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## The rise of the 'Culture of Participation' ...and why the music industry should pay very close attention to blogs, photo-sharing, ringtone-mixers, and social networking



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Witness: blogs, [mash-ups](#), online collaboration sites and [services](#), [social networking](#), online [photo-and video-sharing](#), [Google-Map-Archives](#), the tremendous growth of [Wikipedia](#), [Ourmedia.org](#) and the Internet Archives, [P2P webcasting](#), [collaborative playlist sharing](#), and the countless new [ringtone-creation](#) tools ...the list of participation-fuelled sites and booming '[personal media](#)' services gets longer and longer, while 10s of millions of people are signing up just to be a *part of something*. "Fan-built playlists and mixes are taking over the way people get their music" says Wired's Katie Dean in a [recent feature](#). "Mix tapes and playlists are really the new container for music," adds Lucas Gonze, creator of [Webjay](#), in the same feature. Is this the next big thing?

In a drastic departure from the good old one-way, top-down [TV-'culture'](#) of the past, we are now witnessing a seemingly ubiquitous trend to media forms that allow, or better yet, *promote* PARTICIPATION and SELF-EXPRESSION - and the music & media aka "content" industries are the first to feel it.

For the average yet somewhat web-savvy consumer, though, it seems that now that we *do* have access to pretty much any content anytime (whether legal or not) many of us are no longer satisfied with simply taking advantage of that fact and blissfully *consume* the content. Rather, now we actually want to BE PART OF IT, influence it, *change it*, and somehow play a more active part in it... or – ouch! – maybe even create some 'content' ourselves. Does this take us to some sort of California Tech-Geek Digital Hippie-ism: is every consumer also a potential creator or (worse) publisher? Is that where it's going?

Well, personally, I have some doubts that just giving people good, cheap and plenty production tools plus access to almost-zero-cost publishing and distribution mechanisms actually produces GOOD CONTENT (however you want define that), rather, I think it first and foremost creates A LOT OF content. Still, even if this empowerment trend does not (yet) truly boost the creation of mind-boggling new art, the mere POSSIBILITY of playing a more active role in content (re)-creation is certainly an exciting idea to many people, and probably will unlock some potential that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

But, *music* may prove to be a different animal here: while the grassroots journalism that takes shape in blogging has already made a real tangible [impact](#), and is very much on its way of changing the way the journalism business operates, I am not sure that the same thing will happen with music, anytime soon. While, conceptually, I like and support the 'everybody can be a publisher, composer or writer' – idea, deep down I have a hunch that so few people are actually gifted in these fields, and, personally, *those* are the ones I would want to hear and see, not the countless others

that just *maybe* of interest. Who has the time? Often, the desired result is best achieved with some sort of smart, benign, and intelligent filter in place, i.e. a trusted third party that selects the best new music for me, or –maybe- some sort of human + machine +database intelligent engine that can emulate it, see [Pandora](#), Soundflavor, Transpose / Goompah, Last.FM etc. MAYBE.

As to participation, let's remember that back in the early days of the NSF, pre-Netscape Internet almost every user was most likely also a contributor to its exploding vastness and ever-increasing depth. Early 'epicentres of participation' like TheWell ([now for sale](#)) thrived on people participating rather than just being 'information freeloaders' which pretty much became the default scenario in the 90s. However, we are now at the point where many things that were invented in the late nineties, and that didn't quite 'make' it then, are becoming actual reality (witness the long and winding road of [EMusic](#) – imho, a vastly under-rated success story in digital music), and this phenomena also brings us to the *second wave of the 'the culture of participation'* – a phenomena that is changing entire industries practically over night, with the media / music / entertainment industries right on top of the s(hit)-list.

And the importance of the participation factor is even further amplified by that other crucial new paradigm of media consumption: *empower your customers or watch them move on*. Add that to "enable user participation or become irrelevant" and you have a nice stew of opportunities and challenges.



