SNSs are also both global and local. From Manchester to Manila, and from Seoul to Sydney, people are using SNSs for similar reasons, and in this way they are a powerful symbol of the way that communication technologies really are spanning the globe, crossing cultures and encouraging research that appreciates the diversity this represents. Yet SNSs are also intensely local, emphasising rather than erasing geographical proximity. SNSs may span the globe, but the relationships we maintain through them are generally those that we also maintain through face-to-face contact.

There is, of course, a faddish element to SNSs, and it is likely that today's darlings of the digerati will be tomorrow's old news, but it would be a mistake to dismiss SNSs as nothing more than a fashion, as they reflect social practice as much as they create it. SNSs have not become popular because they create social networks, but because they provide a space for social networks to exist. These social networks, as we have seen throughout this chapter, and indeed in other chapters, exist in both online and offline worlds. They provide spaces for online relations, but also structure our offline relationships.

4 Participation and user created content

If there is one word that summarises the particular quality of social media, it would be 'participation'. Unlike the mass media before it, social media is fundamentally a participative medium. Our online experience increasingly involves methods of actively providing information about what we are doing, or what we think of something. This might be as simple as a Facebook 'like' button, or as involved as maintaining a blog. Participation can take various forms of agency from user generated content (UGC), in which users forward content made by others, to user created content (UCC), in which the content is made by the user. Every time we participate we partake in various forms of labour sharing – from creative and social to emotional and affective labour. In each cultural context, what it means to participate takes on different dimensions. For example, in China where the internet is highly regulated by the government, participation can often take the form of what in the West might be called 'lurking'. After all, imagine if the 457 million internet users (CIW 2012) all spoke online at once. If everyone were talking, who would be listening? Indeed, listening as a form of participation has only recently gained attention in critical work concerning social media (Crawford 2009).

The emergence of social media and its emphasis on participative modes of use has many significant implications for the study of media and society more broadly. In each location, the implications of 'click-activism' are playing out with different results (Nugroho and Syarief 2012). For example, we can see changes in the fabric of activism in the emergence of social uprisings like the Occupy Wall Street movement, or the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 (Diamond and Plattner 2012). New dimensions are added to crisis management and response as seen during the New Zealand earthquake of 2011 (Bruns et al. 2012) and the events of Japan's 3/11 tsunami (Hjorth and Kim 2011). Perhaps most significantly for journalists, social media is throwing up challenges to the privileged position of journalists and the news media as the sole arbiters of reportage. As participative forms of media like blogs and SNSs become more mainstream, we are seeing the rise of the citizen journalist – a phenomenon that is challenging conventions around press

media and journalism in general (Meikle and Redden 2010). It is important not to grant social media too much agency when examining its role in political events: social media didn't cause these events, but it did change the context for distribution and participation. In short, we are witnessing a shift in the *affect*, rather than *effect*, and this has effects on other spheres of society such as political agency and online activism.

The impact of the participative features of social media has been studied by a number of scholars from a number of different perspectives. Bruns et al. (2012) found that the use of social media, Facebook and Twitter played an important role in crisis communication at the height of the 2011 South-East Queensland floods crisis. In their report they focused upon the role of Twitter 'in disseminating and sharing crisis information and updates from state and local authorities as well as everyday citizens' (Bruns et al. 2012: 7). In his discussion of the political capacities of political fans and Twitter faking, Jason Wilson argues that such mobile and social media 'are interwoven with emerging, fan-like forms of engagement with mediatised politics' (2011: 1). In what he calls 'post-broadcast democracies', activities such as Twitter 'faking' show 'playful, performative and mobile dimensions, which challenge scholars to rethink theories of play, performance, fandom and political engagement' (Wilson 2011: 1). Hjorth and Kim's analysis of social media for crisis management in the wake of Japan's 3/11 asks whether we can think about a social and mobile media 'affect' in the ways in which it frames people's responses. They argue that 'while social media provide new channels for affective cultures in the form of mobile intimacy, they also extend on earlier media practices and rituals such as the postcard' (Hjorth and Kim 2011: 1).

Central to these discussions about the politics of social and mobile media is a rethinking of the relationship between participation, agency and media. In this light, it is important to recognise that media 'participation' is a culturally specific notion. Let us return to the opening example of China. While 'lurking' in an Anglophonic context evokes images of users being passive (Crawford 2009), in China such an activity is seen as an important part of media participation (Goggin and Hjorth 2009). As social and mobile media evolve unevenly across the globe, we see the ways in which that media reflects local cultural, social and economic nuances. By engaging with a culturally divergent understanding of participation that complicates the binary between empowerment and exploitation, we reflect upon the evolution of 'participatory media' (Jenkins 2006) and how this has shaped, and been shaped by, social media (Bennett 2008; Rheingold 2008). In order to explore what participation means, and how it has been theorised and represented in the social media literature, we will investigate a few broad areas of academic study.

First, we will expand upon one of the threads explored in Chapter 2 and engage more deeply with how academic scholars have conceptualised the idea of audiences/users as producers. We also deploy Bruns' term 'produser', which we think is a very helpful term for describing the kinds of productive behaviours to be addressed in this chapter. After we have defined what we mean by produser, we will tackle another slightly more straightforward and related theme: user created content (UCC). We will define what we mean by these terms, contextualise them within the literature and then go on to look at some of the implications of produsage and UCC.

