

## Collaboration – the neglected dimension of prosuming

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The *prosumer* by Toffler (and others after him) is characterized as the combination of production and consumption activities that had become separated in the course of industrialization; the one subject to capitalist production principles, the other in the sphere of private consumption. This concept has been revived with the diffusion of the internet. Some authors refer explicitly to Toffler (Michel, 2000), others conceptualize a new role of the user (von Hippel, 2005) or create their own terms such as the *produser* (Bruns, 2008); and others like Voß et al (2005) set themselves apart from Toffler by coming up with the *working customer*. The revival has been triggered by a trend towards extended involvement of customers or users in the production and distribution of digital goods and services delivered via the internet, that is enabled by the fact that the necessary resources (PC, software, internet access) are now widely available.

Although these authors all focus on the shift of productive activities to the consumer, they differ widely regarding the implications of the shift. One perspective assumes that the integration of these productive activities takes place in the sphere of consumption – that means outside of capitalist production, hierarchical control and heteronomy. On the other side Voß and others argue that consumers are controlled by commercial firms and being systematically exploited as a "second type" of worker; workers who receive no financial compensation. In our view the critical point in the discussion is the distinction between autonomy and self-organization (as emancipating elements) on the one side and heteronomy and commercial exploitation on the other side. This argument is also found in the debate on user-based production models as seen in open source software and open content development ("commons based peer production", "social production"; see Benkler, 2006 and Chesbrough, 2006).

Pointing to the implications of the *working customer* in terms of heteronomy and control by firms, Voß et al certainly focuses on a weak point in the original prosuming concept. However, our point here is, that Toffler as well as Voß neglects the collaborative dimension of the consumer participation in the internet. Toffler did not take the collaborative dimension into consideration when he defined prosuming as work done by the consumer himself. When we are looking at user participation in the internet, collaboration between users and producers takes on a core dimension.

Analysing the role of *prosumers* in the internet, there are two fundamentally different types of participation. First, the individual interaction of a customer with the supplier. Via the Internet, the interaction takes on a specific form of self-service in which the customer interacts with the supplier's web platform and IT system and thereby effects substantial parts of the service (Hanekop/Wittke, 2005). Customers interact here as individuals with the supplier. Their participation is typically not self-organized (even if place and time in the internet can be freely selected), but rather is highly standardized and controlled by the supplier. Second, a more collaborative form of user participation can be found in the open source software development and various forms of user-generated content production. In this type of participation, users do not interact with a commercial supplier but (primarily) cooperate and communicate with one another. In contrast to Toffler's prosumer, do-it-yourself (*Eigenarbeit*) is achieved by attaining a high level of collaborative labor division among a large number of users who are specialized in certain tasks and contributions.

*Prosuming* appears in a different light and new perspectives emerge when the collaborative dimension is included. One question is how collaboration takes place and how production might be organized. This type of collaboration is based on the inclusion of users (instead of contractually regulated work relationships) and self-organisation of production in the context of communities without hierarchical coordination and control by commercial firms (O'Mahony, 2007). A further question is how forms of collaboration arise that is not exclusively based on interaction among users (as with open source software development), but also the which collaboration between users and the a firm. Recent studies (O'Mahony/West, 2008) indicate that a wide range of organization models emerge in which elements of user self-organization are becoming interlinked with commercial companies. We will examine the significance of the collaborative dimension in prosuming, illustrate the differences between collaborative and non-collaborative prosuming, and propose research perspectives that focus on the collaborative dimension of prosuming.

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