Exploring the Boundaries of Crowd Creation:
A study on the value of voice in neoliberal media culture

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ABSTRACT

This study explores *crowd creation* as an emerging method of media production, and its capacity to allow *voice* as defined by Couldry (2010) to be articulated and heard within the context of the neoliberal culture of mainstream media. It takes a normative standpoint on the role of the media as the space where morality is defined in these contemporary, media-saturated times. It looks specifically at the crowd creation process practiced by the online-based production company hitRECord, significant for its unique method of content creation which seems to apply both mainstream and alternative media practices. The study uses depth interviews with supplementary textual analysis as methods of data gathering, followed by discourse analysis.

Findings show that while the potential for valuation of voice clearly exists on a peer-to-peer level within the group, neoliberal culture still dictates its overall motives and structure. While various discourses of community and participation are present in the narratives of hitRECord members, the genuine exercise and valuing of voice remains hindered by the neoliberal ideology that pervades not only the environment within which the production process takes place, but day-to-day life among participants as well. Further steps would have to be taken in terms of exercising voice and valuing it within the group before such value can be inculcated more successfully in the group's media practice and output.

INTRODUCTION

This research project explores the concept of *voice* and its presence, or absence, in the media industry today. Initially motivated by an interest in the responsibility of the media towards promoting diversity and representation, it focuses on a unique form of media content production and investigates whether this method allows voice to be valued even while operating within the neoliberal culture of the mainstream, Western-influenced media. The

phenomenon is explored through the case of online production company *hitRECord* (this project however is not formally affiliated with hitRECord in any capacity).

Today's media in their ubiquity have come to occupy an often overlooked but pivotal space in people's lives – the space where their shared sense of morality is constructed (Silverstone, 2007). Acknowledging that any attempt at qualifying an all-encompassing definition of *moral* is futile, Couldry's (2012: 186) assertion nonetheless rings true: that it is possible to consider which courses of action in distinct situations would address human needs, as opposed to cause human harm, and that the media play a key role in furthering efforts towards either cause. This project follows in the footsteps of Silverstone (2007) and Couldry (2010, 2012, 2015) in taking a normative stand in its view of the media, recognizing that their discursive capacity to proliferate meaning and influence (Casey, et al., 2008) is instrumental not just in pushing issues of morality to the forefront, but more critically, to inspiring subsequent action towards minimizing harm. This stand is perhaps unpopular for seeming abstract in the face of a very real, dominant mainstream media industry that today has become mired in corporate interests (Harvey, 2005; Castells, 2007; Couldry, 2012). However, it remains in media scholars' and practitioners' best interest to interrogate the system in which they operate more critically now than ever before. As the flow of technological advancement and media reach continues to permeate more aspects of people's lives (Castells, 2007), it behoves us not only to observe and record, but to find and pursue realistic alternatives.

Neoliberal culture sees the media and other spaces for communication dominated by the economic designs of a hegemonic few who privilege values of unmitigated consumption (Harvey, 2005; Castells, 2007; Couldry, 2012). With corporate giants dictating the messages and representations available in the mainstream media, moral ideals are easily overshadowed. But there is a silver lining: globalization and the rise of the networked society (Castells, 2007; 2009) are also creating opportunities for those who seek to subvert the dominant discourse. The emergence of alternative forms of media has shown that there are ideas, opinions, and methods of content creation that can materialize and flourish outside the neoliberal system (Rodriguez, Kidd, & Stein (eds.), 2010; Couldry, 2012). A plurality of messages and intentions is present, but finding better means of traction for these in the midst of neoliberal noise remains a challenge.

Given these opposing practices, which in this discussion we refer to as *mainstream* (corporate controlled content and means of production) and *alternative* (citizen-generated content, collective ownership) (Tacchi, Watkins, & Keerthirathne, 2009; Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010), it seems almost counter-intuitive to imagine that they could intersect – that is, provide

a space where marginalized voices can be heard within the neoliberal structure. Such an opportunity is precisely what is interesting: the possibility of compromise between neoliberal and moral values, with moral values operationalized in this project through the valuing of voice.

The context of hitRECord has been selected for its unique placement as a production company that operates primarily online with thousands of contributors from all over the world, but more importantly, its strong ties with mainstream US-based media structures, allowing the group to take advantage of mainstream distribution. No other research on alternative media, as far as the current literature review shows, has explored this type of model. However, as such, this project does rely on an understanding of the mainstream and alternative forms of media from a Western perspective.

It builds upon the inherent conflict between the commercial interests proliferated by neoliberal culture, and the normative standpoint of what the media should be trying to do. It does not however, endeavour to find a perfect balance between the two, or predict trends that can be applied across the industry and throughout the world. Such aspirations are certainly worth considering in future research, but are well beyond this current project. Rather, it seeks to explore what is possible through a limited, yet relevant, lens of examination – whether such a balance might be at all possible given the current emerging and unique forms of alternative media available.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

This chapter looks at the current body of scholarship dealing with the morality of the media and the neoliberal context within which the industry operates, particularly relative to the key concepts of voice, neoliberal culture, and crowd creation. Through these overlapping discussions, we are led to specific gaps in the literature for which to pursue the current research, discussing how these gaps lead to the research question and sub-questions, and subsequently, the theoretical framework used in this investigation.

Review of Related Literature

Media, Morality, and Power
The morality of the media has been discussed by Silverstone in depth, emphasizing above all what he considers the core of our sense of morality: 'the nature of our mediated relationship

with the other person' (Silverstone, 2007: 6). He says that the morality of the media is anchored in its ability to 'represent, re-present, the world' (Silverstone, 2007: 162), and at the centre of modern life as depicted by the representations in the media is the issue of how to deal with those who are different from us – an issue that historically affects areas of social life and culture beyond media and representation. Systems of representation, such as those made available by the media, work discursively to constitute people's understanding of lived reality (Foucault, 1969; Hall, 1997). Considering this capacity to construct the world in specific ways through representation and discourse, the media and those who work within it are therefore obligated towards *ethical* practice towards social change (Silverstone, 2007; Downing & Husband, 2005). In this always-connected, communication-saturated world, media are the foremost place where morality and ethics are defined, and morality must be given privilege by the media, as their actions bear consequences more far-reaching than ever before (Silverstone, 2007: 7-8). The term *morality* here encompasses both morality and ethics.

