, 2008). Yet the lack of user compensation appears not to have deterred the growth of social media. Online social media have grown to become a mainstay of many popular websites. To support this claim, I reviewed the top one hundred websites visited from Canada, as compiled by the web traffic company, Alexa (Alexa, 2008c) to note the presence of social media features (see Appendix 1). Alexa does not provide a list of the top Canadian websites, nor do they measure traffic uniquely by Canadians (as Canadians could be surfing abroad). Forty-six of these websites had social media features present on their website. Some websites on this list, such as YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, MySpace, Craigslist, and Flickr, could be described as primarily social media websites.

Profile of Rotten Tomatoes
Websites devoted to movies are quite popular and can be very influential. In June 2008, The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) was one of the top twenty most popular websites in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Alexa, 2008a). RT is the 604th most popular website globally and attracts over seven million visitors monthly (Rotten Tomatoes, 2008). Rotten

Tomatoes has been acknowledged in the industry by winning a Webby, the Web's most prestigious award (Webby Awards, 2003) and also earning acknowledgment from Roger Ebert and *Time* magazine (Rotten Tomatoes, 2008). The impact of movie websites is such that it led the *New York Times* to recently proclaim them partially responsible for many print movie critics being laid off or reassigned (Carr, 2008). With over 90% of the core moviegoer demographic going online to get movie information, these websites have the power to greatly affect which movies people see (Thompson, 2006).

RT was founded in 1998 by Senh Duong as a means to keep track of reviews and information about his favourite Jackie Chan films (Duong, 1999). As the site grew in popularity, the company expanded and new features were added. Reflecting media convergence trends that have engulfed Internet properties, RT was bought by IGN Entertainment in 2004 for approximately $10 million; IGN was then bought for $650 million by News Corp. in 2005 (IGN, 2005).

RT offers much the same functionality as IMDB: extensive movie data and cross-linking of cast and crew data, user reviews, and message boards, but with a more graphic-rich design. Unlike IMDB, which only posts user reviews, RT's primary innovation is that it was the first website to aggregate professional film critics' reviews (Gabbay, 2006) and devise a composite score. An overall positive score earns a "fresh" tomato, while negative scores have a metaphorical rotten tomato thrown at them – hence the site's name. This functionality helped the website become the top site in the United States in 2007 for movie review/listing sites, according to Nielsen/NetRatings (IGN, 2007).

Method

Research for this paper consisted of ethnographic observation of RT from May to June 2008. Using the top twenty films in Canada, as provided by Tribute.ca, for the week of May 30, 2008, I focused my attention on content and activity related to these films. *Iron Man*, *Sex and the City*, *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* generated the most user content during this time period and thus comprised a large amount of my study. Unfortunately, the only English Canadian film on the list, *Stone Angel,* received no associated social media content, and so my analysis is comprised of American blockbuster films.

Most material on RT is open to the public to view without registration. To participate, one must register. Social networking functionality, such as

specifically adding contacts, sharing content, friends' reviews, and messaging, requires not only registration, but also for one to have added contacts ("friends"). As these interactions cannot be observed without the express consent and cooperation of the user, I was not able to observe specific instances of social networking, beyond my own test use. However, one can observe much of the social media on RT as it is open to the public and does not require registration, such as blogging, groups, user ratings and reviews, forums, and lists. While my observations were quite detailed, my sample is not representative of all activity on the website. Further study would be required to verify my findings.

Results

Presence of participatory tools or features on RT

Despite a strong niche position, RT expanded beyond its base of offering professional critics' reviews to encourage users to contribute more of their own content. They launched a suite of interactive tools, centered predominantly on a section of the site called "the Vine." I observed an impressive number of features on RT (see Appendix 2), both static and those encouraging participation, such as user ranking and reviews, social networking, forums, and blogging.

Prevalence and nature of participatory culture on RT

The social networking tool which generates the most user content is the message boards. During my research, I observed active and regular use of these boards. There are thousands of threads and over eight million individual postings. The message board content is particularly high, as postings remain on the website dating back to 2005 in addition to the hosting of threads relating to a variety of other media (e.g., comics, video games, anime). This traffic can also be explained by the effective promotion and linking of related forums from the individual movie page, thus enticing users into the discussion.