Once we have defined the ideas of users as co-producers and of UCC, we will move on to look at how these concepts play out in more generalised and grounded practice. First, we will consider crowd sourcing as one way that combined user production can be utilised to great effect in an online environment filled with literally millions of users. We will then examine the phenomenon of citizen journalism, before going on to examine online activism, both quite practical examples of the kinds of behaviours that participatory media enable. We will limit our discussion of journalism in light of the book's focus upon social media. Entire books have been written about citizen journalism (Gillmor 2006; Meikle and Redden 2010) and online activism (Zuckerman 2008; Pickerill 2010; Lovink 2012), and where relevant, we encourage you to refer to these works if you want to develop a more thorough understanding of the phenomena.

USERS AS PRODUCERS – 'PRODUSERS'

As we saw in Chapter 2, the premise of Web 2.0 and the associated shift in audiences has become a kind of reaction to the growing understanding that in networked communication environments the audience are no longer simply consumers of media: they have become participants. Just what participation means in the context of online media is very fuzzy indeed. In general terms, we can say that internet-based media is participative because it is two-way. This phenomenon has led some people to describe certain kinds of uses of the internet as participative or participatory media (Rheingold 2008). One aspect of participation is public response. Commenting on a news story in an online newspaper is a kind of participation, although it is a kind of participation that rehearses earlier types of media such as radio talkback and letters to the editor of a newspaper. This kind of participation is something that has been written about widely, especially in social media and Web 2.0-branded marketing texts. The common exhortation you will see repeated by marketers is that the web is a conversation, a rhetoric that has become a contemporary business mantra.

A much more provocative idea, however, is the idea of the audience as media producer. This takes the idea of participation to another level. Instead of simply responding to content that has been created by an organisation, here the user becomes the source of the original material. Bloggers become journalists, fans become the authors of extensions to books and films (Jenkins 1992, 2006). Your kid becomes a star on YouTube because millions of people think he was funny after he had visited the dentist and was still zonked out on anaesthetic.[1] If you have ever watched a funny video on YouTube or been sent an email containing a funny picture, then the chances are very high that the material was produced by another user – a person a bit like you who was armed with nothing more than their laptop or desktop computer, some technical skill and a clever idea. This kind of participation, which is made possible by internet media (and exploited by social media), tells us that the internet user is perhaps not best characterised as a member of an audience, with its associated implications of passivity. This kind of user – the person who makes videos, songs, sounds, images and writings and shares them online – is something more active, something that looks more like a producer.

In terms of scholarly approaches to the idea of user production of media, there have been a number of papers and books written by some well-respected and influential academics. One of the first to stake a claim in this territory was Henry Jenkins, whose earlier work closely explored fan communities in which he persuasively argued that fans were producers (1992). As a cultural theorist, Jenkins comes from a tradition of cultural media research that is interested in how audiences use and make meaning from the media. Stuart Hall's seminal work *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973) argued that television audiences are not passive but active consumers of the media. They are active in that they construct their own meanings from media 'texts' that may not be entirely in line with the intended meaning of the producers.

Jenkins' early work in this area, which pre-dates the development of the internet as a mainstream medium, looked at fan cultures. He was particularly interested in the way that fans of TV series like *Star Trek*, for example, did not simply watch the show, but actively engaged with it through a series of highly visible creative practices which include everything from making outfits and role-playing characters at conventions to extending plots and the storyworld of the show by writing fictional narratives of their own. The film *Trekkies* (directed by Roger Nygard, 1997), in which *Star Trek* fans are divided into two types – Trekkies and Trekkers – is a good example of different levels of 'fandom' participation. Trekkers might be fans in that they watch the show and buy some merchandise, while Trekkies actively render

their lives into characters and storyworlds of *Star Trek*. In other words, Trekkers might visit *Star Trek* whereas Trekkies completely inhabit the world of *Star Trek*. Thus, engagement with the TV series was much more than passive watching; it was highly creative and active with audiences participating in the making of meanings and interpretations. Indeed, it was in these fan communities – both those of gamers (we will come back to this in Chapter 5) and fans of popular culture – that the first kinds of production emerged, well before anyone coined the term 'Web 2.0', and well before the first social media sites appeared. In reflecting on these observations, Jenkins describes something he called a 'participatory culture', which he defines as:

> a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (2006: 3)

While Jenkins was concerned with the way that audiences produced, others pointed to the emergence of a new class of worker – the professional amateur, or 'pro-am' – whose production did not fit into ideas of either amateur production or professional production, but occupied a territory somewhere between (Leadbeater et al. 2004). The professional amateur was someone who worked at their interest like a professional, spending as many hours on their endeavour as they might in their day job, treating it like it was a task that earned money, and yet was not a professional since they were not part of a professional community and did not get paid for their work.

Other scholars looked more intently at the way in which users who produced undertook their work. Australian academic Bruns has engaged with the idea of the user who produces through his book *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond* (2008), in which he describes the term 'produser' as a conflation of the words producer and user. This coining of a new phrase is not just about coming up with a word to mark academic territory; it is also about developing a word that is simply lacking in the English language to describe something that has become so ubiquitous that it is simpler to use a new word than to continue using a phrase.

Other terms have also been coined, but as yet none have stuck. The idea and practices are quite new, and it will be some time before the phrases are resolved. Perhaps in the future we may simply return to a term like 'user', and simply incorporate the understanding that users are also producers into

this term. In any event, the term 'produser' is useful in the context of this discussion, and you will find that throughout this book we use Bruns' term when we are referring to users who produce.