We take Silverstone's aspiration for morality in the media as a starting point, with the concession that the normative grounding within which it stands and which is adopted in this investigation must be contextualized further. Morality is not straightforward. As Harvey (2001) points out, the imposition of universalist ideals of morality upon entire social structures which themselves contain inherent inequalities is clearly a functioning of power relations within that social structure, and so even claims to morality may threaten discrimination and subjugation. Discussing the morality of the media is a challenging endeavour (Ong, 2008). 'Media literally change the scale on which we can speak of societies at all', Couldry says, underscoring the complicated relationship between the two. However, this challenge must motivate a more critical interrogation of the media precisely because they are capable in the same breath of increasing asymmetrical relations of power in favour of hegemonic centres, and of allowing this same power structure to be challenged and appropriated by those with less conventional resources at their disposal (Castells, 2007; Couldry, 2010). If, as Silverstone (2007) says, our morality is based on our mediated relationships with others, it is not only media content that reflects this morality, but more importantly, our methods and practices in the creation of such media.

Thompson's (2005) concept of mediated visibility helps further this discussion on the power struggle inherent in the field of media. Visibility is a tool that people can use for their own purposes, and what better means of gaining visibility than through media? With the resources and networks made available by the internet, there is a potential levelling of the playing field between advantaged and disadvantaged groups competing for an audience's attention. However, he also cautions that visibility and the act of seeing are 'situated' (p. 35);

what we see is not necessarily all that is available to be seen, and neither are we capable of being seen by all the people we want to reach. This dynamic underscores the significance of reflexivity in media practice, in this case, relative to online communities and perceived diversity, power relations, and plurality of voices.

Neoliberalism

Discussing power relations in the media necessarily leads to the consideration of the neoliberal culture of the industry, the backdrop against which this project rests. The definition of *neoliberal culture* here is, per Harvey, when attitudes and actions across all aspects of life and industry operate on the singular belief that humanity's well-being is reliant on the overwhelming prioritization of market exchange value and commercial practices (2005: 2). The worth of any object, person, or practice depends on what it can be exchanged for, conventionally in monetary value. Neoliberalism, in the same vein, is an ideology (Thompson, 1990) that proliferates meaning towards the perpetuation of oppressive power relations (see also Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010).

Harvey goes on to assert that neoliberalism 'has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse (…) to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way' that people understand the world (2005: 2). Couldry (2010) affirms this hegemony. The media industry has become so entrenched in this culture that privileges consumption, hierarchy, and a sense of distinction against 'others' – an exclusivity that leads to an increase in market value. Such discourses run rampant in both media content and practice and are exemplified in the context of contemporary Western media through 'Hollywood' and 'reality TV'.

Hollywood as an institution, of course refers to the collective of media conglomerates who produce and distribute entertainment content worldwide, historically based out of Hollywood, Los Angeles in the US (McDonald & Wasko, 2008). The conglomerate system of Hollywood is quintessentially neoliberal: '[D]ecisions are not based on quality, but on the moneymaking potential of the material' (Wasko, 2008). Today, Hollywood companies have reached an unprecedented level of both vertical and horizontal integration across all entertainment industries, so that even films that perform poorly in ticket sales can earn millions from syndication or merchandise (McDonald & Wasko, 2008). In the pattern of neoliberal culture, profits are benefitted from only by a minority of studio executives who stand at the head of large production and marketing teams, operating on principles of hierarchy, political power, labour, and standardization (Allen & Hill (eds.), 2004; Caldwell, 2008; Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010).

The genre of reality TV is likewise discussed in scholarship as a benchmark for neoliberal values in the television industry. These programmes make a case for providing 'ordinary' people with short-lived moments of 'celebrity' (Couldry, 2010). This hearkens back to the idea of visibility (Couldry also references Honneth's concept of recognition). The issue is that while visibility on such programmes may increase for individuals, this comes at the price of subjecting oneself to preordained rules and conventions set by already established, and sometimes invisible, authorities – judges, directors, producers (Skeggs & Wood, 2008; Couldry, 2010). The effect is a further entrenchment of reality TV participants, whether contestants, voters, or even audiences, 'in a long tradition of attempts to impose bourgeois standards' of life on people. The genre functions ideologically to present norms and morals as dictated by the industry that creates them (Fiske, 1987; Mittel, 2001; Skeggs & Wood, 2008).

These examples show that neoliberalism as an ideology has, as Harvey (2005) says, come to dictate a mainstream media culture that pretends to, but does not, value people and morality.

Voice

What does it mean to value people or treat them morally? Let us consider voice as a reference. Per Couldry, voice is conventionally understood as the physical capacity to speak, or voice as a *process*. One's voice is the ability to 'give an account of one's own life and its conditions', a 'basic feature of human action' (2010: 7). But voice is significant only when treated as a *value*. Voice must be of consequence, given importance in all dimensions of life: political, social, cultural, and beyond. (Tacchi, Watkins & Keerthirathne, 2009; Couldry, 2010).

> Treating voice as a value means discriminating in favour of ways of organizing
> human life and resources that, through their choices, put the value of voice into
> practice, by respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining
> them, not undermining or denying them.
> (Couldry, 2010: 2)

Treating voice as a value is a natural point of opposition against the conventions of neoliberal culture. In the neoliberal media system, no requirement, much less emphasis, is given to people and the importance of their narratives in affecting decisions and actions relative to the market system, politics, nor any other aspect of human life. This relationship between voice and the neoliberal culture of the media is particularly significant because the media is precisely the avenue that people tend to turn to in order to express voice (Couldry, 2010), today more than ever before because of social media. This culture has given rise to a 'crisis of

voice', when the prevalent manner of organization for all of human life inherently denies a crucial aspect of human beings and their functioning in society.

