Communication Models of Institutional Online Communities: the Role of the ABC Cultural Intermediary

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The co-creation of cultural artefacts has been democratised given the recent technological affordances of information and communication technologies. Web 2.0 technologies have enabled greater possibilities of citizen inclusion within the media conversations of their nations. For example, the Australian audience has more opportunities to collaboratively produce and tell their story to a broader audience via the public service media (PSM) facilitated platforms of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). However, providing open collaborative production for the audience gives rise to the problem: how might the PSM manage the interests of all the stakeholders and align those interests with its legislated Charter? This paper considers this problem through the ABC's user-created content participatory platform, ABC Pool and highlights the cultural intermediary as the role responsible for managing these tensions. This paper also suggests cultural intermediation is a useful framework for other media organisations engaging in co-creative activities with their audiences.

Keywords: Cultural intermediation, ABC Pool, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Community manager, user-generated content (UGC), co-creation

Introduction

Information and communication technologies within organisations have enabled new modes of communication between staff and online participants. In some cases, groups of online participants have formed 'institutional online communities' that are governed by the rules of the organisations that develop, resource and host the participant platforms

(Hutchinson, 2012). Unlike online communities within the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement, institutional online communities are not independently facilitated and rely on the focus of their hosting organisation for creative direction. Axel Bruns (2008) and Clay Shirky (2008) have noted the benefits of Web 2.0 technologies within organisational communication: they enable decentralised activities, are cheaper to resource, egalitarian, highly innovative, and are based on a meritocracy system that empowers participants with skills and experience of management and coordination roles. Henry Jenkins (2006) and Yochai Benkler (2006) suggest participatory culture activities within organisations provide highly innovative production solutions, along with decentralised non-hierarchical governance arrangements that promise a 'level playing field' for all participants. The technological affordances and benefits of participatory cultures provide the rationale for organisations to engage in production activities with institutional online communities.

However, the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies within organisations complicate the traditional governance models by challenging the control mechanisms of production activities associated with group complexity. Shirky (2008) notes that group complexity is the difficulty of making decisions for a large group of individuals when considering all of their interests. Thomas Malaby (2009) highlights that online participants engaging in collaborative cultural production reject top-down hierarchical models of governance in favour of heterarchy and meritocracy. Daniel Kreiss et al. (2011) remind us of the benefits of centralised governance: secure, rigid and consistent organisational structures. The challenge for a corporate organisation incorporating online participation within its production activities is to create a governance system that encourages the skills of its staff and online users, while developing an open governance model rigorous enough to promote user-led innovation while maintaining the organisation's focus.

Institutional online communities exist in many areas of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) including the Self Service Science forums, its Twitter community associated with the television program Q&A, and its more recent national digital literacy project, ABC Open. ABC Open seeks to promote digital literacy in regional Australia and "is an exciting initiative which provides a focal point for Australian regional communities who want to get involved in sharing their experiences through the ABC via websites, radio and TV" (ABC, 2013). This paper investigates the institutional online community associated with ABC Pool. ABC Pool is an opportunity for Australian audiences to contribute media (audio, video, photography and writing) to an ABC platform developed and maintained by the ABC, which operates under a Creative Commons licensing regime. "ABC Pool is a social media site where you can share and engage with creative work and collaborate with the people who make it" (ABC, 2013). Users have access to the media and cultural expertise of the ABC staff, access to a selection of archival material for rework and remix and can co-create broadcast programs with the professional Radio National (RN) producers. ABC Pool has approximately 8000 registered members, has produced over 450 co-creative projects and has over 25,800 contributions. Given ABC Pool's diversity and approach to open participatory cultures, it is a suitable case study to examine the problem of managing the interests of multiple stakeholders of an institutional online community engaging in the production of cultural artefacts.