USER CREATED CONTENT (UCC)

There is a wealth of information online, and a great deal of it is produced by users working in their own free time. Creating content not only involves creativity but also time, emotion and various forms of capital (social, cultural and sometimes economic). With the availability of high-quality cameras connected to smartphones, the ways in which we can record, experience, visualise and memorialise events is changing (Ito and Okabe 2005, 2006; Hjorth 2007; Mørk Petersen 2008). Many social media sites including YouTube, Flickr and Facebook, to name only a few, exist only because of the content created by their users (Burgess 2007; Mørk Petersen 2008). These sites – more services or 'platforms' than places that actually produce content – make money by selling attention, and that attention is gained through users' creative and social labour. An active part of the media discourses involve forwarding content to other users – often generically called 'user generated content' (UGC).

Not all of this information is produced directly with the implicit intention of making something for someone else to enjoy. Recorded conversations between users is one example. A vast majority of conversations may be of absolutely no interest to other people. Many of these micronarrative gestures seek to reinforce existing relationships and social capital (Ellison et al. 2011). A conversation on Facebook between two friends about what they did on the weekend plays an important role in building and maintaining offline relationships in the online space, but is unlikely to have a great deal of value to others outside this relationship. But this does not mean that all online conversations have little value. For example, a conversation between a few people about their cats' health problems that leads to a resolution might have a great deal of interest for other cat owners who find themselves in the unhappy position of having a sick feline friend. Other information that comes under the overall heading of UGC includes information that users supply about themselves on personal profiles, such as birthdate, gender, physical location and so on. This information may be even less interesting to the average user, but as we discussed in Chapter 3, it is of great value to the SNS that collects it for data-mining.

While all of this material is clearly created by users, and it can become content that is useful to other people, there is a difference between user profile

data and a carefully crafted blog post that is uploaded to the internet for the express purpose of being read by other users, or a short film that may represent many hours of production work that is then uploaded to YouTube. In this book we draw a distinction between content that has been created purposefully by a user expressly for exhibition to others, and content that is generated by users as a result of using social media. We use the term 'UCC' to more precisely refer to the kinds of content produced intentionally by users, usually for the purpose of consumption by other users.

There have been a number of criticisms of UCC, some of which we explore in more detail in other chapters (see Chapter 5, for example). One of these criticisms is that (often) amateur UCC is displacing established forms of content creation where the content creator is a professional who has significant training and experience in their field. This is a pronounced criticism in some fields, such as journalism and the arts, as we will see below. In seeking to move the discussion of user creativity beyond the professional/amateur dichotomy, Jean Burgess (2007) has used the term 'vernacular creativity' to identify UCC as something that is characterised by the vernacular and everyday. She points out that while creativity is often seen as the exclusive domain of trained elites like artists or design professionals, creativity has always been an activity that everybody engages in, even if in the past it was not always visible.

Scrapbooking, writing of short stories, and family histories, home crafts and decoration are all examples of vernacular creativity that are no less creative just because they are not produced by professionals or widely accessible in the public domain. For Burgess these activities are about cultural citizenship, a concept that expands and redefines classical notions of citizenship that are based on participation in political activity. Here, the production of creative works acts as a way of asserting and defining one's citizenship, which is 'practised as much through everyday life, leisure, critical consumption and popular entertainment as it is through debate and engagement with capital "P" politics' (Burgess et al. 2006: 1). We will return to some of these issues around UCC in Chapter 5 when we come to look at art and cultural production in the age of social media.

CROWD SOURCING, SMART MOBS, WIKIPEDIA

> A person is smart. People are dumb, panicky dangerous animals and you know it. (*Men in Black*, dir. Sonnenfeld 1997)

> [U]nder the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them. (Surowiecki 2004: xiii)

While some of the material about user participation explores cases where individual produsers can participate in activities that were once beyond them, others focus on the action of groups of users working together to produce materials or solve problems. James Surowiecki's *Wisdom of Crowds* (2004) explored the idea that large groups of people can often solve problems that individuals within the crowd cannot. Tim O'Reilly picked up this idea and worked it into his formulation of Web 2.0 (2005).

Extrapolating from this idea, Amazon launched their Mechanical Turk service in 2005, which allowed people to either pay a fee to have some problem worked on by a group, or on the flip-side, to be paid a small fee for participation in helping to solve a larger problem. Other online services provide facilities that allow users to associate tags (single words or short phrases) with content, thus allowing large numbers of people to build up keyword indexes based on human-entered information.

The National Library of Australia has also utilised crowd sourcing to help fix text from scanned newspapers for their online Trove service. Trove is a digital repository of Australian media, including print, images and audio. Part of their archive consists of newspapers dating back to 1803, resulting in millions of pages of newsprint available online. These pages were passed through an optical character recognition (OCR) process that automatically turned the printed text into electronic text, which allows the text to be indexed and searched. This is clearly a very valuable resource for historians. However, OCR is not perfect and newsprint – especially material that is smudged or damaged – does not always scan correctly. To fix this a person needs to read the original text, compare it to the OCR text and make any corrections manually. For a collection the size of Trove, this is an intimidating amount of work.