Alternative Media

Where then is voice valued in the media? The inevitable answer seems to be from media forms that lie outside the mainstream. Alternative media, also called 'participatory', 'citizen', and 'community' media among other terms, relates closely to social change and activism from the 'third sector', as identified by Kidd and Rodriguez. These media forms, '[i]n contrast to the homogenization of content and standardization of programme genres and modes of production, marketing' (2010: 8), represent a plurality of content and messaging coming from various, particularly marginalized, sectors from all over the world, including activists, indigenous peoples, and labourers. Alternative media encompasses many different models of democratic participation in content production, management, distribution, and consumption that aim to express narratives which run counter to the dominant, hegemonic narratives available in the mainstream media. Examples include community radio, self-publication on print and online, guerrilla filmmaking, and mixed-media forms (Tacchi, Watkins & Keerthirathne, 2009; Rodriguez, Kidd & Stein (eds.), 2010; Dreher, 2012).

For Kidd and Rodriguez, alternative media are characterized by 'collective design, decision making, creative interchange and governance, at all stages of the production and circulation of meaning', emphasizing the 'deep involvement of marginalized communities' (2010: 6), as opposed to 'the user-generation of Web 2.0, which, while still in development, has already revealed a dangerous tilt toward an intense level of surveillance and data-mining' (Chester, 2006, cited in Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010: 6). While their argument on the potential dangers of data mining are not without basis, it would be a mistake not to mine the power of the internet as a tool for alternative media endeavours towards the same ends – forums that allow the articulation and valuing of voices, characterized by collective and lateral governance and ownership. Tacchi, Watkins, and Keerthirathne (2009: 574) assert that while arguments abound claiming the overstatement of the internet's potential, the issue of ICTs and technology-enabled media used for the advantage of those most in need is a question not of access (as in the commonly-cited 'digital divide' argument), but rather of 'use and engagement'. They go on to say that such content-creation activities serve to give voice to marginalized communities, where voice is a necessary component of social inclusion – having the ability to participate in social processes as a political right. Furthermore, they themselves point out that in this definition, any expression of voice necessarily dictates that voice is also listened to.

Listening

Listening is the pivotal other half of the concept of voice (Dreher, 2009; 2012). For voice to have value, it is not enough to articulate. It is crucial that structures within which voice is articulated also allow for voice to be heard; by this, Dreher refers to 'political listening', wherein institutions in the context of the given instance of voice allow it to be expressed, and also to be of actual consequence to the greater scheme of things – to affect policy, to prompt change. In particular, Dreher highlights 'listening across difference', listening regardless of whether what is being communicated is what one wants or expects to hear (2009: 446).

At this juncture, we recognize that the literature seems to gravitate to either the criticism of neoliberal culture and its influence on mainstream media, or the discussion of alternative media forms that are far removed from mainstream influence. Moving forward, the specific gaps in the literature that have contributed to the formulation of this research project are as follows: (1) 'Alternative media' as a term can be limiting, especially as it continues to be closely associated with ideas of locally situated 'communities', a term that itself may lead to static identities (Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010: 12). This study investigates a potentially alternative model of participation through internet-enabled media production, giving us the chance to see how this might happen across borders; and (2) Alternative media forms still contend with the lack of opportunities to be listened to (Dreher, 2012). It is of interest that the neoliberal model of media production operates with the intention of reaching as large an audience as possible, and putting the two together may present a new area of possibility for alternative media forms.

Alternative media has thus far been limited in scale precisely because of the seeming need to disassociate from mainstream media. What we seek to investigate is the possibility of appropriating the resources of the neoliberal industry (particularly with regards to the internet's potential for democratic participation, and the mainstream media's capacity for distribution and reach), towards a more socially just operation and output that values voice, or a combination of 'market' plus 'mission' (Fish, 2013: 391). Defining alternative media in the context of this study as media that, regardless of its genesis, allows voice to be articulated and listened to, we can now delve into a new area of media content, production, and distribution that is gaining traction across the world, and that shows potential for a delicate balance between mainstream and alternative.

Crowdsourcing and Crowd creation

From broadcast programmes with audience interaction through Twitter, to musicians gaining album funding from fans and beyond, this generation's crowdsourcing culture, or

'participatory culture' per Jenkins (cited in Howe, 2008: 272) is undeniable. Web 2.0 and 'user-generated content' are likewise iterations of the concept. It first came about in the early 2000s, when start-ups began to employ methods of ideation and design, funding, and overall operation with the help of the internet, specifically, the many people who were online and willing to share knowledge and resources in an open, flexible environment. This made processes cheaper, faster, and provided a much larger pool of talent and raw material (Howe, 2008). For recent applications, see Lockie (2015) and Tariq (2015).

Howe, credited with having popularized the term, views crowdsourcing as almost utopian: it 'has the capacity to form a sort of perfect meritocracy' (2008: 13), he claims. Online, judgment cannot be passed on employees or contributors in the same way as traditional businesses, where elements like age, sex, nationality, and educational background are potential barriers to employment or participation. There is merit to his argument. But as we have encountered, other scholars remain wary of the potentials of crowdsourcing (Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010); the reason for this wariness can be detected in Howe's own argument. His entire narrative on crowdsourcing revolves around the business benefits of the model: profit. A truly neoliberal model.

Fish (2013) distinguishes between the crowdsourcing and neoliberal models of participation through the type of relationship between participants (see Asmolov, 2014, for further typologies of crowdsourcing). Crowdsourcing employs an explicit type of relationship between a formal social enterprise (FSE), the professionals and gatekeepers who facilitate the operation and whose task it is to reward the organized public (OP), who contribute to the operation and who must stay dedicated for it to thrive. Neoliberal participation on the other hand (Hands, 2011, cited in Fish, 2013) resembles an employee-client relationship, where there is a 'casual workforce without the burden of emotional investment and health benefits associated with fulltime employment' (Sassen, 1998, cited in Fish, 2013: 390). The difference is the explicit participation in crowdsourcing – with emotional investment, motivation, deliberate action, and a feedback mechanism – and neoliberal participation which is limited and implicit in nature – goal oriented, limited in scope of action and interaction.

