Prosumers and emirecs: Analysis of two confronted theories

Prosumidores y emirecs: Análisis de dos teorías enfrentadas

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Abstract

In the 1970s, the publications of Alvin Toffler and Jean Cloutier were essential for the emergence of two concepts, prosumer, and emirec, whose meanings have been mistakenly equated by numerous scholars and researchers. At the same time, the mercantilist theories linked to prosumption have made invisible the models of communication designed by Cloutier. In this article, configured as a review of the state of the art made from an exhaustive documentary analysis, we observe that, while the notion of prosumer represents vertical and hierarchical relations between companies and citizens, Cloutier's emirec evokes a horizontal relationship and an isonomy between professional and amateur media creators. The prosumption presents an alienated subject, which is integrated into the logic of the market under free work dynamics and from the extension of time and productive spaces, while the emirec is defined as a potentially empowered subject that establishes relations between equals. The theory of the prosumer reproduces the hegemonic economic model by seeking solutions from the field of marketing so that the media and entertainment industries must face the challenges they have to face in the digital world. On the contrary, the emirec theory connects with disruptive communicative models that introduce new relationships between media and audiences and the establishment of logic of affinity between communication participants.

Resumen

En los años 70, las publicaciones de Alvin Toffler y Jean Cloutier resultan esenciales para el surgimiento de dos conceptos, prosumidor y emirec, cuyos significados han sido equiparados de forma errónea por numerosos académicos e investigadores. De forma paralela, las teorías mercantilistas vinculadas a la prosumición han invisibilizado a los modelos de comunicación entre iguales de Cloutier. En este artículo, configurado como una revisión del estado de la cuestión realizada a partir de un exhaustivo análisis documental, observamos que, mientras que la noción de prosumidor representa unas relaciones verticales y jerárquicas entre las fuerzas del mercado y los ciudadanos, el emirec de Cloutier evoca a una relación horizontal y una isonomía entre comunicadores profesionales y amateurs. La prosumición presenta un sujeto alienado e integrado en la

lógica del mercado bajo dinámicas de trabajo gratis y a partir de la extensión del tiempo y los espacios productivos, mientras que el emirec se define como un sujeto potencialmente empoderado que establece relaciones entre iguales. La teoría del prosumidor pretende la reproducción del modelo económico hegemónico buscando soluciones desde el ámbito del marketing a los constantes desafíos que la industria de los medios y el entretenimiento deben afrontar en el mundo digital. Por contra, la teoría del emirec conecta con modelos comunicativos disruptivos que introducen nuevas relaciones entre medios y audiencias y el establecimiento de la lógica de la afinidad entre los participantes de la comunicación.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Prosumer, emirec, digital media, empowerment, market, prosumption, marketing, alienation.
Prosumidor, emirec, medios digitales, empoderamiento, mercado, prosumición, marketing, alienación.

1. Introduction

Two opposing theories about communication were enunciated in the 70s of the 20th century, based on the ideas outlined by Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt in their book "Take Today: The Executive as a Dropout" (1972), in which they affirmed that with technology the consumer could become a producer at the same time. On the one hand, Jean Cloutier defines his emirec theory that focuses on communication, interaction, and creation in all fields. On the other, Alvin Toffler stated his prosumer theory for the first time, which is distinguishably economic and focused on the market, as we will show later on. A thorough re-reading of these two authors' contributions is necessary to identify the true nature of both terms, mistakenly considered as equivalents or synonyms.

Emirec and prosumer do not evoke the same reality. Prosumption is a process that has economic roots, while the emirec theory focuses exclusively on the field of communication. Different scholars have analyzed the work of prosumers as a key element for the current economic model's functioning. The following authors, among others, consider it to be a key word to characterize new market relationships between consumers and producers. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) defend the emergence of "prosumer capitalism" and the need for a "sociology of prosumption". Fuchs (2010) introduced the concept of "labor of the media and Internet prosumer", based on the notion of the work of Smythe's audiences (1977). Huws (2003) affirms the existence of a "consumer work" that is enabled by new information and communication technologies. Bruns (2008) coined the term "produsage" which evokes the figure of the user who produces his goods and/or services. Kücklich (2005) was the first to mention the need to study the so-called "playbour" that proliferates on social networks and within the transmedia culture and media franchises. Hardt and Negri (2000) and Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson (2012) link this producer as an essential actor for the "social factory", which generates a huge immaterial production (Lazzarato, 1996) in the Web 2.0 context where users consume information and produce content through different platforms (Chia, 2012; Shaw & Benkler, 2012). In this model of informational capitalism, an ethical surplus is generated in content and messages (Arvidsson, 2005) constituting a model of informative consumption on demand (Sunstein, 2001) or pro-am (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004).