In order to tackle the sheer size of this task, the National Library of Australia developed an interface that allowed anyone on the internet to register and edit the text themselves. This has proved a very successful way of using crowd-sourcing techniques to help produce a publicly accessible, searchable archive. The success can be measured in part by metrics. An early version of the service was released in July 2008 and as of February 2009, 2.2 million lines and 104,000 articles had been corrected by internet users (Holley 2009). While this is only a small percentage of the total 3.5 million articles in Trove (which is planned to increase to 40 million), the strong engagement of the community so rapidly suggests that there is a great deal of value in crowd-sourced applications, especially when people perceive they are helping the community. As one person noted about her motivation for fixing material on Trove:

> 'I enjoy the correction – it's a great way to learn more about past history and things of interest whilst doing a "service to the community" by correcting text for the benefit of others' but also, her motivation for continuing to change pages was driven by 'the knowledge that you are doing something that will benefit future people that wish to access articles on their family history'. (Holley 2009: 17)

This gives us a small insight into the kinds of motivations that drive user participation. If Mechanical Turk and the Trove experience demonstrate the power of crowds, then Wikipedia provides a compelling case for the power of utilising millions of online users to create an online knowledge repository. Wikipedia is a portmanteau of two words – 'wiki' and 'encyclopaedia'. The word 'wiki' was developed from a Hawaiian word that means 'quick'. In practical terms, a wiki is a web-based system, developed by Ward Cunningham in 1994, that allows people to write and edit a shared document, which can be quickly linked to other documents. This allows a group of people to collaborate on the production of documents that contain a hierarchical and inter-linked arrangement of content. A perfect use for this kind of service is the production of documents that consist of small chunks of self-contained information that have relationships with other chunks of information – a user manual for a piece of software, a technical manual for a mechanical device, or an encyclopaedia.

Realising this potential, the founders of Wikipedia sought to create the world's largest repository of knowledge on just about any topic imaginable. To facilitate this, they created a wiki that they then opened to everyone to contribute to. Wikipedia has quickly become the world's largest source of knowledge on a variety of topics, from the history of the Roman Empire to biographies of actors who starred in obscure cult TV shows. Anyone can create pages in Wikipedia, and anyone can also edit or amend information on Wikipedia – allowing not only for the creation of a wide variety of information, but also for an iterative process of correction and amendment, towards the goal that over time the quality of the entire source will improve.

Some of the major issues with crowd-sourcing come from a failure to recognise its limitations. The main limitation is the inherent fallibility of crowds and the disproportionate ability of a committed individual or small group to bias results. As soon as the Mechanical Turk services started, for example, people quickly found ways to maximise the amount they could earn by providing random results or by automating their input. This means that certain kinds of activities that might utilise the service are open to abuse. Wikipedia, while offering far more information than traditional encyclopaedias, cannot

assert the same level of quality that an encyclopaedia with a tightly controlled editorial process can. While the crowd will tend to correct errors and omissions, individuals and groups who have strong views will attempt to sway articles to reflect their points of view, which has led to some significant disagreements over certain contentious subjects.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Citizen journalism is fundamentally about the collision between traditional news reporting and participative media. In the online environment, users can take an active role in the production of content, and when this extends to reporting on events, it constitutes citizen journalism (although as we will see this definition makes the issue seem more clear-cut than it is). Citizen journalism has appeared at the intersection between the challenges faced by traditional news reporting in the internet age, the emergence of social media and the growing ubiquity of devices like mobile phones that can capture images and video. For some like Gerard Goggin, the rise of mobile media such as the camera phone, along with personal but broadcast media like Twitter, has made messages, contexts and content more intimate (2011). As part of a broader movement of intimacy into the public realm (Berlant 1998), the role of mobile media – as one of the most personal and intimate devices (Fortunati 2002) – has had an impact upon journalism. With 'amateur' images taken by the mobile phone having more of a raw and unpolished feel, the texture of visuality in journalism has changed. It is not uncommon for a journalist to evoke that amateur feel to give the news a more intimate and trustworthy affect. The use of camera phones to shift notions of intimacy and place is discussed further in Chapter 7.

In the contemporary media landscape, one of the areas that has come under the most pressure is news reporting, and in particular, newspapers. Newspapers, which have long been supported by advertising revenue, have steadily lost this revenue to the internet as advertisers follow user attention online. Compounding this, many online news sources offer content for free and directly compete with traditional newspapers for their readers. This loss in revenue for newspapers results in increased pressure for newspapers and related news organisations to find cheaper ways to produce and present the news. Social media offers an interesting alternative for the collection of news stories, allowing news organisations to crowd-source content which not only gives them access to content that would not have been possible to get in years past but also to get it for very little money.

So what is citizen journalism?

While the internet has allowed users to write and contribute from its earliest days, it is only since the emergence of social media that the tools for doing this became mainstream. The chief technology associated with citizen journalism has been blogs, which made the publication of material on the internet accessible to people who did not possess the knowledge and skills required to set up and maintain a web server, or organise their own hosting (both of which require a fairly high level of technical knowledge).

Another key feature in the emergence of citizen journalism is the growing ubiquity of mobile media devices – primarily mobile phones – that allow users to take photos and videos, and which are always with millions of people all the time. This means that when an event occurs where there are people to see it, there is frequently also footage, courtesy of someone's ever-handy mobile phone. Following the London bombings in 2005, for example, the BBC received hundreds of videos and thousands of images from the public (Stuart 2007). Furthermore, with the growing uptake of internet-enabled smartphones, content can be both captured and shared within minutes of an event occurring. When linked to social networks like Twitter or Facebook, news can break very quickly and reach an audience much faster than traditional media – especially print media – can respond to. These same features of mobile and social media also have significant implications for online activism, which we will deal with in the following section.

