

Facebook, MySpace & Co.: (Web 2.0-)Interaction for active consumer citizenship?*

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I. Introduction

Consumer Citizenship is one of the most vital social needs we face in our age of consumerism, active consumer citizenship is imperative for a functioning and sustainably prosperous, according to the socio-economical needs duly balanced society.

Consumer citizenship can be realized solely by active integration of consumers into the opinion and decision making processes of consumer items and consumerism in general.

And active consumer citizenship needs easily manageable access to public space and peer-to-peer models for a comprehensive participation of all customers.

With Web 2.0-tools like LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook, Weblogs or Twitter the public space is easily prepared, and special social software features for interactive communication like RSS, trackbacks, tagging resp. 'folksonomy', shared bookmarks or tweeting, preferably available on multiple, especially also mobile, devices foster the public-space dimension and accelerate the process of consumer's active and often efficient integration into a very wide-spread, peer-to-peer modelled and therefore democratic opinion making.

II. The pivot of Web 2.0

Like nothing else, the principle, „Software as a Service, not as a Product“, has stamped the current state-of-the-art Internet, the so-called Web 2.0. Engineering of IT-applications is not any more that much or even exclusively characterized by software release cycles, but is rather qualified by the “perpetual beta”-paradigm, that is the continuous improvement of an application like a Web Service, done by the interested crowd, the specific – although by trend *open* – community. Within Software engineering, this refers to the open source movement and in this case has been known since decades now. Larry Wall with scripting language

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“PERL”, Richard Stallman, President of the F(ree) S(oftware) F(oundation) or – of course – Linus Torvalds, ‘Mr. LINUX’, just to name a few, have argued with and succeeded in this new software-paradigm continuously. Compared to the open source movement the disruptively new aspect with Web 2.0-tools and applications is that the boundaries are much wider open and that technology, especially technology which is related to information, does not necessarily play the first role any more. Tim O’Reilly, CEO of the famous IT-publishing house of the same name and since years one of Silicon Valley’s most acclaimed New Media Gurus, summarized this aspect of Web 2.0, that is the slipping role of technology, on the first conference on Web 2.0 in autumn 2004, with the statement:

“Web 2.0 is not a technology, it is an *attitude*.”¹

Interestingly, this dictum, “Web 2.0 is not a technology, it is an attitude”, fits very well to the first premise of the “Free Software Foundation”²: Already mentioned Richard Stallman differentiates precisely between “free software” and “open source”, although both groups coincide in many aspects and - despite of their splitting in 1998 - collaborate now and then. But for Stallman - and that’s the interesting point - the pivot is not that the source code is open and completely available. That - of course - for him goes without saying, - for Stallman and the “Free Software Foundation” the pivot of free software consists in its perception, in its estimation as an expression of user’s freedom, of user’s freedom as an unmistakable pioneer to enlightened citizenship and - as we might conclude already - to active consumption:

“To use free software is to make a political and ethical choice asserting the right to learn, and share what we learn with others. Free software has become the foundation of a learning society where we share our knowledge in a way that others can build upon and enjoy.”³

So, for FSF, this has turned out to be a fundamental principle and it somehow has paved the way to Web 2.0 and to O’Reilly’s key dictum:

“Web 2.0 is not a technology, it is an *attitude*”.

¹ Tim O’Reilly, What Is Web 2.0 - Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software, <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>. (Download: 2009-03-25).

² <http://www.fsf.org>.

³ Cf. the sort of ‘mission statement’ of the “Free Software Foundation”, “What is free software and why is it so important for society?”, <http://www.fsf.org/about/what-is-free-software>. (Download: 2009-03-25).

Of course, O'Reilly - what else could he say? -, of course, O'Reilly could not deny the technological implications of according to Web 2.0 designed and optimized websites, but what he meant was that technologies like f.e. the REST- or SOAP-protocol stack or the AJAX technology (which by the way had been on the road far longer than the conscience for a new enhanced and especially interactive Web) -, that technologies like SOAP, REST or AJAX are not the key aspect of defining a new, an enhanced form of the Internet, which lets us speak of a new dimension, of some kind of new version, of Web 2.0. The key aspect is a sociological or socio-cultural one: Web 2.0 means a quantum jump of usage, of applying to the and applying the Internet. Web 2.0 allows, Web 2.0 evokes, Web 2.0 in a way even instigates interactivity, reciprocity and participation of all users. In cause of its easy-to learn, easy-to-use, intuitive and simply commoditized way of practice it pulls down all former technological barriers and turns out to work as a vehicle for *social* needs, interests or aims. Among others, concerning Web 2.0's social dimension O'Reilly in his already cited fundamental contribution to Web 2.0 mentions as maxims, "Harnessing collective intelligence", "Trust your users", "Emergent: User behaviour not predetermined", or "The Rights to Remix: 'Some rights reserved'"⁴.

Once again: Web 2.0 is more an attitude than a technology or about a technology, and the term „Web 2.0“ – available since 2004 – is misinterpreted if it is primarily or even exclusively connected with the software paradigm (what is somehow obvious, because within software engineering the „2.0“-cipher could mark a new version).