Unlike all these notions, which dialogue closely with the economic and mercantile dimension of Toffler's prosumer, the emirec notion implicitly evokes questions related to the field of communication and, from its origin, focuses on dialogic, democratic communicative processes; not those that are hierarchical.

2. The economist view. The prosumer as a market support

The perspectives from which the study of prosumption has been addressed vary from the field of media convergence (Sánchez & Contreras, 2012), the world of marketing (Tapscott, Ticoll, & Lowy, 2001; Friedman, 2005; Tener & Weiss, 2004) and the analysis of citizen participation in the social structure (Fernández-Beaumont, 2010). Of all these approaches, those linked to the field of

economics have occupied the space that would correspond to the theories and models that are derived from the emirec theory, so it becomes essential to review both concepts − prosumer and emirec; both apparently similar but substantially different.

The profound study of prosumption is inseparable from the use of categories of analysis embedded in the field of economics. Any approach to the prosumer notion takes us to the book "The Third Wave" (Toffler, 1980)*,* where three key moments in the history of economic relations are differentiated. The first wave arises with the agricultural revolution and is established between the ninth and eighteenth centuries. In this period, most individuals were prosumers; they consumed what they produced. From the eighteenth century, the so-called second wave begins, when the industrial revolution modifies the means of production and establishes a separation between the functions of production and consumption, which has the birth of the market understood as a set of networks of commercial exchange as its main consequence. This second wave differentiates those who produce goods from those who acquire them. In this period, the individual is a consumer of the goods that others produce. The third wave −starting from the 40s of the twentieth century− entails the reappearance of the prosumer on a high technological basis that allows for the production of their goods for the market's sustenance. This process is evident in the digital world.

After the initial contributions of Toffler, the prosumer concept was refined by Don Tapscott in his work "The digital economy" (1995). Tapscott updates the vision of prosumption at a time when technological advances enabled the convergence between producers and consumers more than during any previous time. The term's economic dimension was renewed and strengthened by this author, who defined the fundamental characteristics of the prosumer 2.0: freedom, customization, scrutiny, and comparison before the purchase, search for integrity and coherence in the message of the brands, collaboration in the realization or the design of products and services, search for entertainment, demand for instant supply and constant product innovation (Tapscott, 2009). Prosumption would be a key element to understand the new marketing rules of the twenty-first century. This is based on the transition of products to experiences, from the sale's physical space to the ubiquity provided by digital devices and traditional promotion and advertising processes to the dynamics of communication and dialogue between brands and users, setting forth an evolution that starts from the author as the sole producer to the user as a prosumer (Hernández, 2017). Two works by Tapscott contribute significantly to increasing the expansion of the term prosumer: "Wikinomics" (2001) and "Grown up digital. How the next generation is changing your world" (2009).

In connection with Tapscott's ideas, it is evident that the production of user data constitutes a fundamental element of the market in an informational economy like the present one. In digital platforms and social networks, users constantly create and reproduce content and profiles that contain personal data, social relationships, affection, communications, and communities. In this model, all online activities are stored, evaluated and commercialized. Users not only produce content, but also a set of data that is sold to advertising companies that, in this way, can present personalized ads based on each's interests. Users are, therefore, productive consumers that produce goods and benefits that are intensively exploited by capital (Fuchs, 2015: 108).

The digital prosumer, therefore, is not configured as an empowered individual but alienated by converting what would otherwise be necessary paid labor for the market into unpaid work. To do this, one of the techniques used is crowdsourcing, an essential strategy to achieve users' involvement and emotional attachment (Aitamurto, 2013; Marchionni, 2013). Far from being configured as a democratizing engine of commerce (Howe, 2008:14), crowdsourcing can be defined as a mechanism that informational capitalism uses to create value and intensify exploitation (Fuchs, 2015: 156).

At the same time, digital prosumption is governed by processes of coercion. Large digital companies monopolize the provision of certain services −such as the creation of vast networks of social connectivity− and, therefore, are able to exert an invisible coercive force on users, who are reluctant to abandon such platforms in order to maintain their social relations and not be led to an evident impoverishment in communicative and social terms.