Crowdsourcing remains a powerful buzzword in part because the idea itself is still evolving. It already cuts across various types of participation, the most prevalent of which are knowledge sharing, content creation, voting, and funding. The level of interaction between participants varies greatly, as can the types of outputs, goals, and rewards (Howe, 2008; Mansell, 2013; Asmolov, 2014). But at its core, crowdsourcing draws upon a fundamental human need that neoliberal models of participation do not: 'the deeply social nature of the human species'

(Howe, 2008: 14). This brings us back to Silverstone's core of morality – relationships with the other, and Couldry's voice – the capacity to narrate one's own worldview, and have it listened to and acted upon.

Of particular interest is the form of crowdsourcing called *crowd creation* where it is creative work, such as images, writing, film, design, etc., that is generated by the crowd towards specific goals. Of the various types of crowdsourcing, it is the sharing of creativity that necessitates truly explicit interaction and dedication within a community (Howe, 2008). Howe attributes this to the atypical, or sometimes complete lack of, compensation involved in such enterprises. If money is not the inevitable reward, it must be the relationships cultivated with peers and collaborators. Considering crowd creation as a form of alternative media in context may yield a capacity of this model to exist within the neoliberal framework that dominates the industry, while still being a platform for voice, not only as a process, but as a value.

hitRECord

If we are to agree with Bondebjerg's (2010: 121) assertion that 'the most enduring part of the new media development is the merging of old and new media' or 'media hybridization', then the course of investigation must touch on the interaction between new and traditional media. Both Howe (2008) and Fish (2013) have discussed the case of CurrentTV in the crowd creation field. At its peak, CurrentTV actualized a model of news gathering through crowd contributions, and was among the first enterprises to successfully merge internet and television via content generation and distribution. In the field of entertainment content on the other hand, hitRECord has emerged as the group to watch.

hitRECord (stylized HitRecord, hitREC●rd, etc., and referenced here as *hR*) was founded in 2005 by brothers Joseph and Daniel Gordon-Levitt; the former is a Hollywood-based actor. It is an 'open collaborative production company' (Frequently Asked Questions, n.d.). Besides maintaining an active online community, hR has to-date released short films, music videos, merchandise, and in 2014, a television variety show series, 'hitRECord on TV' (*hRoTV*), which aired in the US through the Pivot network, and was made available for viewing worldwide through multiple channels. hR is of note for its forays into media hybridization as well as its complex and unprecedented form of crowd creation. As with CurrentTV, hR operates on a 'market plus mission' directive: While monetary compensation remains a part of the model, the emphasis of the company is its social dimension, exemplified by the activity called *remixing*.

Research Question

This empirical research project seeks to answer the question: How does crowd creation provide a space for valuing voice within the contemporary media landscape? It focuses on the practice of crowd creation by hitRECord as it operates in the context of the West-oriented mainstream media industry.

More specifically, the following sub-questions will be addressed: (1) How does hR conduct crowd creation? (2) How do members (*hitRECorders*) describe their experiences on hR? (3) How do they perceive and rationalize the affordances and/or limitations given to their individual and collective voices in the process of crowd creation? (4) How does the programme hitRECord on TV (Season 1) (*hRoTV (S1)*) affirm, subvert, or otherwise relate to hitRECorders' perceptions of voice within hR?

Conceptual Framework

The key theoretical concepts used in this study are voice as value, per Couldry (2010, 2012), and neoliberal culture, per Harvey (2005) and Couldry (2010). They are operationalized based on definitions and criteria gleaned from the two primary authors above, and additional resources deemed of great relevance to the current project as empirical investigations dealing with alternative media forms, and voice in particular: These are the works by Dreher (2009; 2012), and Tacchi, Watkins, and Keerthirathne (2009).

Voice as value is viewed as the capacity to articulate oneself, highlighting the reflexive dimension of voice, and furthermore being able to do so such that one's voice is listened to and can be acted upon, highlighting the social dimension of voice. The primary means of operationalizing voice in this project is through the general principles that characterize voice set out by Couldry (2010: 7-11), together with contextual applications of the concept by Dreher, and Tacchi, Watkins, and Keerthirathne.

Neoliberal culture is viewed as the discursive environment which dictates existing industry conventions that emphasize market value, and the culture of judgment that suppresses voice or renders it false. Neoliberal culture is operationalized through the characterization of the neoliberal ideology discussed by Harvey and Couldry, as well as media and television-specific applications drawn from Thompson (2005) and McDonald and Wasko (2008).

These two conceptual areas are examined relative to how existing neoliberal power relations are enforced or challenged in the crowd creation process. This conceptual framework is expressed visually by the resulting coding framework utilized in this study, to be discussed further in the succeeding chapter.

Objectives

At the time of writing, no other research has been published about hR. In this light, the objectives of this project are: (1) To understand how hR conducts its crowd creation process, paying particular attention to unique or noteworthy aspects, practices, and effects; (2) To investigate hitRECorders' perceptions of hR, its process, and its output; and (3) To compare and contrast hitRECorders' perceptions about the opportunities or limitations on voice with the data drawn from specific output produced by hR through crowd creation, that is, selected episodes of hRoTV (S1).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section explains the literature-based rationale behind the selected methods for data collection and analysis, also considering the results of a pilot study conducted prior to the research proper. It inculcates the succeeding research design and methods carried out.

Discourse Analysis

Couldry (2010: 130) emphasizes the dynamic between voice and power: 'Honneth writes, we are all engaged in *struggles* for recognition. (...) Spaces for voice are therefore *inherently* spaces of power'. Voice relates not only to individuals, but to collectives that exercise relations of power (see also Casey, et al, 2008). Voice, therefore, must be observed within the greater discursive practices and environment of the phenomenon (crowd creation) in question, and the community (hitRECord) that functions through it, within and perhaps regardless of the neoliberal culture that envelopes these practices. The methodology implied is inherently qualitative. Addressing the research question means examining the discourses at work in the crowd creation process; therefore, discourse analysis has been selected as the method of data analysis. This method is apt for its capacity to shed light on people's motivations for action in relation to existing power structures and the overall social reality within which they position themselves. At the same time, it is an interpretive method of analysis that allows the careful flexibility and reflexivity necessary to contextualize the study

from the perspective of the researcher without losing focus on the objectives (Fiske 1987; Fairclough, 1995; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Gill, 2000; Casey et al, 2008). Discourse analysis asks the question 'how' in order to paint a picture of the entire culture within which people (or texts) are positioned, revealing patterns and boundaries of thought, action, and influence within this milieu (Casey, et al, 2008; Gregory, et al, 2009).