III. Consumer citizenship and social media – paradigms of practice

Let me just list a few examples to underline the argumentation of active consumer citizenship's measures joining interactive media's use:

- 1) A broadly discussed and much noted and even cited story happened in September 2004, when the bike lock manufacturer "Kryptonite locks" tried to ignore the discovery of an anonymous blogger that one could pick the company's trusted u-shaped locks with a BIC pen. At first published on a group blog for bike enthusiasts the announcement rapidly climbed up the blogosphere and soon got to be read on the most heavily trafficked blogsite "Engadget"⁵, who posted a

⁴ *ibid.* (cf. A.1)

⁵ cf. <http://www.engadget.com/2004/09/16/hacking-the-evolution-2000-bike-lock-with-a-bic-pen-kryptonite/> (Download: 2009-03-25).

video showing how a BIC pen opened a Kryptonite lock. The company remained mute for a full week, at which time they served up a tepid statement that their locks remained a deterrent, but the company was working on a better one to be released at a later unspecified date. The response expressed neither sympathy nor remedy for the hundreds of thousands of customers who had given the company money for a lock that was supposed to protect their property but did not. Bloggers verbally assaulted Kryptonite, spread commentary and dispatching heavy traffic to the Engadget video. Engadget 's owner Jason Calacanis estimated the video was seen by about 1.8 million visitors. Ten days after the original incident, the company equivocated, announcing it would replace 100,000 Bic-pickable locks at a cost to them of \$10 million. Most observers agreed that had the company jumped in earlier, showing that they cared about the security of their customers, the story would not have spread so rapidly and the financial damage to them would not have been so great.

- 2) Another significant example is the never-ending story concerning Digital Rights Management and its current development, especially from the perspective of the music industry. Different standards had been established, most of them - at least in the beginning - so bad, that honest consumers, who approvedly bought music on Compact Discs, DVD's or whatever sound carrier, could listen to their bought titles only on particular players, and even there the often complicated DRM-mechanism did not work. The situation with former HD DVD-format turned out to be especially quaint:

The HD DVD used a Digital Rights Management system based on the encryption code AACS (= Advanced Access Content System). This encryption code already had been decrypted at the end of 2006, when an anonymous published a utility named BackupHDDVD and its source code on a web forum for DVD decryption. This utility can be used to decrypt AACS protected content once one knows the encryption key. A few weeks later, the respective processing code got published on a number of websites. Among many others the code appeared also on the highly frequented technology news website (and web 2.0 news aggregator) "Digg.com". In the meantime the Advanced Access Content System Licensing Administrator (= AACS LA) began issuing demand letters to respective website carriers. In this case, the "Digg.com"-company received a DMCA (= Digital

Millennium Copyright Act) cease and desist notice. Digg.com then removed numerous articles on the matter and banned users reposting the information. As a consequence of that, the user community turned into an incomparable revolt against Digg's sanctions and peppered Digg.com's front page with countless postings mostly containing the mentioned AACCS processing code within an embedded string. Not even 24 hours after this user's revolt the well-known Digg.com-CEO Kevin Rose apologized for the sanctions and revoked them⁶.

Why do I tell this story? Am I maybe about to undermine Intellectual Property Rights? – Not at all, although I don't hesitate to dissemble that I increasingly appreciate Intellectual Property set-ups like the Creative Commons or Open Access and so on. But anyway, applicable law must take its course, and so my arguing with the AACCS-/Digg.com-example must not be misunderstood: I did not want to advocate illegal downloads. I simply argued with the consumer-unfriendly strategy of big media industries where incompatible and half-baked DRM-solutions (kind of) penalized honest consumers.

Well, the ongoing of this story is a hopeful sign:

Almost all companies within the music industry in the meantime abandon their Digital Rights Management measures and turn to distribute their content – no, not in any case for free -, but - at least - for thoroughly private usage (It had started in spring 2007, when big player EMI decided to abandon its DRM-function. And the most recent example is Apple with their iTunes-store whose items are free of any DRM-restrictions practically from now onwards, the change happens during the next days, the cut-off date is the 7th of April).⁷

- 3) For the third example I would especially like to thank Frau Mag. Schuh, Austria's "Dolceta" National Coordinator, who called my attention to this special issue, the – so-called - "Motrin"-case:

⁶ Cf. <http://blog.digg.com/?p=74> (Download: 2009-03-25).

⁷ In general agreeing with the criticism on the DRM-strategy of music industries' majors, Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams within their much received book, "Wikinomics", propose an even ongoing and more to social web-practices like mashups or remixing related, that is: consumer-friendlier, solution by stating: "Our favorite is a subscription model, in which consumers get access to an unlimited selection of music tracks through streaming Internet audio for some kind of recurring payment, much the way satellite radio operates today." (D.Tapscott/A.Williams, Wikinomics. How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything, New York: Portfolio 2008, 283).

What happened?

