

Social networks need to convert passive viewers into motivated creators

Digital media is a tricky phenomenon. It expands the growth of the economy, provides people with new forms of income, and fosters connection, but it can also facilitate bullying, harassment and cause mental health problems.

Whether we see digital media as more of a good or bad actor, it's here to stay. The big question is how to nudge the industry to the good side. One solution is to expand creative participation.

The introduction of Stories on Instagram back in 2016 seemed like a move to protect its business from Snapchat, which offered a successful similar feature that may have attracted the user-base of Instagram to Snapchat. However, there were other strategic reasons for doing that.

One of the key ones is that Instagram wanted to push users to create more. Expectations for content quality have been rapidly increasing, driven by emerging influencers. Because of this, many users have been turning from creative participants to simply spectators on the platform.

Instagram's strategic move played out brilliantly: by bringing down the increasing expectations for content, users started engaging more on Instagram and creating more. By converting users from spectators into creative participants, companies create a happier and more meaningful internet.

The benefits of creativity on mental health

The creative process kicks us into a state of flow – a mental state in which we are fully immersed in the process of an activity. During the creative flow, the parts of the brain responsible for caution deactivates, making us more courageous and willing to experiment. Moreover, *the output of a creative process* is intertwined with our personalities and shows us our authentic selves, which can help us make meaningful connections with others.

Lastly, the creative process requires effort and produces a more stable and enduring dopamine boost compared to short-lived instant gratification that we feel when scrolling through feeds or swiping through pictures.

It's important to note that creativity does not necessarily imply a two month long process of painting a masterpiece. A simple post that you share with a person or a video you compiled from two different ones is all that is required to trigger some of the mental and emotional benefits described above.

Creation in favour of consumption

Magnifying creative participation is beneficial not only for users, but for businesses as well. According to IDC, the global video games industry is almost double the global movie industry in size. One of the key reasons is that gamers “create” – they define their experience and influence the outcomes versus simply following the linear scenario of a movie. Even one of the most successful content creators, Netflix, presented a strategic shift towards gaming during its Q2 2021 earnings call.

The importance of creative participation has been also highlighted by Instagram's founder Kevin Systrom, who said: “All the data supports that if you follow more friends and engage with your friends, your activity goes through the roof. If you just follow more celebrity content or more interest-based content, that doesn't move the needle at all.”

Deeper engagement

Media consumption is of course a big business, and we have seen a constantly growing user-base for the main TV-like platforms. However, it is important to understand that people's attention spans are not growing at the same pace as the volume of potential avenues where this attention may be spent.

TikTok garnered the attention of 80 million users in the US in less than four years, who now spend a monthly average of 24.5 hours on the app. Also, we cannot assume that time spent online will only continue to increase – the post-COVID world may see much more time spent in the physical world. As the pie of content supply is growing faster than the cumulative attention of people who want to consume it, competition intensifies and users are more likely to keep gravitating to the next big thing.

Creative participation leads to a deeper level of engagement compared to simple consumption and builds defensibility in business in a world of fickle users. Trying to push users into an inherently more complex process of creation versus consumption is a complex challenge in a world in which each of us makes 35,000 decisions per day. Here, the main goal lies in enabling a smooth and interesting onboarding experience, providing easy-to-use tools for users to create, and building up storage vehicles for these creations, such as playlists on Spotify or bookshelves on Goodreads.

To make the internet a happier place, businesses need to try shifting our attention span away from providing instant gratification to editor and creation tools – a place on any of the platforms where our creativity can kick in.

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