This paper draws on three years of ethnographic action research of ABC Pool to demonstrate the significance of the cultural intermediary within co-creative cultural production. During the research, I was embedded as the community manager of ABC Pool to conduct research of the community to answer the questions: who is involved in institutional online communities, what are their interests and how are those interests negotiated? The results indicate that there are several *cultural intermediaries* who are responsible for the in-

termediation of communication between the online users and the public service media (PSM) organisation. These cultural intermediaries enable an effective communication to maintain the core goals of the ABC while integrating the perspectives of the online users. The cultural intermediaries must understand and negotiate the needs and requirements of all the stakeholders engaging in cultural artefact production. These findings are demonstrated in the case study of the collaborative production of the 53-minute radio documentary, *New Beginnings,* broadcast on Radio National's *360documentaries*. Finally, this paper proposes a new organisational communication and governance framework, *cultural intermediation*. Mediation "occurs across actors such as technological devices, programming, code generation and design. The combination of all of these human and non-human actors as they negotiate cultural artefact production is described as *cultural intermediation*" (Hutchinson, 2013 forthcoming).

METHODOLOGY

In gathering these data for this research project, it became clear that I was required to investigate three stakeholders: the ABC Pool team located in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne; other ABC staff attached to the Pool project, physically located at the ABC headquarters in Ultimo, Sydney (approximately a hundred people); and the online participants of ABC Pool (approximately seven thousand registered users). I required an adaptive methodology that could employ a mixed methods approach of the co-located research subjects, that is those physically located at the ABC sites and those online participants of ABC Pool. Therefore, the data for this research was gathered through an ethnographic action research methodology, a successful methodology for other research projects investigating media focused online communities (Banks, 2009; Baym, 2000; Bonniface et al., 2006; Malaby, 2009).

I employed a two-phase approach for the methodology. The first year was the ethnographic action research phase where I was embedded at the ABC as the community manager of ABC Pool. Ethnography is the process where "the ethnographer enters into a social setting and gets to know people involved in it" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 1) to "understand and interpret everyday life" and "analyse the broader contexts though which cultural texts and scripts are produced and reproduced" (Horst et al., 2012, p. 87). Action research "means integrating your research into the development of your project" (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn, 2003, p. 12), which improves the research project while attempting to improve the research field. I was able to observe, understand and participate within the research field through my ethnography, which provided rich, textured data of the environment and the participants of ABC Pool. I was then able to action my knowledge through my community manager role to improve the participants' practice who were also engaged in the research (Herr and Anderson, 2004). I would participate in the platform, management meetings and would also consult on the direction of the project. While conducting the ethnographic action research, it was not simply a case of switching between the two methods, but a coordinated approach to employing the combined methodology. In my case, it was useful to employ the action research after the ethnography as I had data to 'action'.

Ethnographic action research is an iterative process that is constantly making sense of the research environment, realigning the research focus given the emerging data and requires the researcher to reenter the research field to test the their hypotheses. I used grounded theory as a tool to assist me in the analysis process of the data I was collecting on a daily basis. "By adopting grounded theory methods you can direct, manage, and streamline your data collection and, moreover, construct an original analysis of your data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). For my research, it was a matter of collecting my data, aligning these with my

sensitising concepts, applying a coding process to extract the reoccurring themes and synthesizing those against the four categories of the community manager activities I had constructed. Those categories are project design, community engagement, community administration and interaction with the ABC. Grounded theory and the four categories focused the research, made sense of the emerging data and defined meanings in them without "constructing theoretical presumptions of the research while ignoring a developed sense of the research problem" (Hutchinson, 2012, p. 127).

Having constructed a theoretical framework of the relationship between the stakeholders of ABC Pool from the year of ethnographic action research, I entered the second phase of research to gather additional data and quantify the theoretical framework. I used a mixed methods approach of surveys, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The survey was a method of "reaching people who regularly use the Internet" for them "to provide data about their media use and communication motives" (Chen, 2011, p. 758). The survey received 34 responses, which, while broadly considered marginal, confirmed most of my hypotheses with the highly engaged users. I conducted two focus groups to extract "the most important themes, the most noteworthy quotes and any unexpected findings" (Breen, 2006, p. 472) from the users. The first focus group was unsuccessful as only one Pool team member participated, however the second was successful with 12 participants engaging in the event, consisting of ABC users from three Australian locations and ABC staff based in Sydney. Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 ABC staff, including staff from the ABC Pool team, legal, archives, developers, designers, Innovation and Multiplatform and Content Development. Interviews "are an invaluable method for exploring the feelings and reactions that audience members or fans have for their preferred pleasures" and "for obtaining oral histories" (Long and Wall, 2009, p. 265). The combination of these methods quantified my research findings, while some of the interviews were crucial in developing the cultural intermediation framework.

