

'Prosumers' take over

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Fun storyboard for the next 'prosumer' blockbuster? © Citizen Media

It's the movie awards season, and the world is tuning into to admire the stars of the big screen. But one European project wants to make Joe Bloggs the writer, director and star of his own show, online and on an IPTV screen near you. It's about building social audiovisual networks for regular citizens like you and I.

The days of media production being a one-way street are just about over. Content is no longer the preserve of professional writers and creators, distribution is not limited to the telcos and [broadcasters](#), and the audience is no longer a purely passive consumer.

Cheaper, easier to use digital technology means just about anyone can be the producer, writer, publisher and end-consumer.

We have entered the world of the "prosumer": professional media and

content consumers. Now European researchers in the Citizen Media project want to exploit the power of new technology and networked multimedia for the benefit of citizens, like you and I.

“Citizen Media is about social change,” says Michiel Pelt of Alcatel-Lucent Bell Labs, the coordinator of the project.

Individuals, families, and local communities who have no knowledge of user-generated content, or the internet as a whole, were the project’s target audience, not technical experts or people who already know how to program.

“We wanted to understand what drives people, and the ‘social change’ aspect of the project is that users adapt their behaviour and embrace the new application concepts,” he tells ICT Results.

Simply put, we all have lots of digital photos and pieces of information that qualify as internet content. But this material is gathering proverbial dust, or being shared with a closed audience of just, say, friends and family. Citizen Media’s position is, why not use the content for new and different purposes?

“We offer the chance for all this ‘user-generated content’ to be published to networked audiovisual systems - portals, platforms, IPTV. This of course borrows from the explosive popularity of social networks. But because these technologies tend to be for more experienced internet users, we knew we had to strip the idea back to basics, back to specific user needs, so that everyone could use them,” explains Pelt.

But what’s really new about it?

The platforms and software the EU-funded project has built are 100%

based on user-centric design principles.

“It’s true, this is a bit of a buzzword,” jokes Pelt, “but in our case, we really did involve the users from start to end. In each application, we asked them what they wanted, developed the prototype and then asked what they thought of it. We redesigned wherever necessary and then built a community around the application. In all steps, even the business models, we involved the users.”

Take, for example, the Kabadada and Kabadu platforms created for cabaret artists (initially in Germany). This group generally had little or no knowledge of computers and the internet, so Citizen Media really had to start from scratch.

“Some users in our test cases didn’t even know that clicking the cursor on a crossed square in the corner of the browser would close the window. Now, less than a year since launching the beta version, the majority of cabaret artists in Germany have joined the platform and are making and uploading their audiovisual material. They’re really using it,” confirms Pelt.

While top cabaret artists on TV can earn a lot of money, most are talented but rarely get the exposure they deserve.

“Despite its potential, the artists were not interested in internet technology - it was something vulgar to them,” notes Pelt. “But with the platform we developed for them, they are now embracing it and getting their message out.”

It is even proving popular outside Germany, in Austria, and one cabaret artist from the UK has also signed up, despite the platform only being in German for the time being.

Who are you calling unort!

In Cologne, a group of concerned citizens worried about the state of the city and wondered what they could do to improve things. They wanted a way to express themselves to both the authorities and the wider public. So, the idea for Unortkataster was born.

Now, citizens can create a ‘unort’ - supported by a film/photo and a comment function - on an interactive map which literally marks the spot where a hole in the street needs fixing, or a hidden architectural gem which a user thinks deserves more attention.

“The wisdom of the crowd steers this platform,” says Pelt. “Yes, there are similar formats online, but this is really for the city concerned and it has really been taken up.”

Since the Cologne beta was launched - to much fanfare and media coverage in September 2008 - the city of Hagen has also picked up on this Citizen Media platform.

Meanwhile, in the small town of Engerwitzdorf, Austria, locals felt there was a lack of real community spirit or bond between the different districts. Citizen Media approached the town and asked if they were prepared to take part in a European project that could help them solve this social problem. But this time IPTV and not internet was their medium of choice.

“We thought it would be harder with older users at first, and we felt conscious of the digital divide. But the doubts faded fast. Before long, and with some basic training, citizens of all ages were discussing and sharing videos with friends and neighbours,” says Pelt.

Citizen Media also tested an interactive geocaching application it had

developed (Mediacaching) on the Engerwitzdorf community - it's something like a virtual treasure hunt using audiovisual objects instead of chocolate money. A competition was created, the Media-Magic Fair, in which the Austrians would compete against communities in Norway and Germany.

Teams had to score as many points as possible for their community through games and other interactive applications, such as hiding content (multimedia caches like photos or films) that other mobile or PC users could track down.

“It really brought out the team spirit in everyone,” says Pelt, “but also civic competitiveness!”

At the end of the exercise, the communities had to “co-create” a movie, making use of various IPTV tools. The Citizen Media platform helped them manage all these tasks, and it made ICT much more accessible to a wider section of society.

This application was later nominated for an eInclusion Award.

New digital divides

The project also developed Talhonia, an online tool allowing multiple users to co-create movie scripts, music videos, travel books, or any other common media experience. Talhonia was tested in Citizen Media’s Oslo testbed and is available to a restricted user-base at the moment.

From the experience of the project, the researchers became more aware of a trend that is taking hold in the user-generated content world. Just a few years ago, the so-called digital divide was more a question of those who could use PCs and the internet and those yet to take the plunge. Today, with user-generated content booming among the generally

younger early adopters, a new digital divide could be appearing between passive ‘consumers’ and active ‘producers’ of content.

Citizen Media’s long-term commitment is to get users - of all ages gender and skill levels - to take more initiative, to embrace the co-creation approach and become the “prosumers” of tomorrow.

“At first, participants in the tests all thought they couldn’t do it, but with the right tools and some basic instruction, we proved they could. It’s been a truly life-changing experience for everyone,” says Pelt.

And who knows, the stars we admire in the future may be much closer to home than we ever imagined.

More information: www.ist-citizenmedia.org/

Provided by [ICT Results](#)

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