Citizen journalism takes a number of forms, and there is some debate about what does and what does not constitute citizen journalism. There has also been significant criticism of the term, as we will see. Fundamental to all expressions of citizen journalism is the idea that the person doing the reporting is independent and does not work for a media organisation. This leaves a broad range of practices and forums that can be considered citizen journalism. At one end of the spectrum are user comments or feedback on news articles, which allow user participation but maintain the production of news stories within a more traditional editorial setting. These are borderline cases of citizen journalism, as the news organisation maintains tight editorial control over the published story and in many cases also exercises control over the comments posted about the story.

Some sites, like Slashdot and Kuro5hin, for example, feature news stories submitted by users of the site, and encourage commentary on the stories to the point where it is the feedback of the readers (some of which are highly knowledgeable about the topic material) that becomes the most important feature of the sites. Here, the stories act as catalysts for discussion, and a participative moderation system allows readers to rate comments, ideally

promoting the more insightful or interesting comments above the banal or poorly thought-out.

There are other sites that are built on a participatory model, where the news reported is sourced almost entirely from users. In Australia, The Conversation is a news site that provides an editorial framework for the publication of stories written by Australian academics. In Korea, OhmyNews has provided a forum since 1999 for anyone to publish news stories under the slogan 'every citizen is a reporter'. Dozens of similar sites exist in countries across the world.

In Australia and the UK, government-supported national broadcasters (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)) support sites that draw from the community, and are actively engaged in exploring the possibilities of citizen journalism. ABC's The Drum, for example, is an opinion site that merges commentary from journalists and politicians with submissions from the public. Stories posted to The Drum go through an editorial process, and are presented on the site for public viewing.

At the other end of the spectrum are the blogs or websites that report on news where an individual or small group post messages to report on events. Some of the best-known examples of citizen journalism fall into this category. Salam Abdulmunem (better known by his alias Salam Pax), a blogger based in Iraq, became a well-known figure during the Second Gulf War as he reported on the progress of the war as a local Iraqi from his home in Baghdad. Following the terrorist attacks on the US of September 11, 2001, Glenn Reynolds' blog *Instapundit.com* attracted a large following, pushing Reynolds into fame as another blogger who had the impact and audience normally enjoyed only by professional journalists.

Live tweeting has also become a significant phenomenon in recent years. Here people who are present at a newsworthy event – be it a press conference or perhaps a disaster – use instant messaging tools like Twitter to replay short updates, possibly inflected with personal observations or commentary. This can be very powerful as a form of news as it operates in real time, allowing thousands or millions of people to follow an event as it unfolds, rather than waiting for a regular news briefing or the morning paper. With intimate devices like mobile phones functioning to collect and disseminate events almost immediately, the aforementioned intimate turn in journalism has seen an aestheticisation of this effect for more audience affect. This intimacy makes the content and context of mobile media appear more trustworthy and everyday, although of course this may not be the case as the identity and motivations of the reporter are opaque. This immediacy also has other drawbacks, as we will see below.

There is an overlap between traditional journalism and citizen journalism, with many trained journalists working for news organisations maintaining blogs and other forms of social media to provide a channel for news, inflected with the individual journalists' own perspectives on the issues at hand. Many, like Dan Gillmor, see citizen journalism as being a positive development overall. Gillmor, a journalist with more than 25 years' experience, is highly critical of the rise of what he calls 'Big Media' and the negative effects this has had upon journalism. His 2006 book *We the Media* is probably the best-known text on the topic of citizen journalism. For Gillmor, Big Media are large companies that treat the news as a commodity, where costs of making news are pushed down while profits are maximised, a strategy which Gillmor (amongst others) argues is rarely aligned with good journalism.

In this environment, citizen journalism offers an alternative to mainstream media, filling what Gillmor sees as a middle ground that has been opened as Big Media has shifted its focus to 'light' news which focuses on celebrity gossip and violence (2006: 5). In Australia, for example, the news media is highly concentrated into two companies: Rupert Murdoch's News Limited and John Fairfax Holdings Ltd. In the 2007 Australian federal elections, citizen journalists emerged as an alternative to the mainstream media, and actively criticised the reportage of the Big Media organisations through their blogs. *The Australian* – the only national daily newspaper in Australia that felt threatened enough by this criticism to come out with an article attacking citizen journalists – described them as 'sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper' (cited in Bruns et al. 2008).

Gillmor sees the evolution of citizen journalism as paralleling a trajectory of increasing user participation in the production of content. He sees this as an evolutionary process 'from journalism as lecture to journalism as a conversation or seminar [which] will force the various communities of interest to adapt' (Gillmor 2006: xxiv). This characterisation of online behaviour as a conversation is a recurring theme in much of the non-academic literature, as we noted in the beginning of this chapter.

Criticisms of citizen journalism

While proponents point to some significant potential for citizen journalism, there are also many criticisms that point to problems and limitations inherent in the form. One criticism, which is often levelled by professional journalists, is that citizen journalists lack the training and rigour of professional journalists. Critics argue that citizen journalists consequently don't have the skills to get stories that trained journalists are able to break, because trained journalists

have better access to people and have honed their skills in interviewing and research. In effect, this argues that there is more to journalism than having a publication platform, and that participative media, in providing people with a platform, is not enough to make them journalists. This argument does not necessarily dismiss the value of citizen journalists, but emphasises the need for professionally trained journalists even in an era of participative media.