So, take a short tour with me. Even if you don't subscribe to the possibly naive notion that everyone can be a writer, actor, musician, artist, entrepreneur or inventor, you still can't avoid noticing how the thresholds for at least *trying to be a content creator* are being drastically lowered everywhere around us. Everyone can now 'make music' using computers and various software programs (like it or not), and publish the results on a website, or set up his / her [own online radio stations](#), right from the bedroom PC. Everyone can now be a writer and publish endless pontifications on their blogs (I should [know](#) ;) or even make you listen to them via podcasting (scary thought, [as in my own case](#) :).

No longer are we just contend in shooting [cool photos](#) or bleeding–edge videos, and showing it to our family or friends, we now actually want to show them *to the world*, and post them on Flickr, Webshots, Ofoto or Shutterfly for everyone to see! And it's not just because it's so easy (it's not, really ;) ), it's also because we want to be heard and seen, make a contribution, and show ourselves, even without anyone's approval or official authorization.

No longer do we take the 'official' and sanctified sources of traditional news for granted, instead, we find and subscribe to 'our own' news-channels by *connecting to other people* that focus on the exact same subjects or verticals that we're interested in, and that seem credible or are otherwise recommended (witness the booming popularity of [Boing Boing](#), InstaPundit etc). Out goes CNN, and in comes RSS. Never mind MTV, ClearChannel and American Idols – now people tune into podcasting!



No longer do we just listen to TUGOR (“the uniform, good old radio”), and take their remote-controlled programming choices for granted, instead we build *our own* radio stations on the Internet, and swap playlists, like-it links, URLs and profiles. Enter Mercora, Myspace, [Grouper](#), last.fm, Launchcast...

No longer do we just accept one opinion or one point of view as ‘real’ just because that’s all we can get right now, instead, we now [‘google’ everyone](#) and everything, and find others that may have something to add that sparks our interest.

No longer do we only read the classified ads to meet new people, make business connections or personal contacts, or find out what’s happening - instead we become an active piece of the puzzle, and contribute to the formation of virtual meta-conventions where people meet each other for kinds of purposes. Witness Myspace, Friendster, ASmallWorld, Match.com, HotOrNot, Ryze, [LinkedIn](#)...

No longer do we just *listen* to music, we now are starting to remix it the minute we have downloaded it; we morph, change, tweak and edit with great enthusiasm the very minute it has turned up in its original version. We use samples and snippets of *anything* to make a personal and / or a *Fashion or Style Statement*, e.g. by mass-customizing our cellular ringtones – already ringtones are an estimated \$4 Billion global boon for music publishers and record labels. Look at [Garageband](#), [Minimixa](#), [DigImpro](#), [Hyperscore](#), and many others – watch for those kinds of tools and services to go through the roof in the next 5-10 years. **Tune-In, Participate, contribute, share, publish!!**

*Good-bye, one-way-content funnel and good old ‘linear’ copyright, and welcome to the chaos of participation that will make the [music business 3x as big](#).*

Digital trust, reputation and credibility are now starting to be *real* factors; something that was once reserved to MIT-geeks, hackers, and assorted ‘get-a-life’-ers. Now, one’s reputation on EBay may be just as valuable to people than their ‘real-life’ reputation at their favourite bar. This, to me, is a sure sign that the [distinction between ‘online’ and ‘offline’](#) realities is starting to blur. In fact, I would venture to say that within 5-7 years most ‘digital natives’ in most rich countries won’t even comprehend what ‘offline’ even means (except for, hopefully, for describing a frame of mind).

In music –as a direct side-effect of the exploding Culture of Participation and the drive to self-determination that fuels it – WE THE USERS now determine WHAT, WHEN, HOW and WHERE we listen to music – and we egg others on to do the same.

There goes Radio (at least in its old form) and in comes [time-](#), space-, and device-shifting. It is becoming clear that the more people are ‘connected’ to digital networks more often and at ever decreasing costs, the more people want to PARTICIPATE and be involved – it’s that simple. We are therefore leaving something behind that basically was the foundation of media for the past 50+ years: *the one-way communication-mode that made THEM (the media companies) the producers,*