3. Application of the term prosumer in the field of communication

The arrival of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) opens up new opportunities for communication and participation of audiences in public discourse, even for the development of cyber-activism activities (Tascón & Quintana, 2012); so that the former passive receiver has the possibility of becoming a message sender. Rublescki (2011), and Aguado and Martínez (2012) assert that we are in a liquid media ecosystem in which the roles of issuers and receivers are blurred. In this context, studies are beginning to proliferate on the uses that young people make of social media (Turkle, 2012; McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2011). The new configuration of the concept of responsible citizenship in the consumption of media (Dahlgren, 1995; 2002; 2009; 2010; 2011), the new possibilities of media participation (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2006; Lunt & Livingstone, 2012), and the use of virtual environments and social networks as platforms for citizen empowerment (Scolari, 2013; Jenkins, 2009; Kahne, Lee, & Timpany, 2011; Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2016; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2015). However, it was Tapscott in 2011 who explicitly incorporated prosumption in the analysis of communication when he described the Huffington Post model, based on a shared work between the producer and the consumer (Tapscott, 2011), a global conversation of active news 'prodesigners' (Hernández-Serrano, Renés-Arellano, Graham, & Greenhill, 2017).

On the other hand, the notion of prosumer jumped into the cultural field thanks to the contributions, among others, of Henry Jenkins (2003), who applies this concept to the field of transmedia narratives. Jenkins defines the transmedialization of stories as those processes that trigger narrations using multiple media and platforms and in which a part of the prosumers, users or fans do not limit themselves to consuming such cultural products without going further, but embark on the task of extending its narrative world with new textual pieces (Scolari, 2013). The proliferation of new devices and digital media products produces a scattering of the public, which is no longer behaving under homogeneous consumption principles. The arrival of the Internet and the invention of new entertainment screens (especially smartphones and tablets) facilitate the disintegration of monolithic audiences of the past that happen to behave in a more heterogeneous way and distribute their media habits on different platforms. In this context, transmedia narratives are presented as a possible solution to address the atomization of audiences. The stories' dispersion in different media that function as differentiated access points to the transmedia universes makes it easier for cultural franchises to locate their products where the consumer is located.

Despite the numerous references that we can academically find about the prosumer's power as a significant participant in the stories' narrative and the construction of the messages in digital media, the truth is that prosumption carries out communication processes clearly vertical and that it hardly modifies the unidirectionality and hierarchical structure manifested in the mass media. This was demonstrated by Berrocal, Campos-Domínguez and Redondo (2014) in a study on prosumption in political communication on YouTube collected in the journal "Comunicar" (43rd issue), in which they affirm that the prosumer of this type of content is characterized by exerting a very reduced prosumption in the creation of messages and is mainly a consumer. Similarly, much of the limited content generated by these prosumers only serves to reinforce the major communication actors' message or to follow the majority's tendencies, exerting a low level of empowerment and critical capacity. The majority of the opinions that consumers introduce in these videos is linked to what Sunstein (2010) calls "conformity cascades", in which these comments are very brief messages that reaffirm the message of the majority (Berrocal, Campos-Dominguez, & Redondo, 2014:70). Similar results were obtained by Torrego and Gutiérrez (2016) in studies on the participation of young people on the social network Twitter.

As we have observed, the prosumption defined by Toffler as a characteristic of our time is configured as an idea of clear economic vision that in no way serves to define participative communication models since it contains an evident authoritarian burden from which, under the guise of freedom and empowerment, the cultural and media market finds a solution for its renewal and adaptation to the new technological framework. In this sense, unlike opinions such as those of Jackson (2013) that defend the breaking of the monopoly of information from conventional media after the arrival of Web

2.0 and new prosumption, authors such as Buckingham & Rodríguez (2013) affirm that spaces that define new technologies are far from being configured under the principles of freedom and democracy.