Another serious criticism of citizen journalism is that it lacks the transparency of traditional news media. Citizen journalists do not need to follow professional codes of conduct. Furthermore, while a professional journalist is kept in check by editorial processes, citizen journalists are free to write whatever they want. Any political affiliations or bias on the part of the citizen journalist is therefore harder to determine, bringing the impartiality and accuracy of their work into question, and placing more responsibility on the reader to determine the quality of the source. Trust becomes a major issue that was in the past mitigated to some degree by the reputation of the news source.

Citizen journalists are also far more vulnerable than journalists working for news organisations because they lack the protection that is often extended to them as employees. Some of the best journalism provokes strong responses from people and opens journalists to legal (and sometimes physical) retaliation. Journalists working for news companies enjoy a certain amount of protection, especially legal protection against civil litigation (for example, being sued for libel). Because citizen journalists are working for themselves they have no overarching protection, which in some circumstances seriously compromises their ability to report on provocative issues. As Dan Gillmor asks:

> Who would have exposed the Watergate crimes in the absence of powerful publishers, especially the *Washington Post*'s Katharine Graham, who had the financial and moral fortitude to stand up to Richard Nixon and his henchmen? (Gillmor 2006: xxvii)

The speed with which social media allows news to be distributed also raises issues. Traditionally, the professional journalist's job was not simply to relay pieces of information to their readers, but to sort rumour from fact, to analyse and synthesise a story from multiple, often-contradictory sources. With instant messaging services like Twitter, news can be disseminated so rapidly that it bypasses normal editorial control, potentially leading to incorrect and misleading reports being released which are then left to readers to analyse and evaluate. The short 140 characters or less format of Twitter in many ways remediates its technological predecessor, SMS (short messaging system). Twitter thus borrows the etiquette of SMS as both compressed and seemingly

fleeting. While the information arrives faster, the quality of that information may be lower and less considered. Increasingly stories are noted as either Twitterable or not.

Some have also pointed out that the same factors that allow citizen journalism to challenge Big Media and established power structures can be utilised by these same groups to move Big Media into the internet age. Politicians, celebrities and large organisations are using blogs and social media in the same way as citizen journalists, presenting their own perspectives and views with the same level of apparent openness as any other citizen journalist. While this may not be a problem in and of itself, it undermines the contention that digital media is fundamentally empowering – it can also be used to reinforce, strengthen and deepen existing power structures.

As social media becomes more pervasive, it is also influencing the way we think about citizen journalism. Following their citizen journalism project based around the 2007 Australian election, Bruns et al. noted that there is a role for sites that facilitate 'communities of news and content makers', which suggests a new form of journalism that they tentatively refer to as 'journalism as social networking' (2009: 205). For them, this construction helps get around the unfruitful professional-versus-amateur issue that lies at the heart of much criticism of citizen journalism. They argue that an emergent 'networked journalism' would incorporate both trained journalists and citizen journalists, enjoying the strengths of both forms of news gathering and reportage.

ONLINE ACTIVISM

> Cyberspace has become a global electronic agora where the diversity of human disaffection explodes in a cacophony of accents. (Castells 2001: 138)

Citizen journalism is one specific form of produsage that is enabled by participative media, most notably in this case, blogs. Online activism is related in that it also enables various participative media, and allows produsers to express opinions and ideas in the online environment. Online activism goes beyond commentary – it allows groups of people to organise around a political issue.

What is online activism?

Online (or internet) activism is a burgeoning area, and has seen the publication of numerous books and articles on the subject. This presents a problem for researchers who are new to the area because it is hard to determine what

the key texts are. As Garrett (2006) points out, the literature also comes at the same issue from different perspectives and fields, further complicating study. Our goal in this section is not to try to cover the entire gamut of online activism, because to do so would take us well away from social media and into other subjects that are only tangentially related. However, in order to examine the importance of participation, it would be remiss of us to ignore the importance of online activism and particularly its intersection with social media. By way of contextualising this section, let us briefly outline some of the fundamental points about online activism before going on to examine some examples and how social media has influenced online debates.

One of the earliest and best-known groups to use the internet for social activism was the Zapatistas, a revolutionary movement based in the Chiapas state of Mexico. In late 1993 the Zapatistas occupied a number of towns in southern Mexico, and gained attention in the West for their use of the internet as a means to communicate with the rest of the world. Although, as Turner (2005) points out, the Zapatistas come from an impoverished area of Mexico, they relied upon non-governmental organisations to place their hand-written materials onto the internet. In particular, they were supported by the San Francisco Institute of Global Communication, who Castells describes as 'an NGO of socially responsible "techies"' (2001: 138). They helped establish an internet network in Mexico called La Neta, which in turn supported the Zapatistas as well as a number of other activist groups in Mexico.

While the reality of how the Zapatistas got their messages online may dispel romantic images of revolutionaries writing emails from satellite-linked laptops in remote caves or jungle hideouts, it emphasises the growing impact of the internet for activists – even sometimes those working outside wired environments – to increase awareness about their cause. For Cleaver, the Zapatistas' approach to activism, including their use of the internet, 'has inspired and stimulated a wide variety of grassroots political efforts in many other countries', a phenomenon which Cleaver refers to as the 'Zapatista effect' (Cleaver 1998). As the quote at the beginning of this section suggests, Castells sees the internet as becoming a place where social disaffection is engaged on a global scale.