While much of the discussion I observed was related to the aesthetics of the films, there were active discussions of greater societal significance, such as whether or not professional critics were anti-Christian in regards to their reviews of the C.S. Lewis adaptation of *Prince Caspian* or whether the Indiana Jones films' depictions of indigenous people are racist. In Dodds's study of the use of IMDB message boards related to James Bond films, he found that discussions could be grouped into five main types: 1) trivia, 2) characters and actors, 3) favourites within the series, 4) plotline holes and under-development, and 5) geo-politics and film (Dodds, 2006). In my observations of RT, I can confirm these findings related to movie discussions

in general; however, one area Dodds did not identify that is possibly the most common is discussion around the enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation of the film, whether in terms of technical virtuosity, artistic merit, or entertainment value. As with other websites that allow anonymous postings, there were several observed that were primarily derogatory of other users and did not advance the discussion.

Although not generating as much content as message boards, I observed other forms of participatory culture occurring on RT. User rankings of films appeared to be common, wherein users assign scores for the film from one to ten. This score is then added to the overall user base score to derive a composite score for the film, which is displayed under the "RT Community" tab. RT presents a top critics' composite score significantly more prominently than the users' composite score, which IMDB, conversely, prominently promotes. I believe this is due to the website's primary focus as an aggregator of professional critics' reviews, rather than a website where user participation is considered paramount. Despite the lack of prominence of user scores, this feature was observed to be frequently used, possibly due to the technical ease and low time commitment of using it.

Reviews of the films were observed; although, due to a design flaw, there are some difficulties in observing them. All reviews appear on the "RT Community" tab of an individual film in chronological order. One usability problem encountered is that if one rates a film first and then writes the review or chooses not to write a review, the rating will appear but the review ("Quote") will always be blank. User reviews display the most recent first, thus there are many blank entries. Design flaws such as this and others that serve to downplay the social media tools and user generated content cast the impression that this functionality is not a strong facet of RT and thus may dissuade others from participating.

While RT has blog and group functionality, these features seemed to be underused, according to this analysis. Blogging on RT seems to largely consist of reviews of specific films, which is not surprising considering that it is the same tool used to derive both blog postings and film reviews. On RT, I did not observe blog postings speculating on alternatives to a film's narrative or character development or inspired fiction or artwork, which Jenkins has observed is a hallmark of participatory culture (1992). I did, however, observe this type of user content on movie blogs on IGN, RT's parent company. I did expect to see a wider variety of discussions relating to film in general or certain film series or genres. User activity was also noted in the Groups feature, wherein a group of users can share blog postings, comments, images, and ratings. There are a large number of groups based on movies,

other forms of popular culture and unrelated topics, such as business, health, science, sports, and recreation. Most groups I observed tended to have very few members (under five). There appeared to be many groups and journals created, but little or no actual activity occurring in the journals or group. Furthermore, a significant amount of activity observed was a year or more old.

Discussion

Analysis of barriers prohibiting greater participatory culture

Although I have demonstrated that participatory culture is occurring on RT, it was not operating at the quantity, quality, or currency I expected given the website's popularity, its impressive suite of social media tools, and a comparison to similar websites, IMDB and IGN. The forums and user ratings are the only features that I would describe as having regular, diverse contributions. Through examining RT's social media tools in relation to insufficient encouragement and a lack of content filters, I will consider various difficulties and offer possible solutions.

Lack of content filters

Overall, with regard to RT's social media content, the signal-to-noise ratio is too high. Desirable content may be present, but it is quite difficult to find; blogs, groups, and forums are not searchable, for example. Not only should this content be searchable, but a separate, scoped search would enable users to pinpoint desirable content. The search engine also occasionally fails, for example in searching lists it will return zero results, despite the presence on the website of related content. Without exposure to this content, users may feel that either the content is not present at all or that social media on RT has yet to attain a critical mass of usage. Users may thus feel that social media on the website are not viable enough to merit participation or vibrant enough to entice their contribution. Shay found that other websites had also encountered this problem: "the challenge here is not strictly speaking the 'open source' paradigm … but rather the subset of projects that embed the process of aggregation, filtering and quality control in the system itself" (2007, p. 179). RT does somewhat filter blogs by offering a link to the blogs that are most visited, have the most entries, are the newest, and through random generation. These attempts to filter blog content, however, do not offer enough guidance or specificity. Shay studied websites that addressed the signal-to-noise issue successfully and compiled several best practices (2007, p. 191). Shay cites the practice of offering titles and special privileges to users that are either community-voted or company-determined based on continual or high quality participation. These special users can then help filter quality content, as they can be given the privilege and ability to raise or lower

posting rankings. They can also be given designated areas (e.g., on the homepage) where they are able to promote content of their choice. Another method to filter quality content is to allow all users to be able to vote for postings, as both Digg and Amazon allow, with content prominence rising proportionally in relation to votes.