It is worth pointing out at this stage that I was a paid employee as the community manager of ABC Pool during my second year of research. My official role complicated the reflexivity of my research while providing opportunities uncommon to researchers of the ABC. The complexity of my role poses the question "how does the researcher both observe objectively and be part of the problem they are observing?" (Hutchinson, 2012, p. 112). Many ethnographic scholars have written on this subject (Fine 2003; Madden 2010; Watson 1987;), and agree the participation of the researcher within the field should not be seen as the "marginalia of ethnography" (Madden, 2010, p. 23). As an ABC employee I had increased access to people, situations and information of the ABC, which provided positive implications for the research. Reflexivity in this project then became a way of "managing the influence of 'me' on the research and the representation of 'them'" (Madden, 2010, p. 23).

CULTURAL INTERMEDIATION WITHIN ABC POOL'S NEW BEGINNINGS

Keith Negus (2010) reintroduces and builds upon the term first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), cultural intermediary, to describe the role within the "practices that continue to proliferate in the space between production and consumption" (Negus, 2010, p. 501). He notes the "central strength of the notion of cultural intermediaries is that it places an emphasis on those workers who come in-between creative artists and consumers (or, more generally, production and consumption)" (ibid, p. 503). Negus's inquiry of the cultural intermediary centres on three core areas: how creative they are, what strategies they use to address the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy of users in open collaborative production processes, and how they bridge the production/consumption gap of cultural artefacts. His findings suggest the cultural intermediary "reproduce rather than bridge the distance

between production and consumption" (Negus, 2010, p. 509). I have returned the opposite in results to Negus and have proved that cultural intermediaries do in fact bridge the gap between production and consumption of cultural artefacts through a combination of creative strategies. This section builds on Negus's conclusions and uses the case study of the co-creative project facilitated by ABC Pool and operated through RN, New Beginnings, to demonstrate how the cultural intermediary is managing the blurring boundary between production and consumption of cultural artefacts.

New Beginnings was a project designed and developed by an RN producer, Mike Williams, and was facilitated by the ABC Pool team during 2011. Users are mobilised through a call-out, which is an invitation to the ABC Pool participants to contribute their media to a specific theme that is then usually collaboratively produced, by the project's producer and the contributors. The call-out for the New Beginnings project was:

> ABC Pool wants to hear your New Beginnings story!
>
> Starting something new can be exciting, refreshing and stimulating but also very daunting and scary. Whether it's a new job, new family member, new home, or maybe even a new love interest, we're often faced with the challenge of having to start afresh in a new situation.
>
> This project is about expressing your stories, your experiences and your emotions when you've gone through a new beginning.
>
> And your stories don't have to be real! You can interpret this project fictionally - get creative and think up something brand new!
>
> Stories can be told from all perspectives using all forms of media: text (please keep to a 600 word limit), video, audio, pictures... or any combination of these.
>
> Some of your written and audio contributions may be selected and produced into an upcoming 360documentaries feature. Images and video may find their way into an upcoming 'In The Dark' listening event taking place in Sydney early next year!