The specific method of discourse analysis carried out in this study draws on Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis model, as well as the more textual approach discussed by Gill (2000), Gregory, et al (2009), and Schneider (2013), but is marginally partial to the textual approach. CDA pays attention to discourse practices in terms of both production and consumption, as well as the wider sociocultural practices that shed light on the exercises of power in a given context. The time-bound nature of this study limits the investigation to production practices from the perspective of hitRECorders, also having only a limited understanding and discussion of the history and sociocultural environment that informs hR, which continues to evolve as a group in all aspects.

The literature likewise cautions on potential difficulties with employing discourse analysis. Chief among them are limitations and bias that result from carrying out analysis on only one source text. This may cause an overwhelming perspective or positioning of the text with no reference against which to carry out a more objective analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Barker & Brooks, 1998; McNair, Hibberd, & Schlesinger, 2003; Casey, et al, 2008). To assist in addressing this potential shortcoming, which was likewise encountered during the pilot study, a combination of data collection methods has been employed.

Depth Interviews and Supplementary Textual Analysis

Depth interviewing is the primary method of data collection. As per Gaskell (2000), it allows for examination and analysis of situated discourse towards an understanding of how respondents account for what they do, how they feel, and how they perceive the significance of their participation in crowd creation. Furthermore, the dialogical nature of interviews allows a degree of flexibility for both interviewer and interviewees to discuss aspects of experience that may not be included in prepared interview questions. It is important to keep in mind for this study that puts together interview data and discourse analysis, that while interviews allow for probing through a range of questions including 'what' and 'how', the succeeding analysis must delve into the discourses in the interview texts, and not just objective answers to questions which would fall into a quantitative account of experiences, resulting in a more thematic analysis.

During the interviews, respondents were asked to speak openly about their perceptions of and experiences on hR, first generally, and then specifically in the context of the production of hRoTV (S1), with the researcher facilitating discussion through the interview guide (details to follow). They were conducted through online video chat platforms such as Skype and Google Hangouts, with the exception of two. One interview was conducted face to face given the proximity of the interviewer and interviewee's locations, and one was conducted through a combination of email and video recording, as the interviewee did not use any online chat platforms.

Skeggs, Thumim, and Woods (2008) warn that this method creates a tendency for researchers to rely on personal prejudices throughout the interview process, as in forming questions, and selecting the environment in which interviews take place (Berger, 1998; Gaskell, 2000). Because of this, it is necessary to take precautionary steps, such as those outlined in the section below on reflexivity and ethics, to not only minimize bias, but more importantly to be explicit about how specific choices may affect outcomes.

As the methodological literature suggests, and as was tested in the pilot, a secondary method of textual analysis is also employed in this project to bolster the credibility of analysis. The selected texts serve as a reference point against which the findings from interviews could be compared and contrasted, hopefully yielding a deeper analysis (as demonstrated by Skeggs & Wood, 2008). The audio-visual texts (episodes of hRoTV (S1)) also have the potential to reveal information such as social practices and identities not openly disclosed or overlooked in the interviews. Furthermore, the presence of both sets of data may serve to reveal more about the relationship between the respondents and the media text which they helped produce (Fairclough, 1995). Textual analysis was conducted on three out of eight episodes of hRoTV (S1). Again, episodes were selected purposively. Three episodes of the eight were already selected and analyzed in part during the pilot stage of the research, and so another three were selected for the research proper, particularly the first, middle, and last episodes to represent a breadth of topics and duration of production.

After data collection, discourse analysis was carried out by manually analyzing the interview transcripts and programme episodes (which were viewed and annotated in full), guided by the coding framework in an excel sheet (details to follow) with manual annotation. Prior to carrying out data collection and analysis however, the following necessary processes were first undertaken.

Sampling

For interviewee recruitment, a purposive sampling strategy was used in combination with snowball sampling to best address the limits of time and resources on this project. While random sampling is generally considered the fairest strategy that allows any member of the population to be selected (Creswell, 2013), for this project, interviewees must have fulfilled the following criteria to participate: (1) Active membership on hitRECord over the last 12 months; (2) Having contributed to and/or watched hitRECord on TV (Season 1); (3) Aged over 18. In addition, selected interviewees were a mixture of men and women of different ages, nationalities and countries of location, fields of work, and backgrounds of involvement in hitRECord. These measures were to ensure a diversity of interviewees and a range of experiences and opinions. The three initial interviewees, who were recruited for the pilot study through hR with follow-ups on email and social media, were asked to recommend other hitRECorders for consideration. This process resulted in the ten depth interviews that were included in this study. The interviews were truncated after having reached a point of data saturation, with both clear regularities in terms of data, but also points of divergence for discussion. hitRECord staff members were initially contacted as well, but no response was received.

Why use hRoTV (S1) as a criterion when hR has had many other successful media projects? hRoTV (S1) holds a particularly significant place in hR's ongoing history. It represents hR's having reached a certain critical volume of users as an online community, which affects its capacity for creating output at a mainstream standard. In the words of Joseph Gordon-Levitt (*JGL*), hR's director and series narrator, 'We've screened our short films at Sundance and other festivals, we've published books, we've put out records, we've gone out on tour. But it's all been leading up to this. Now, we get to hit RECord on TV' (Gordon-Levitt, J., 2014). This programme was selected as point of reference not only because interviewees would be expected to have contributed to or at least to have been aware of the production of hRoTV (S1), but also because it represents the type of media hybridization gaining traction in neoliberal media culture for it's capacity to expand its audience reach.

Interview Guide

The interview guide is the result of revision after initial observations were made during the pilot regarding flow and specific questions asked. As with the pilot, the interview guide maintains a succession of questions over three segments, ranging from general, participation-oriented questions before moving into specifics about the interviewees' experiences and

motivations for being part of hR, and thoughts on hR's processes, community dynamics, and hRoTV (S1). The interview remains semi-structured with the interview guide being the general basis for discussion.