Online activism and a democratising internet

The study of online activism returns us to one of the fundamental claims about the internet: that it is inherently democratising. Some early writers claimed that the internet was democratic by its very design because, as John

Gilmore is famously quoted in a *Time International* article from 1993, the internet 'interprets censorship as damage and routes around it' (Elmer-Dewitt 1993). This suggests that the internet's physical architecture constitutes a kind of agora in which all ideas can be freely presented, and all people are free to engage with them. The idea of the agora is borrowed from the agora of ancient Greece. Agora were marketplaces where communities would come together to trade in goods and produce, but also to engage in politics and matters of public life. In the late 1960s the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of the public sphere, an agora-like conceptual space that he saw as an engine of social change that had been eroded by the emergence of mass media (Habermas 1989). Habermas's book was published in German in 1969 but was not translated into English until 1989, at which time it was well placed to provide a theoretical foundation to discussions of the internet and its potential relationship with democracy (Dahlgren 2001). Both Habermas's ideas of public sphere and the concept of the agora as a marketplace of ideas have figured prominently in debates about the role of the internet as a democratising social force.

The emergence of social media has only served to accentuate debate around the role of the internet in democratic processes and activism. As participative media has made it increasingly easy for people to create and share media, social media provides services that allow people to come together and organise around issues. With the growing ubiquity of internet-enabled mobile phones, these features of online activism can more readily be translated into offline contexts.

'Smart mobs' provide one example of the interface between social media and offline organisation (Rheingold 2002). The term 'smart mob' describes a large group of people who use mobile technologies as a way of connecting with each other, thus allowing the group to act with a kind of collective intelligence. Smart mobs can be organised online and can allow activists to organise protests with many people at short notice. One example often used to illustrate smart mobs is the way that mobile text messaging was used to organise protests in the Philippines against then President Joseph Estrada. Estrada was impeached in 2000 following allegations of corruption, and his trial was covered widely in the mass media. At one point the judges in the trial elected not to admit a critical piece of evidence. Outraged people took to the streets using their mobiles and text messaging to organise protests (in the Philippines, mobile call costs are high, while mobile texting is cheap and thus has a high level of use). Soon afterwards Estrada lost the support of the military and was ousted in a coup, replacing Estrada with the then vice-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. These smart-mob protests, organised by text messaging, were credited with playing a significant role in the ousting of Estrada.

Examples of the use of the internet and social media in particular to organise social protests are increasingly easy to find. Social media has been implicated as playing a role in the so-called Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East during 2011, and have played a prominent role in the Occupy movements in the US and other Western nations. The Arab Spring is a phrase that refers to the widespread social and political unrest that spread across the Middle East from December 2010. During this period anti-government and pro-democracy protesters ousted leaders in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, and significant protests erupted in numerous other countries in the region. It was widely reported that social media played a significant role in helping protesters to organise and share information in states where other forms of media are strictly regulated. Howard et al. (2011) analysed millions of social media posts from the period leading up to and throughout the Arab Spring in order to determine what, if any, effect social media had. They argued that social media played a key role in the Arab Spring uprisings, noting that tools like Twitter and Facebook were used by well-educated urban youth, many of them female, to pressure governments. They saw spikes in conversations that they described as 'revolutionary' just prior to major events, and suggest that social media helped to spread political dissent beyond the borders of countries.

Although social media is implicated in all of these movements, one of the persistent questions is exactly what role it plays. It seems unlikely that these technologies are the main cause or catalyst for social activism. As Anderson points out, countries like Egypt and Libya have a long history of social activism and protest that predates modern communication technologies (Anderson 2011). Another way of asking this question is whether online environments are purely instrumental, or whether they actually change the dynamics of activism, including the players, their goals and their methods (Castells 2001: 137). In many ways, online environments both are instrumental in, and change (or are indicative of change), the nature of activism. In the Arab Spring example, it seems likely that while social media played a role, it was an instrumental one, appropriated by a movement because of its utility, and abandoned when its utility was limited.

In other cases, as Castells argues, political movements are shaped by the structure of modern information societies; and the internet, as the emblematic expression of communication media in the information society, becomes an important organising site. Castells draws parallels between the labour movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and modern social movements. Where the labour movement extended from the factories and used pubs as rallying points, modern movements extend from the network and use the internet as their medium (Castells 2001: 139). For Castells, the

social movements of the network society have certain common features. He points to anti-globalisation movements that are not highly structured organisations like the trade unions before them, and are in fact a conglomerate of various different groups with local and culturally inflected concerns that, through the internet, can coordinate their efforts. These movements are global, although they draw strength through local mobilisation.

The Occupy Wall Street movement is an example of a protest movement that extends from the network. Beginning in September 2011, this movement was designed to highlight the growing inequality in Western societies, emphasised by the global financial crisis and the protection that was extended to banks and financial institutions (whose questionable business decisions and loose ethics were heavily implicated in the crisis) by governments while individuals and families lost their homes and livelihood. Even before the first protests began, this movement was deeply linked to the internet, with a domain name for the protests registered in June of that year. A Facebook page appeared only days later. Like the Arab Spring protests, the Occupy movement used social media to organise people and provide a virtual rallying point for activists. For the Occupy movement, social media provides a site for a variety of very different and disconnected protest groups to come together and protest for a common cause.

It seems, then, that some movements, like the Arab Spring uprisings, might be said to be heavily based in local issues that are less about the new networked society and more about ongoing struggles expressed through different, multiple public channels. In these cases, social media appears as an instrumental tool, an implement that can be wielded by activists to enhance their activities. Other movements, like the anti-globalisation movement, arise from the networked society, and are shaped by the structure of the society, responding to its challenges and tensions. In this second case, the internet and social media suit the forms, methods and goals of the kinds of activism typical of anti-globalisation protests.