Over the five months that the project was open for contributions, it received 86 contributions from 44 project members. Williams then entered into a process of curation of the contributions to select the most appropriate and interesting pieces in relation to the call-out. With a final selection of contributions, he was then able to begin the co-creation production cycle with the contributors to produce a 53-minute documentary to be broadcast on 360documentaries, RN's documentary program. Williams recalls of the process:

> So I put the call out together: anyone can contribute, anyone can comment on anything, that's a normal standard Pool thing. The next phase is recording the people who write the contributions themselves which hasn't happened in a Pool project to my knowledge. What's the difference between getting my next door neighbour to read a line of a piece of poetry for me and getting the person who wrote the story to read their own story? They are worlds apart, especially for a 50-minute feature. That's a chal-

lenge, making it harder for myself because you have to make it hit that bar, but you have to work with someone who's never talked into a microphone before - to make him or her hit that bar. So how do you do that? The next thing is to record all these people reading their own stories and edit it with them. The next phase is to throw it back on to Pool and get anyone to comment and give ideas on the sound design. So at this stage, anyone can say anything about any piece and it can be changed, no guarantee it will be changed but the idea will be taken on board and we will talk about why that should or shouldn't happen.

Instead of creating the content on his own, or rerecording the contributions from the participants as was the modus operandi of co-creation within Pool, Williams wanted to bridge that gap between the production and consumption of cultural artefacts. He invited some of the contributors into the ABC recording studios located around the country, directing them to literally tell their story while a group of professionally trained ABC staff recorded them. The significant concept to focus on here is that although the co-creation process occurs, there is still a clear, professional ABC 'voice' present within the editorial decision-making. Although the co-creation has been minimally hierarchical to this point, the final production and its quality relies on Williams's knowledge of documentary making at the ABC. His facilitator and directorial skills, along with his creative strategy, are the underpinning practices associated with the cultural intermediary role. These specific skills also align the role of the cultural intermediary with the focus of the open governance system that can promote user-led innovation while maintaining the organisation's focus. It is also worth highlighting that the curatorial and co-creative production process was done in consultation with the executive producer of *360documentaries*.

New Beginnings was broadcast on RN's *360documentaries* on Sunday 8 April 2012 and was critically acclaimed by the ABC audience. Williams had successfully bridged the gap between cultural production and consumption by mediating the co-creative production process to satisfy the interests of the three ABC Pool stakeholders: the Pool participants, the ABC Pool team and the ABC as institution. The *360documentaries* audience members celebrated the production:

what marvellous listening...true story telling. A most enjoyable hour that I will want to hear again and again. thanks to all ... tremendous contributions & production. (360documentaries website, 2013)

Simultaneously, the contributors provided feedback to the ABC Pool team which not only justified the open, collaborative process of New Beginnings, but also shores up the project with the ethos of the PSM remit. Stuart Cunningham (2013) convincingly argues that the role of the public service broadcaster (PSB) in a post-scarcity media environment is one of *distinctive innovation*. He argues "a commitment to innovation in the provision of new products and services can be defined as distinctive" (Cunningham, 2013, p. 65), where the distinctive innovation present in this example is demonstrated through the shared knowledge exchange of skills with Australians working within the creative industries. One contributor reflected on the benefits of participating in the New Beginnings project:

Of all my writing achievements, I have to say hearing my words float out on Radio National, in City Nights and New Beginnings, is by FAR what I'm proudest of. Thank you so much for allowing

me to be part of this; it's really something to put on my resume, and make me feel better whenever I get a rejection from a publisher. (Name withheld, email, 10 April 2012)