Coding Framework

The coding frameworks implemented for both interviews and texts are drawn from the theoretical framework. The key theoretical concepts were broken down into codes that were refined after the pilot coding frame was tested. The operational coding frame is anchored in five major discourse strands representing the most salient areas of discussion regarding voice. These were: *voice* and *social grounding* (representing the '*presence of voice*'); *neoliberal culture* and *culture of judgment* (representing the '*absence of voice*'), and '*power relations*' in between. Each of the five major themes is sub-divided into three descriptive codes that allow the language and other intertextual elements of the data to be classified into these specific areas of discourse. There was also room for emerging codes to be included in the frame, as the pilot study proved that it was possible for interviewees to bring unanticipated points of discussion into their responses. These evolutionary codes (Mayring, 2002, cited in Schneider, 2013) were noted, integrated into the coding frames as needed, and subsequently applied to succeeding interviews.

Reflexivity and Ethics

Working on discourse increases the necessity for clear reflexivity and positioning, for any analysis of discourse is an acknowledgement not only of the discourse's perspective of reality (Gill, 2000). As discussed earlier, it is also a reflection of the examiner's own perspective on reality that is brought to bear. While taking on the role of researcher in this project, I likewise maintain a position as a member of hitRECord; therefore, I take into this project particular ideas and aspirations regarding the potential of the process in question and the community specifically for social good. On a larger scale, my insider knowledge on the history and processes of hitRECord affect not only my capacity to elucidate these details for the reader, but also the very construction of hitRECord, it's activities, and how these are argued for or against in this project.

With this in mind, it was of particular importance to conform to ethical procedures to ensure that any bias or effect on the knowledge produced by this work could be mitigated, and fairness and transparency ensured. Indeed, it must also be noted that this project itself is undertaken within the auspices of a neoliberal university structure which prioritizes

particular ways and details in its writing. In summary, the following measures were undertaken to ensure ethical approval of this project: before the pilot study was initiated, the researcher utilized a department-provided self-examination checklist in order to secure ethical approval for the pilot research project, its topic, and methodology (including the interview process and tools). Approval was secured successfully from the LSE Department of Media and Communications. The approved methods and materials were then utilized in both pilot and research proper with little variation beyond those disclosed in this paper. All interviewees were asked to read and sign approved consent forms prior to participation in the study. They were informed of the context of the research and their options in terms of privacy. They were assured complete anonymity if they so preferred.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This section integrates the presentation of data and the subsequent analysis carried out, anchored in the research question and sub-questions. It begins with an exposition of hR – how it is defined and how it generates content. This is followed by the analysis of interviews using the coding frame as a guide for identifying and exploring the different discourse strands. The codes deemed most relevant are then explored in greater detail, delving into the various discourses that came across, while still positioning these within the greater theoretical framework. The quotes that were deemed most representative of the discourses being analyzed were selected for inclusion in the discussion below, with the effort as well of allowing as many interviewees to be represented as possible. Interviewees were given aliases for anonymity. The chapter concludes with the findings of the analysis carried out on episode texts.

Crowd Creation on hitRECord

For the scholars who have written on crowdsourcing and the many other iterations of this process, one thing is clear: The definition of the concept remains fluid, especially today as various groups with different applications of these processes continue to evolve and champion different aspirations (Asmolov, 2014). Crowd creation too continues to resist definition, and it is the same with hR. Respondents admit difficulty in trying to explain hR and what it does because it is different from any other well-known creative enterprise. Interviewee T shared his definition with an emphasis on remixing:

> So it's either, 'oh it's something I work on and it's just fun'. Or I would say, 'okay this is hitRECord, it's a production company website like an open collaborative community that was started by Joseph Gordon-Levitt. And it's a website that anyone can join. You can submit artwork, illustrations and animations, music, writing—anything that is possible in the internet that you can upload to the site—and then anyone that joins has free reign to do whatever they want to the stuff that's uploaded. Anything is re-mixable, and so things are created out of nothing.'

Most other respondents likewise reference the 'official' definition of hR as it appears on the hR website:

> hitRECord is an open collaborative production company. (...) It's open to anyone (...) who wants to upload original audio, video, text, or images (...) with the understanding that their work may be downloaded by other members of the community for the purpose of being remixed. For example, a piece of writing may inspire an illustration, which could then be turned into a piece of animation. (Frequently Asked Questions, n.d.).

What this practice implies is that hitRECorders recognize their group as having a distinct identity. According to them, hitRECord is comprised of 'artists', a blanket term that can refer anyone who wants to create art at any level of skill or medium. But what really sets hR apart from traditional production companies and other crowd creation-based online or art groups is the dynamic of re-mixing – being able to take any piece of work made available on hR, a photo, illustration, piece of writing, video footage, music score, etc., and building upon it to create new output, without limit to the extent of re-creation. It can be described as a cycle of creating, uploading, feeding back, downloading, and uploading again. There is also an implied greater level of freedom in this process that is not commonly associated with crowd creation as a business model, where the gatekeeper/FSE asks for specific materials to be created and contributed by the crowd/OP (Fish, 2013). The idea of monetizing or selling the work that is developed on the site is consistently downplayed in favour of the aspects of creation, sharing, and re-creation.

Another idea clearly shared among respondents is a normative, aspirational view of hR and its methods. Not only do they describe it as unique; several respondents trump it as unprecedented, and critically, as something particularly empowering for 'regular people' who are 'outside of Hollywood', another element of the hR identity that will be explored in depth in the succeeding sections of this analysis. Regardless of this perceived identity, delving into the specific crowd creation process involved in the production of hRoTV (S1) sheds light on a very specific power structure operating on a discursive level, and at the heart of this structure

is a separation between the hR crowd or OP, which we refer to here as the *community*, and the hR FSE, the staff members who are based in LA and who comprise hR's business operations and maintenance team besides also carrying out creative work with the community.