Problems with online activism

By way of another example, and in order to segue into some of the problems with social media-based activism, we now turn to an example that is intensely connected to social media, *Kony 2012*. In March 2012, as we were preparing this book, an activist group called Invisible Children Incorporated put a video on YouTube titled *Kony 2012*. The video, which was 24 minutes in length, featured a simple message that was reinforced by highly emotive content. The message was 'make Joseph Kony famous'. Joseph Kony is the leader of a paramilitary group called the LRA, which operated in Uganda and

then moved into the surrounding countries. In 2005, Kony was indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. The idea behind the video was to bring popular attention to Kony's crimes and to drum up popular support for continued US military support of the Ugandan government's attempts to capture Kony.

The video was immediately shared by millions of people via Facebook and Twitter, and the YouTube video achieved over 40 million hits within the first few days of its launch, with the number continuing to climb past 84 million. Critical responses to the video followed, with a number of journalists, academics, Ugandans and organisations criticising the way the video simplified a complex problem, and, many claimed, contained misleading facts. The film was seen by some as a kind of neo-colonialism that depicted Ugandans as powerless, while others questioned the financial transparency of the Invisible Children organisation. These criticisms prompted Invisible Children Inc. to publish a response to the critiques.[2]

Questions about the finances and backing of online activists, as raised in the criticisms of *Kony 2012*, suggest more fundamental issues with the transparency of online activist organisations. As we identified earlier, social media allows campaigns to be organised very quickly, and the combination of affective social networks and well-designed rich media (for example, video materials) can evoke action (even if it is in the form of making a financial donation to a cause) before people have had time to properly assess the cause. This was the case with *Kony 2012*, and will no doubt be the case for similar causes into the future. This is not to say that such causes are not worthy of support, but merely to point to some of the problems that stem from slick marketing-inspired campaigns that encourage action without thought.

The *Kony 2012* video is a powerful demonstration of how effective social media can be for groups with the right skills and knowledge to get a message out to millions of people very quickly and raise the profile of a cause. However, the immediate controversy around the video and its use of social media raise some very salient questions about the role of social media in social activism. In particular, it raises serious questions about the value of social media in creating a new kind of activism in which participants feel good because they have taken a stance, but in fact may have done very little, and may actually do harm. The problems facing central Africa are significant, and cannot easily be reduced to a 24-minute YouTube video, or a trite one-line campaign message. Support for the video is not the same thing as support for a movement.

This kind of activism has pejoratively been described as 'slacktivism' to denote activism that is lazy, half-hearted and generally 'slack'. Others point

to the emergence of online activist groups who use social media and online marketing techniques as a way of engaging social media users with political movements. The word 'clicktivism' has been coined to describe 'the pollution of activism with the logic of consumerism' (www.clicktivism.org). Critics argue that this undermines traditional modes of activism and constitutes a threat to movements that require more substantial engagement from activists.

In Australia, for example, GetUp was established as an online site that bills itself as '[a]n independent movement to build a progressive Australia and bring participation back into our democracy' (www.getup.org.au). The site allows people to vote for causes that GetUp will back if they achieve sufficient popularity. Thus, 'ordinary Australians' can feel they are engaging politically and making a difference by signing up to digital petitions or voting for causes that matter to them. Whether this constitutes true activism or not is open to debate, but it does suggest the evolution of new avenues for political activism with unusual topologies (Flew and Wilson 2010).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have looked at participation as a central concept that underlies social media. The internet has always been a two-way medium that supports the production of digital content by anyone with internet access. However, social media has enabled and encouraged participation by making the production, distribution and storage of content less challenging and, in many cases, all but free. Emergent from this phenomenon is the user who produces – the phenomenon that Bruns (2005, 2008) has helpfully described as the 'produser'. However, it is important to ask how much 'produsing' is repurposed for profit by the companies such as Google and Facebook, and at what point does this repurposing become problematic, especially when weighed against the potential value of the material being produced?

The examples of produsage illustrated in this chapter – crowd sourcing, Wikipedia, citizen journalism and online activism – demonstrate some of the ways that produsage is impacting on how we engage not only with the internet but also with society itself. This provides yet another context for both of our central themes. Participation reinforces the importance of offline realities in online behaviour. Far from developing new forms of expression that are disconnected from the real world, people's online productive behaviour is strongly anchored in real-world concerns. For Salam Pax, blogging from inside Iraq during the Gulf War, participative media allowed his very local and contextualised perspective to transcend the informational

controls of both the Hussein regime and the mainstream Western media to provide readers from around the world with a strong and personal connection to something very real that had ramifications well beyond the digital world.

While produsage – particularly in forms such as online activism and citizen journalism – appears to be a very empowering use of social media, there are always issues around exploitation, as we saw in Chapter 3. We must be careful to bring a critical eye to any claims of revolutionary change. Although citizen journalism promises empowerment through a more open press that avoids the bottlenecks and gatekeeping of Big Media, it also raises issues about transparency, trust and quality. Online activism provides exciting opportunities for democratic participation and change even in places where political dissent is treated harshly, but it also opens up potentials for the abuse of good intentions. The participative dimensions of social media are subject to local conditions, highlighting that what constitutes 'participation' is defined by the forces of the local environment.

NOTES

1 *David after the Dentist* became a hit on the internet when it was posted in 2009. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=txqiwrbYGrs.

2 www.invisiblechildren.com.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/critiques.html.