4. The view from the field of communication. Emirec as an empowered subject

In the previous sections, we have analyzed how the new digital economy that underlies the big social platforms' functioning subjects the prosumer to new mercantilist laws that confine them to the realization of a free job that benefits large companies. Parallel to this logic, the new communication possibilities offered by the digital media as spaces of communication empowerment that dialogue closely with the notion of emirec defined in the seventies by Jean Cloutier are no less evident.
Cloutier (1973) proposes a communicative model in which all the participants have the possibility of being broadcasters (Aparici & García-Marín, 2017). He calls his theory emirec (émetteur/récepteur), in which the interlocutors maintain relations between equals and where all the subjects of communication are, at the same time, transmitters and receivers. While Cloutier (1973; 2001) in Canada thought about this type of horizontal communicative relations, in France Porcher (1976), Vallet (1977) and later his disciple Francisco Gutiérrez (1976) conceived the media as a parallel school to the educational system; its approach being autonomous and having the need for a total language, a clear antecedent to the current concept of transmedia narratives. There is a whole stream of authors who have criticized the role that has been assigned to the media users and audience, granting the subjects a more significant role in the communication process that exceeds that of the public or fans. In this line of thought we can place Martínez-Pandiani (2009), Vacas (2010), Piscitelli, Adaine y Binder (2010), Repoll (2010) and Jacks (2011). Kaplún (1998) and Martín-Barbero (2004) criticize the communication and education models and practices, adopting Cloutier's emirec proposal. These authors defend the need for communication to be a basic pillar of education, focusing, more precisely, on dialogic communication (Flecha, 2008) and distinguishing between readers, viewers and Internet users (García-Canclini 2007). From the specific field of education, authors such as Silva (2005), Ferrés (2010), García-Matilla (2010), Aparici (2010) and Orozco, Navarro and García-Matilla (2012) advocate a horizontal communicative relationship in the classroom as a practice of citizenship and democracy that promotes true co-authorship practices and a collective construction of knowledge. In digital contexts, the works of Rheingold (2002), Scolari (2004; 2009), Santaella (2007) and Shirky (2011) defend the ideas of empowerment: participation, interactivity, collaboration and co-authorship; in short, the establishment and development of new connectivities in the field of communication. In the same vein, Dezuanni (2009), Burn (2009) and Jenkins (2009; 2011) bring us closer to an interconnected society reaffirming the need to design other communicative models to overcome the 20th century's hierarchical practices. In the media model originated in our days, we can appreciate the fundamentals of communication between equals that support these theories. We analyze these essential principles below.
- Professional/amateur convergence. The digital social media present a model that converges both professional communicators and unpaid users in the same space. These platforms break the professional-amateur divide that prevailed in the old media's model. In this sense, according to Burgess & Green (2009: 90), social platforms propose completely disruptive spaces in communicative terms.
- The isonomy principle. Digital social media outperforms the hierarchical broadcast model and propose an isonomy where the productions of traditional media and those made by citizens are presented in the same way in a space in which everyone −the media and those who were only receivers before− are communicators (Gabelas & Aparici, 2017). Stiegler (2009) states that digital platforms break the model based on the large media corporations' hegemony that dominated the twentieth century, to privilege the personal choice of each member of the audience, enabled to access a greater volume of media choices possible and to empower themselves as a content producers. Not only are social media spaces for convergence (as we mentioned in the previous

point), they are also environments for divergence that operate under the logic of the niche, the individualization of consumption and the fragmentation of audiences (Grusin, 2009).

- Freedom and negotiation. The "collaborative networks" (Cusot & Klein, 2015) and social media are configured as open platforms for the participation of any user trained to incorporate all kind of content, formats, ideologies and styles. In these services, there are no defined quality standards, but emirecs value the meaning of the content for their lives, hobbies and emotions with greater relevance. The creative freedom offered by these media opens up new possibilities for expressive experimentation and the creation of new formats. This communicative model feeds the establishment of constant negotiation processes where the ways of understanding the media, their identity, quality and aesthetics are widely debated horizontally within the communities of creators and users.

- Affinity media and horizontality. Lange (2009:70) conceives the affinity media as those that do not distribute their contents for mass audiences, but for small niches of users that wish to take part in the message and remain connected with the producers in clear relations of horizontality. The closeness and permanent connection between YouTubers, Instagramers, podcasters and other digital media producers and their followers (and potential communicators participating in the programs that follow) is key to their messages' success. These productions present a more personal and reflective nature; usually dealing with the day-to-day aspects of the creators and are likely to generate a greater level of response. The logic of affinity feeds an interaction that offers the user the feeling of being connected not to a media product, but to a person with whom he shares common beliefs and interests (Lange, 2009: 83).

- Challenge to the broadcast model. The participative, horizontal and dialogical culture typical of these media clashes directly with the strategies used by mass media stars when they want to enter into these platforms. This can be explained with the following example: The American television personality Oprah Winfrey launched her channel on YouTube in November 2007 through a movement that was criticized by the users of the service; since she ignored the cultural norms that had been developed within the community when eliminating the ability to embed and comment on the videos hosted on her channel. YouTube was treated [by Oprah] not as a participatory space, but as an extension platform for her brand (Burgess & Green, 2009: 103). The communicative model associated with the appearance of Oprah on YouTube reproduced the authoritarian unidirectional broadcast logic from which the television star came from, ignoring the basic principles on which the community is governed through this medium. Oprah treated YouTube users as prosumers who had to produce for her brand, not as emirecs with whom to dialogue as equals.