Crowd Creation for hitRECord on TV (Season 1)

The hR community works concurrently on multiple art and media projects, some of which are subsequently brought to market and the participating artists paid, while others stay on the site as continuous projects made purely for 'art's sake' – out of passion or as a hobby. It is no wonder hR has grown over the last few years into a group of thousands of members at varying levels of activity. The current hallmark among hR's monetized productions is hRoTV (S1), which not only received a budget from a commissioning network, but also marked hR's first foray into television after years of producing audiovisual works that had been screened online and in film festivals.

When asked about hRoTV (S1) and its production process, respondents would once again commonly refer to the 'official' description of the programme, referring to it as a 'variety show'. Interviewee R explains:

> 'hitRECord on TV' is a variety show. And it is made by people like me and you. Regular people and professionals, artists from all over the world make this show together, that is then broadcasted through the network Pivot. The show, like hitRECord, is directed by Joseph Gordon-Levitt, RegularJoe. And the show, like the site, likes to showcase artists of all kinds. And when I say variety show, I mean variety, because we do live performances, and testimonials, we do music, singing, dancing, animation, voice-over, tiny stories, all kinds of things.

She goes on to explain how the show is structured:

> Each episode has its own theme. So we might have an episode that is regarding 'space'. So for that whole episode, we focus on looking at the topic of space and different meanings of how people interpret the word space. Are we talking personal space? Outer space? And we have people who record testimonials about it, write songs about, do a little, short cartoons about. And we put all that stuff together and turn it into a show.

What R is describing is a process of ideation and selection. Initially, the floor is open to all members of hitRECord to suggest themes that would then be selected for adaptation into

episodes for the programme. Another period of ideation is then open for suggestions from the community as to how the themes would be treated. After ideas are curated, each selected idea is developed into one of several types of artistic formats, including music videos, short films, animated segments, interviews, and testimonials among others, forming roughly one to four minute segments on the theme. Each segment is put together by the members of the community in a collaborative process of creation, feedback, and remixing, until a final version is approved by the director, and included in the final theme-based, 22-minute episode.

This process certainly gives the impression of collaboration and the opportunity for a plurality of voices to be heard, or at least articulated, in the process, as members are invited to draw on their own influences and experiences in suggesting topic treatments. With participants from all over the world having the chance to contribute, and mitigated only by fellow hR members as opposed to studio executives and marketing managers, this picture seems akin to models of alternative media. At this point, it is necessary to delve deeper into how this process is rationalized to see whether voice is truly valued.

Voice: Commitment to Speaking and Listening

Among the codes analyzed, three emerged as the most pertinent in terms of frequency and depth of engagement among respondents: *interaction*, *diversity*, and *mainstream organization*. Each of these represents one of the three major areas within which all initial codes were grouped: the presence of voice, power relations, and the absence of voice, respectively.

Interaction
Interaction pertains to the social component of voice (Couldry, 2010), which is crucial for voice to have value. In this respect, all respondents agreed that one of the most, if not the most attractive aspect of hR that encourages people to become active in the group, is the strong sense of community that develops among members. Regardless of differences in age, cultural background, and lifestyle, hitRECorders are able to share ideas and art, but also values and goals. They describe friendships that often translate from online creative collaborations into off-line, real-world friendships. hR's community culture is facilitated by the creation of artistic work through sharing and re-mixing. However, more important is the emotional support that members give each other throughout their artistic endeavours, also carrying over to real-life interactions that may not involve art at all. This sense of community is expressed in a language of emotion, empathy, and family, where hR is more often a support

group and family as it is a creative community. Interviewee AK shared (in conversation with A, the researcher and interviewer):

> AK: I mean I was asked the other day how I'd describe hitRECord in one word, and I said 'home'.
>
> A: Oh.
>
> AK: Which like, oh god, it sounds so cheesy, doesn't it?
>
> A: (laughs) But you, you have to just say it, you know? I mean, don't think about-
>
> AK: It's like, you know. That's, if you say haul the internet away, the rest of the internet can go, but you can't take that away. That's like, that's home. As far as an online home goes, you know? Um... (pause/drink) It's just, you know, it's comforting.

AK's idea of a community that is more about emotional connections and personal relationships than a professional network was consistent with other interviewees. All respondents, some more frequently than others, would cite specific names of other hitRECorders with whom they have developed relationships, or who serve as inspirations to them. This is indicative of the human faces that they associate with the hR community, the real people with whom they can share intimate connections and experiences. Furthermore, several respondents also relayed an impression of the artists in the community as being more prone to honesty and vulnerability in their art work and interactions, foregrounding a level of trust that the community shares. This trust encourages them not only to speak to one another, but to say things they would not say elsewhere. hR is therefore described as being both a community of artists with a distinct identity in the creative online space, and a family where people feel safe, supported, and encouraged. The group is also consistently touted by respondents as being diverse.

Diversity

This code, which is closely associated with the codes of *interaction* and *participation*, refers to the heterogeneity of voices and ideas drawn from and expressed, included and excluded, in hR's crowd creation process. As mentioned, hR is described across the board on a thematic level as a diverse, international community of thousands of artists from all over the world and all walks of life. Some interviewees embrace this description wholly, while others go on to qualify it further, particularly when it comes to blanket terms like 'artist' and 'international' or 'global'. Certainly, artists are considered by this demographic as being outside of the mainstream media industry, with nearly all interviewees referencing Hollywood as the benchmark for the mainstream media. Interviewee R relates:

> I want to have my work find a television audience, that is just amazing that I can do that with, especially considering where I am, where I'm located. I'm not in Hollywood. I am not running around some studio. I don't have powers. I don't have connections. I don't, I don't have that stuff. I'm just, I'm just a part of hitRECord.

This seems to describe artists as aspiring towards visibility to an audience, but not having the resources to do so; whatever resources are needed to gain visibility are therefore made available by hR. But the category of artists itself proves difficult to pin down and necessitates further qualification, even among the small group of respondents in this study.

