

The micro-macro-level of the prosumer discourse

Matthias Bode & Per Østergaard

Department of Marketing & Management

University of Southern Denmark

In the 70's, the student movement zeitgeist marched through the institutions and did not even stop at the doors of German marketing departments. A small group of leftist academics was looking into ways to democratize the market: applying Willy Brandt's famous dictum "Mehr Demokratie wagen" in their professional sphere. The goal was to empower consumers by integrating them into the production process. The idea was that as consumers turning into part-time producers, they could balance the overwhelming power of companies. In the late 80's the same idea, which was first ridiculed by the traditional marketing community, was re-introduced less with an emancipatory impetus, but within a straight profit enhancement strategy. Concepts like Relationship Marketing, Value Chain Management, and the Service-dominant logic, developed first in industrial markets, were redefining the role of the consumer in the market. The participation of the consumer in the production of value promised a stronger customer relationship, loyalty and long-lasting commitment. The most common used term in this context was the consumer as "co-producer", sometimes with a reference to the prosumer, coined by the futurist Toffler. In a different academic universe, dominated by media & cultural studies, the prosumer idea was approached from the angle of a new acceptance to study the more active consumer/reader role. Meanwhile, the multi-discursive "prosumer" can be found everywhere, from lifestyle magazines, brand management conferences, to neo-marxist critics of late-capitalism. The intriguing resonant ability of the prosumer concept to be charged with opposing ideologies has the flip side of blurring conceptual differences. The prosumer has a reference to market changes, but it is primarily a theoretical concept. It is used as an umbrella term for divergent phenomena as well as a normative concept to initiate changes in the market.

The main goal of the presentation is to work on the nexus of overlapping discourses, by emphasizing their distinct explanatory potentials. As a structuring element the distinction between the macro- and micro level of analysis is applied. This distinction cuts across ideological approaches to the prosumer and emphasizes potential aggregation fallacies in relation to macro implications that are based on micro observations. Blurring these distinctions relates also to the dangerous shortcut of developing universal explanations based on contextual micro

behaviour. When Ritzer tries to explain the emergence of a consumer demand interest in prosumption, he refers to the specific situation of the US-American shopper experience. A contextualized analysis would also consider other market cultures. An example is the German market, where the introduction of prosuming elements like self-service was resisted by consumers until the mid 1950's.

Rather than starting the discussion of the prosumer with individual behaviour, a more macro-related perspective is focusing on the commodification of consumer activities, skills and knowledge. Hereby the defining element of the prosumer is the re-configuration of market and institutional borders. In this way, consumer activities like writing a diary, repairing a car or cooking a meal are viewed from a more macro perspective, and the prosuming classification is based on the contextual positioning in the market network. At the same time, this re-configuration is usually initiated by companies, who are subsequently changing their own position in the market network and substitute hierarchical processes by the market. A macro approach can then focus on the institutional level of blurring borders of the firm. This embeds the discussion of the prosumer within changed market mechanisms. Here, especially relevant are emergent structures of competitive/cooperative tendencies, which are discussed as "domesticated markets". Insofar, the new relationships with consumers on a macro level are already taking place in new market configurations, with the important element of evolutionary, less controllable structures in the management sphere. These structural changes resonate with the integration of the consumer, seen both as a necessary process, but at the same time also as a dangerous moment for companies, in increasing their vulnerability and decreasing the range of strategic control. In this way, coming from a management and economics discourse, also the concept of power can be applied in new ways. First, the concepts were initially developed in an emancipatory context, and then first introduced in industrial markets, where the consumer has a more powerful position in the market. Then, from a more social and cultural perspective, the contextualized issue of contested negotiations of the market re-configuration can be analysed without having to rely on individual consumer sentiments or experiences. This helps to advance the discussion, especially in a situation when too often the starting point of the analysis is the functional change in individual market interactions. It is the intention to get beyond the functional aspects of prosumption and develop theory that can illustrate how prosumption is mainly about the changing meaning of consumption.