Midst of November last year the McNeil Consumer Healthcare company, part of pharmaceutical big player Johnson & Johnson, put an online ad, a commercial spot, on their website which was supposed to promote the „Motrin“ medicine. This medicine is designed to alleviate pain, especially severe headache. The mentioned spot is about babywearing moms who are said to get headache by wearing their babies in slings, schwings, pouches or wraps etc.

As far, as good – but the plot of this ad is that hostile towards babywearing moms, in fact it's hostile towards moms and women at all: For example, Babywearing is called merely 'fashionable' and a 'supposedly bonding experience', it's named simply as an indication of looking 'crazy' and a good idea 'in theory'!⁸

Within hours the-related-to-this-case Social Web exploded by twittering or 'tweeting' messages, blog posts, contributions on facebook or You Tube-videos, simply by Web 2.0-related media responding (mostly of course, but not exclusively) women who expressed their lack of understanding, irritation and their being offended by such an at least insensitive and simply unfounded ad message. Bloggers and tweeters began calling for boycotts.⁹

At first, the company tried to ignore the expressions of opinion of an invariably protesting group of annoyed consumers and - most of all - the ad agency occurred to not having had any idea of the quickly and efficiently self-organized power and mass collaboration of a wide-spread relevant community of consumers, that is Babywearing Moms (and in many cases, as well) their husbands. According to the incompetent reaction of the ad agency, the McNeil company lost a whole weekend, until they took down the ad from its website and published a short statement wherein the responsible directors granted their consumers that "they had learned a lot from them *lately* and continue to listen"¹⁰.

⁸ The online ad is available now at "You Tube", cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO6SITUBA38>; the respective website is <http://www.motrin.com> (Download: 2009-03-25).

⁹ One of the first and most received collection of twittered or blogged reactions is the so-called "Motrin Ad Makes Moms Mad", available at "You Tube", cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhR-y1N6R8Q> (Download: 2009-03-25).

¹⁰ The statement is still available at <http://motrin.com/generic.jhtml?id=/motrin/include/message.inc>, and is linked from the front page of <http://www.motrin.com> (Download: 2009-03-25).

Now let me draw some conclusions from the Kryptonite locks story, the DRM-battle between the big players of the media content industry and annoyed consumers and the 'Moms and Motrin'-case:

The mass of consumers - and now I think, I can already say: the *active* mass of consumers - in all three cases have proved that the new interactive and social mass media, the web 2.0-platforms like weblogs, online social networks or collaborative digital environments like wikis, news aggregators or social bookmarking devices *indeed* foster rapid, comprehensive and grass-roots democratic opinion and decision making!

- Concerning rapidity remember: The consumer-unfriendly strategy of Digg.com could not even last for 24 hours!
- Concerning comprehensiveness remember: The huge number of community members who actively urged their protest.
- Concerning grass-roots democratic strategy remember: The easily uniting and 'voting' mechanisms of examples like the "Motrin"-case which make their acid test in the twinkling of an eye or – as I now might point out better – in the 'tweeting' of an eye.

IV. Summing Up

There is an obvious enthusiasm about the possibilities and the power of social media and web 2.0-features. But this enthusiasm must not forget that social media is a *means* of establishing or optimizing active consumer citizenship by interaction. Twitter or Facebook (both are directly connected, Twitter even can be integrated wholly into the Facebook personal webpage) -, Twitter or Facebook, weblogs or wikis, MySpace or LinkedIn, Digg or Delicious etc. etc. are *utilities* to foster, to broaden and (last, not least) to speed up active consumer citizenship. But the mental attitude and the moral courage for being an informed, attentive and conjointly organized consumer has to precede all enthusiasm about new interactive media. Furthermore, as competence in assessing consumer items is not only achievable by self-organized and grass-roots confirmed peer-groups, a structured and professionalized convergence at least seems to be of equal importance. That is the entry point for consumer education 'multipliers' and their activities in educational or governmental institutions resp. in consumer associations, activities which (think

about DOLCETA.com and this conference!) increasingly demand the use of digital interactive media.

So nevertheless these new interactive mass media's already wide-spread and rapidly gaining usage, its technologically incrementally ubiquitous availability and - last, not least - its manifold features and related to human's play instinct polymorphic applications can support and even motivate a self-confident, interested and courageous consumer attitude. O'Reilly's in the beginning cited dictum, "web 2.0 is an attitude, not a technology", needs to be read and understood and classified within this context as a certain prevalence of the socio-cultural to the technological aspect.

In short:

- Obvious enthusiasm concerning possibilities and power of social media and web 2.0-features must not forget that social media is a *means* of establishing or optimizing active consumer citizenship by interaction.
- Mental attitude and moral courage, in general: the human and social factors, have to precede all enthusiasm about digital interactive media.
- Nevertheless, in conjunction with professional multipliers from educational or governmental institutions resp. from consumer associations, where digital interactive media increasingly are used, too, these utilities primarily need to be counted as vehicles for sociocultural activities, especially towards active consumer citizenship. If they are counted as *utilities* the term „Web 2.0“ doubtlessly is meaningful.