Sharing technology and media as digital commons: sensibilities and tensions from making invisible things visible

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Sharing and openness are two fundamental values that underpin the internet, and are constantly under a dynamic contestation. Since the days of the early internet, different groups have worked for making public different aspects of computer culture. Hackers and free software developers, for example, have ever since been committed to making software code and internet infrastructures public. Proponents of free culture have emphasized the need and importance of making public digital creative work, and circulate it online as commons. Many of the online platforms today also encourage sharing as a way to make profits, and as a way to foster network sociality and online self-expression. As such, internet cultures are formed largely around different politics of visibility.

While much attention has been paid on the broader implications of different configurations of visibility online, there are less empirical studies about the ways in which visibility configures the actions of those practicing it. How is it experienced internally by those who share their code or creativity online, and what remains out of sight and is never being shared?

This paper explores these questions through a focus on the social structures expressed and created within media production practices that are radically committed to openness through sharing technology and media content as commons online. It addresses also the ambiguities and affective sensibilities that emerge internally within these practices. While not denying the positive role that such practices can have for creating a pluralist and more democratic mediascape, the paper aims to add a critical perspective on sharing and illuminate the complexities and inner tensions that emerge from a radical commitment to visibility and publicness online.

Openness and transparency are frequently promoted in practices of good governance, and have historically been part of a broader ideological project for public access to knowledge that would allow individuals to gain more autonomy, and build a fairer society (Birchall, 2011; Hood, 2006; Tsoukas, 1997). Yet, practices of visibility simultaneously produce and reconfigure power relations in manifold and subtle ways (Flyverbom, Christensen, & Hansen, 2015). They play a subtle control function, one that creates practices of self-regularizing behavior, and monitoring. Transparency can therefore activate different configurations of control, power, empowerment and disempowerment.

Using these ambiguities as a theoretical vantage point, the paper discusses two cases of open film production which were studied through multi-sited ethnography and qualitative interviews in the period between 2013-2015. The cases are presented and compared with each other in order to delineate similarities and differences of the subtle effects that visibility has inwardly.

The first case is the production of the 3D animation film *Cosmos Laundromat* (2015, Netherlands), which extensively used *YouTube* as a channel to disclose the film making process to the public. Each Friday during the production year that lasted between 2014 and 2015, the team of animators, script writers, programmers, directors and producers, disclosed their work on the film in a public livecast streamed and recorded on *YouTube*. In these public reports, oriented towards an internet audience, each of the team members

would communicate what they have been working on during the last week, show concept art being drawn, report changes in the script, and discuss pieces of software code in progress that would make the artistic visions of the film possible. The video recordings, and the media artifacts presented in these reports, such as software, computer graphics, and texts were subsequently swiftly organized and put online as commons in a cloud service that grew into a substantial digital archive of the production process.

The second case is the 2D project *Morevna* (2016, Russia). Similarly disclosing the media, technology, process and organization of work, the project has been using the blog format in order to post production progress summaries on a weekly basis. Each post would similarly feature also graphics, technology and sometimes music in progress, shared online by the producer.

Both cases revealed that, at an individual level, sharing pieces of software or works of art in progress would usually create strong senses of emancipation among the team members. Sharing allowed artists and programmers to expose a lot of work which in more conventional production frameworks would have remained hidden (Velkova, 2015). Thus, sharing was perceived as helpful in order to establish reputations online, and as such, foster systems of meritocracy.

Yet, at the same time, sharing and reporting work-in-progress created continuous pressures and obligations to actually have something to share, to present, to report and to admit progress on a weekly basis. This pressure established a rhythm, structure and pace for the film productions, which from the outside seemed rather spontaneous and unstructured. It also created peer-pressure among the teams, to produce and share as much as everyone else, or else have an explanation for why little was shared. As a consequence, sharing resulted in individual strategies to internalize control and develop a self-regularizing behavior. For example, one artist admitted: "Putting work-in-progress online is not really an issue for me. My artworks are often little stand-alone finished piece in themselves; I never posted a half painted picture". Such strategies implied redefining the meaning of what counts as a work-in-progress to be shared, and of working more intensively in order to match the productivity of other, more successful in sharing peers.

The study shows that the inward control mechanisms triggered by sharing ultimately had positive benefits, resulting in raising the quality of the films being made. Surprisingly though, most of the team members of both films were rather unaware of the dependency created between sharing-control-productivity- and quality. There was also very little discussion internally on what has remained out of the sight of the internet public. Continuous internal conflicts among the team members, and the ways in which they have been resolved; changes in the teams; as well as the notable hardware infrastructures that had to be accumulated in order to enable the creation of these animation films remained continuously excluded from disclosure. Some of these aspects were obscured deliberately, and justified as necessary to allow the projects to progress, yet others remained hidden unintentionally. Yet, revealing them could help to make open media at scale, as it would have helped the broader internet community interested in making commons to gain knowledge about how to manage difficulties in larger projects based on sharing and commons; as well as on the necessary initial assets. Without sharing these difficulties, sharing might become an instrument in a struggle for power and recognition among an elitist community.

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