- Human-machine hybridization. The Web does not have the possibility of identifying the semantic content of media products built-in image and sound formats, that is why the metadata introduced by users are key to the functioning of the algorithms that operate through the creation of lists, rankings and the recommendations on social platforms. For this reason, these services facilitate acts of deliberate interaction (uploading files, viewing, marking with "likes" or favorites, labeling, commenting, etc.) that provide the necessary information for the system's organization. Such contributions are fundamental for the platform's operations, since they are essential to achieve the visibility of the files and affect the responses of the searches that the user performs. This hybrid model (Kessler & Schäfer, 2009) connects humans and machines for the management of information within the large database that is built around online services. These media and platforms are an example of what Kessler & Schäfer call Theory Actor-Network, which defends that human and mechanical agents should be considered equally important in the constitution of social interaction. In such platforms, the meta-information provided by creators and users is crucial. The subjects provide semantic input that the machine processes algorithmically producing different organization types of file and metadata. This mixture of technological devices and user action constructs new media practices that challenge our traditional conception of media use and that place the emirec in an interaction not only with other subjects, but also with algorithmic devices that influence their media experience.

- Collective Intelligence and library metaphor. These social media can be seen as large libraries or repositories full of cultural resources where a large number of emirecs create content on the topics

they dominate, constituting sources of knowledge that can be used in many different ways; from the reappropriation of contents and their use for educational purposes to their own cultural enrichment. As we have observed, networks and digital social media are potential spaces of action for emirec communicators. Their operating model fundamentally breaks the dynamics of the mass media by imposing a new configuration of the connections between traditional media and independent producers and a greater dialogical relationship between media creators and users.

However, the emirec concept must be revised starting with the arrival of Web 2.0. Cloutier enunciated his theory in an era of analog technologies that defined a media ecosystem that changed radically since the beginning of the 21st century. Digital technologies have opened the door to the arrival of new media and languages and renewed relationships between communication actors. On the one hand, the new digital media context activates the presence of new platforms that incorporate renewed communicative logic. These platforms, far from being static, change their languages and protocols over time; adapting to the use that users make of them. Social media platforms, far from being obsolete products, are dynamic objects that are transformed in response to user needs (Van-Dijck, 2016). This process also operates in reverse: new spaces and digital communication services affect the way in which subjects produce and distribute their messages and are affected by them (Finn, 2017). Therefore, a clear co-evolution process is established in which technologies and users influence each other, adding new nuances to the emirec notion; whose updating is essential.

5. Conclusion

The economic theories of prosumption have managed to make the communicative notions based on the emirec model that provides a liberalizing vision of the individual invisible. The prosumer notion has an economic origin and should not be used conceptually as a synonym and equivalent to the term emirec. Both concepts present radically opposed definition frameworks. The framework linked to the prosumer notion refers us to a creative subject of goods and services that are commercialized by large companies in the process of false participation that reconfigures and renews the forms of alienation and exploitation. Prosumption is essential for the extension of spaces and productive work times that were previously dedicated to leisure. In the digital economy, it is essential that this leisure time becomes a time of goods production that, unlike the processes that occur in offline prosumption, prosumers do not create for themselves, but for large digital companies.

Faced with these power relations −vertical and hierarchical− which prosumption offers as an economic category, we find the communicative theory of the emirec, which places its basics on the consideration of individuals as senders and receivers at the same time, acting under the principles of horizontality and with a total absence of hierarchy. The prosumer is an individual who works (for free) for the market and reproduces the existing model, while the emirec is an empowered subject that has the potential capacity to introduce critical discourses that question the system's functioning. The prosumer produces and consumes to reproduce the economic order, while the emirec communicates from a position of freedom. Therefore, the separation and differentiation of both terms are essential.

At the same time, it is necessary to start thinking about theories that overcome the division between senders and receivers. In the digital context of communication, the relationship occurs between communicators (amateurs, popular, professionals, all have the voices of broadcasters) that move or are moved by different platforms or social networks. For this reason, the emirec concept must be studied from innovative perspectives according to new communicative logic. Cloutier's post-functionalist theories were enunciated in an era that presented an exclusively analog media ecosystem that has nothing to do with the current context. The technological leap developed over the last decades and, above all, the generation of new practices and communication dynamics oblige us to review the emirec theory. It deserves to be analyzed from a dynamic point of view that addresses the profound changes that have occurred during the first decades of the 21st century in communicative and technological fields.

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