LOCATING THE CULTURAL INTERMEDIARY

The success of the New Beginnings project highlights the significance of the cultural intermediary within cultural artefact production by identifying who the stakeholders are, their interests and how to negotiate those interests. Within the co-creative process of documentary production on ABC Pool there are three stakeholders: the ABC Pool team, the ABC Pool participants and the ABC as institution. The cultural intermediary is ideally located within the middle of these three stakeholders and interacts with them by incorporating the interests of the other two stakeholders. For example, when the cultural intermediary is interacting with the ABC Pool participants, he or she is bringing the interests and concerns of the ABC Pool team and the ABC as institution to that negotiation process. Figure 1 indicates how this relationship operates.
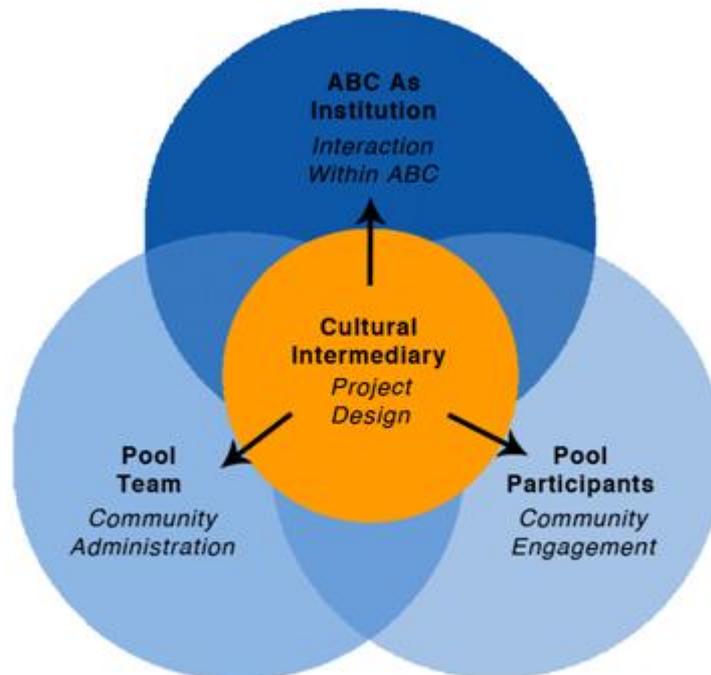
Figure 1: The location of the cultural intermediary between the ABC Pool stakeholders

Figure 1 also indicates that each stakeholder has a core activity that the cultural intermediary engages in with that stakeholder. Project design is the principal activity of the cultural intermediary as they design, develop, facilitate and engage all the stakeholders in the collaborative cultural production projects. Community engagement refers to the interactions the cultural intermediary has with the community members, including answering correspondence, offering feedback on their contributions and engaging in collaborative

practice with them. Community administration is generally the activities the cultural intermediary engages in to maintain the platform, such as deleting spam, site design, moderating content and attending meetings to evaluate the day-to-day activities of the site. Interaction with the ABC relates to any other type of interaction the cultural intermediary will have with ABC staff not directly related to the platform such as meeting with legal or archival staff, working through issues with the editorial staff or attending meetings with larger departments on strategic projects that include ABC Pool.

Within New Beginnings, Williams filled the role of the cultural intermediary as he interacted and negotiated the interests of all three stakeholders. He would interact with the community to stimulate their contributions and feedback on their work, interact with the ABC Pool team to ensure the project aligned with the platform and interact with the ABC as institution through the executive producer of *360documentaries* to align the project with the focus of the program. In this capacity, Williams actively negotiated the interests of the three stakeholders and obtained consensus. The result was a nationally acclaimed cultural artefact: a 53-minute radio documentary that satisfied the desires of the stakeholders of the ABC Pool platform. Additionally, the documentary aligned with the regulatory organisational focus of the ABC (ABC Act, 1983) to "inform, educate and entertain" by engaging audiences in new and exciting ways and deliver content over new media platforms (Department of Broadband, Communication and Digital Economy, 2008).

Conclusion

ABC Pool has experimented with multiple forms of intermediation since its conception in 2003. The New Beginnings example above demonstrates the multiple cultural intermediaries model that incorporates the ABC Pool team, one RN producer, some additional ABC staff and the contributors engaging in an institutional online community governance model. However, my observations during my time at the ABC indicate the role of the cultural intermediary manifests across the corporation in different capacities. For example, the intermediary is present within the moderators of online forums of *The Drum*, the moderator of the Twitter feed of *Q&A*, the social media producers who manage the social media accounts within the broadcast divisions of the ABC, the ABC Open producers and the ABC Pool team. This develops the earlier observations of John Banks (2009), who suggests a similar role, the community manager, which operates as a representative toward the institution on behalf of the online community. Extending this role, cultural intermediaries represent the interests of all stakeholders within all negotiation processes across an entire media corporation.