Insufficient encouragement

Overall, RT does little to promote its social media to users, and does not offer incentives to encourage participation. The lack of prominence of user reviews and other user-generated content may be an intentional business decision. As Duong stated, "our users regard reviews from critics much, much higher than regular users" (Lai, 2007). Shay found websites encourage participation by "reward[ing] performance with visibility within the community" (2007, p. 191). Examples of this are badges users can post to their profile, gifts, or promotion on the website or newsletters. This offers an incentive to participate, as users worked to earn these esteemed titles or badges. To further encourage user participation, blogs and groups could be embedded and linked within an individual movie page, as IGN currently does. While the impeded prominence of social media may arise from a lack of business attention to these specific features, it does appear symptomatic of a larger neglect on RT's part of their social media features.

Conclusion

Jenkins dispels a misconception that simply having social media tools in place will foster participatory culture by noting "it matters what tools are available to a culture, but it matters more what that culture chooses to do with those tools" (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 8). I would add to this that it also matters how the tools are connected to the culture. By analyzing the popular movie website Rotten Tomatoes, it can be seen that while the tools and cultural inclinations are at work, it is not enough for participatory culture to flourish.

It appears that RT's neglect for these features may be a strategic choice, as in an interview with former CEO, Patrick Lee, he noted:

> Even as Rotten Tomatoes rolled out more community features like forums, blogs, and friend features, these were not the major drivers of traffic.… Almost 70% of incoming traffic was/is from search traffic, emphasizing the point that a loyal community may not be enough to achieve mass scale for an information service. (Gabbay, 2006, Focus on search engine, ¶ 2)

Lee's statements belie the belief that simply having the features should spark participation and repeat visits. I am unable to discern, however, if it is corporate neglect of these features that is responsible for the state of participatory culture on the site or whether RT's users are intrinsically uninterested in this activity. Judging from participation observed on competitor websites and Shay's findings (2007), it seems that websites can indeed encourage participation by offering incentives and using content filters.

Jenkins also identifies user characteristics that would encourage participatory culture, as "for some, these grassroots cultural productions are understood as offering a radical alternative to dominant media content, providing space for various minority groups to tell their own stories or to question hegemonic representations of their culture" (2006d, p. 555). Meyer and Tucker, however, acknowledge hegemonic resistance as a motivation, but note "some fans certainly do position their acts as sites of resistance, others simply express a deep affection or desire for particular media texts" (2007, p. 115). It could be possible that I did not observe more flowering of participatory culture as RT's users desire traditional, static features, such as movie information and critics' reviews. To truly ascertain whether the participatory culture has the capacity to grow in both volume and scope, inherent design flaws should be addressed.

Yet even within RT's limited amount of participatory activity, the content observed is consistent with that observed by Jenkins when fans generate a media text's "meta-text" (Jenkins & Murray, 1999). It is via this meta-text that consumers assume the power to move beyond notions of passive media consumption. They become active participants in creating their own meaning; moreover, they become content creators, adding their voice to the cultural landscape. It is indications such as this that lead Karaganis to note, "Plato's complaint that writing is mute to our inquiries bears deeper consideration in our era. In blogs, remix culture, and other distributed aspects of digital culture, we see the growth of more participatory, less regimented, real-time cultural dialogue" (2007, p. 240). The power of virtual spaces like this website is to provide an open and accessible means of cultural dialogue. Users are invited in through the familiar and comfortable reference points of popular culture – in this case films – and once there they may feel encouraged to add their voices to the discussion. Whether the discussions are concerning film aesthetics or encompass larger societal and cultural issues, such behaviour is an act of civic participation. The Internet has made such participation more readily possible and yet the tools of participation, social media, are still not uniformly developed or sufficiently promoted – as seen in the case of Rotten Tomatoes – to encourage greater participation.

Author

After ten years working in the Internet industry, Glen Farrelly is currently pursuing a master's degree in Communications from Royal Roads University. Glen has also studied the Internet at The University of Toronto's Strategic e-Business program and at Humber College's Internet Management program. Glen's master's thesis will examine factors limiting the widespread adoption in Canada of website accessibility for the disabled. His research interests include website usability, online participatory culture, and Canadian Internet history and policy. Glen explores Internet topics in his blog (www.glenfarrelly.com) and for Backbone Magazine. Glen resides in Toronto, Canada.

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