This New Beginnings example fails to outline two other models of institutional online community governance: the single point of contact and the community editors models. The single point of contact model operates through one singular cultural intermediary that is responsible for all forms of communication between the organisation and the online users. This model provides the greatest amount of control over the activities the institutional online community can engage in, but is also the slowest method of governance and the most inhibitive of user-led innovation. The final model for institutional online community governance is the community editors model. The community editors model seeks to promote the users of the platform to become facilitators and moderators of the institutional online community, by engaging the lead users of the site in position of authority. This model is the most open and the fastest communication model of the three, but is also the most problematic for the organisation to manage. An example that emerged from ABC Pool that also engaged the community editors model surrounded how community editors might moderate and manage material that could be considered offensive without having done the offi-

cial editorial policy training an ABC staff member completes. They are perceived to be an ABC official by the community more broadly, yet they perform their duties in a voluntary manner and do not have the same level of skills as an ABC employee.

Collectively these three models can be described as suitable forms of institutional online community governance models that emerge over time. As an institutional online community establishes, it requires someone to mange and facilitate the platform. In this instance, the single point of contact governance model is suitable. If the cultural intermediary in this role is successful at their position and the community grows, the platform will more than likely move to an institutional online community governance model that engages the skills of multiple intermediaries as they collaboratively produce items. If the multiple cultural intermediary model works successfully, the online community may be in a position to activate a community editors initiative that empowers its online community to facilitate the project. Figure 2 demonstrates how the three models of institutional online community governance operates over a scale of decentralisation.
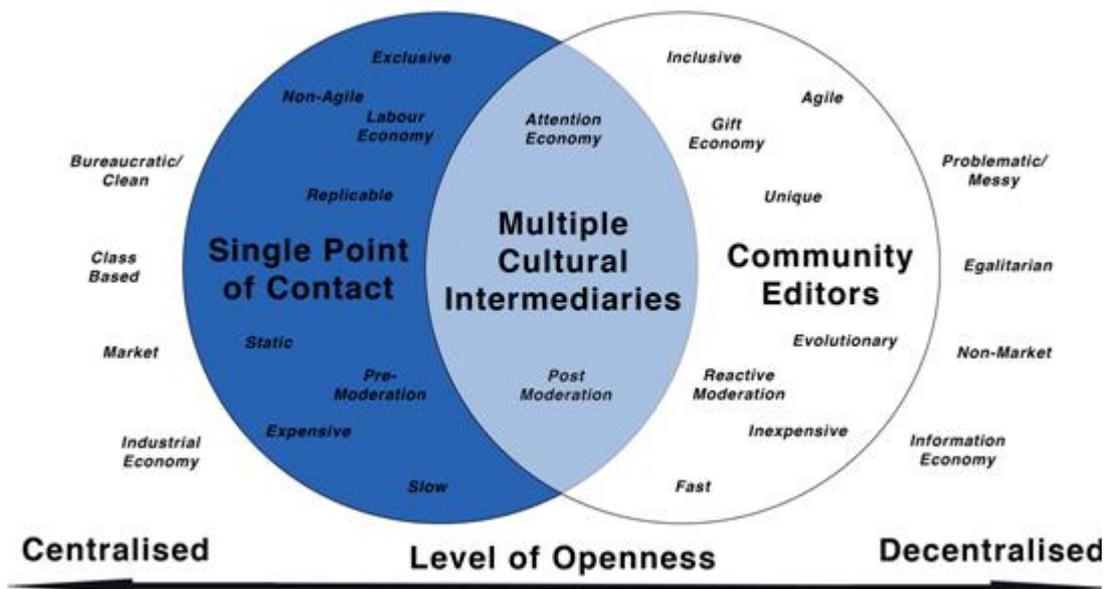

Figure 2: Three models of institutional online community governance over a scale of decentralisations

These three models have successfully operated within ABC Pool. Most times they operate in conjunction with each other where the formation is dependent on the type of project activity. This research has indicated how multiple forms of institutional online community governance models have worked simultaneously within one platform operating at the ABC, and is indicative of how other ABC platforms may engage governance models as they evolve and expand. As such, the collection of these governance models are referred to as cultural intermediation and provide a framework for institutions when engaging in collaborative production activities with their online users.

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