In general, the group describe their community as diverse on two levels: in terms of artists being physically and culturally from different parts of the world, and in terms of having different specializations as artists, such as visual artists, musicians, film makers, etc. Nonetheless, as a collective, they portray artists as 'regular people', who are 'undiscovered', have 'no resources' (or limited resources) and are 'not Hollywood', presumably referring not just to Hollywood in the US, but conglomerate entertainment studios in general. As such, they express difficulty in making their art and ideas accessible outside limited social circles. hR would be a way to breach the high walls of the mainstream industry – they are given the opportunity to share their self-expression to the audience that hR has access to by being part of hRoTV (S1). However, this diversity has difficulty translating into an inclusivity of voices and ideas on a discursive level. Respondents identify a separation between people who work in the mainstream industry and those who do not, and count themselves as being among the latter. Within that latter cohort of artists however, there is a further division implied but never really identified: the division between people who have access to outlets like hR, and those who do not.

As an online group, hR can only accommodate artists who have access to the internet. True enough, there is a certain generic lifestyle narrated by the respondents that points to available access to technology, and knowledge of how it operates (including frequent references to popular culture and social media), regardless of varying cultural backgrounds. More critical than access, these artists have the time and capability to maintain an active presence in the group. This is because the online community itself operates in a way that necessitates a lot of attention in order to achieve goals. Some interviewees attributed this to the website interface itself not being very user-friendly. But in addition, the level of activity and constant updates, requests, and re-mixes on the site seem to create another barrier, particularly for newcomers. This is especially true during busy periods for the group such as when hRoTV (S1) was in production. Interviewee JH shares:

> [A] lot of new people get discouraged because they don't seem to be having an interaction. I know a lot of people, who when they're new to a site, kind of want to feel they're part of the group and if nobody reaches out to make contact with them, it's kind of hard to stay. I know that I personally, when I found new members' work, I've made a point to welcome them, and then say 'if you have any questions or anything feel free to message me on one of my records', so they can try to get the idea on how to communicate on the site.

This clues us in on the idea that the site, and hR as a group, does carry out interaction in a particular way based on a system that they enter into of their own volition; but a lack of knowledge as to how this structure works and how best to take advantage of it may result in a loss of participants, and of diversity, in the long run.

Further to the discussion on art, another idea constantly brought up by interviewees is 'high quality'. The constitution of quality work and the criteria with which such work is selected for inclusion in monetized productions, are neither explicit nor agreed upon, though they are certainly commended. This results in tension between what community members tend to expect, and the decisions made at an executive level by hR's staff members, who are responsible for business decisions. Interviewee SD says:

> It's interesting, like, I mean, I think they make those decisions because that's what fits, and because they're working with a TV network, it's not just what they, like, the headquarters wants to do, they also have to meet the network halfway, right? So, sometimes, things won't work, um, and then we... I wish more people would understand that aspect of it that, like, just because something's most popular doesn't mean that it's necessarily gonna be used because it might not fit with the need...

We can see that standards do exist for art to be judged as high quality, and these standards may or may not be the same as the standards used to qualify content for inclusion in significant productions like hRoTV (S1). But these standards that seem inherent to hR's process are never qualified in certain terms. Some respondents describe the best quality segments of hRoTV (S1) as those that were borne of high levels of collaboration and re-mixing. At the same time, other segments included in the programme may have been the the work of one or two individuals, deemed of quality because they were approved by the director. Standards are taken as understood with a mitigated level of feedback, and this is how hegemonic discourse is expected to operate (Harvey, 2005). SD mentions popularity as an expected benchmark for commendation and selection, but suggests that this is not always the case, as there are third parties exerting further influence on such decisions. What we

observe is a selection process that is ideologically neoliberal in nature: arbitrary and dependent on points of authority. This ties in to the next critical area of analysis.

Mainstream Organization

This refers to the neoliberal media industry structure which puts a premium on exchange value and capital, and works in conjunction with other codes used in analysis, particularly *competition*, *individualization, culture of judgment*, and *conformity.* Already, interviewees have elucidated their understanding of the industry based on big corporations versus independent artists, with a claim on hR as giving artists the opportunity to gain access to mainstream audiences and other resources. This shows certain aspirations of these artists that fall squarely within the neoliberal expectation of the mainstream media: to have access to audiences, and as sometimes explicitly expressed by some interviewees, to be 'famous'. While interviewees often remark that money is no more than a perk and that the greater goal is visibility, it seems that the basis for recognition, at least in the context of a large audience-oriented production like hRoTV (S1), depends on what the authority in the group decides, in this case, the director.

While several instances during production of hRoTV (S1), processes of ideation and contribution result in voices having the opportunity to be articulated, whether these voices are listened to and acted upon further along in the process is a mechanism far from inherent to the hR system. This is not lost to hitRECorders, but they often rationalize it as being what is ultimately beneficial for the group. Interviewee P says:

> We will do what Joe wants to do. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Because we have, you know, an extremely enthusiastic director who is giving us opportunities beyond many of our wildest dreams. You know, how many of us would've thought we would work on a TV show which ultimately wins an Emmy, you know?

Submission to the director's authority is acceptable to P because of what she perceives the potential payoff to be. Interviewee SL on the other has this critique:

> For the most part, they use something the community member came up with but they look at it and Joe says, 'okay well sounds like we have a good, good record. Here's what I think we should do, turn it into animation'. And so they put out a request, people submit stuff and then Joe and G[1] pick and choose the stuff they like...

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[1] G, alias for a co-producer of hRoTV (S1).

Descriptions of this selection process as being akin to a lottery, competition, or working a freelance job came up among several interviewees. However, SL continues:

> Joe and G, I think have said, 'this is not a democratic process, we're a production company'. Joe said 'if I don't love it, it's not going to go on air if I don't love it'. And that's true, all of that is true. And it makes sense. It's not so much that the model needs to be changed, it's just disingenuous to claim it's strictly collaborative and not a contest.

There is a claim to how this structure is acceptable, if perhaps inaccurately described. However, conformity to this structure all but ensures that the attempt at articulating a plurality of voices becomes void at the level of decision. The potential remains present, but the commitment is lacking. Four out of ten interviewees did openly identify this dynamic as counter-intuitive to the ideal that hR aspires to. And it must be said that hR as a group certainly supports and encourages questions, suggestions, and improvements in all aspects of it's work, albeit in a mitigated manner. But most respondents maintain the willingness to embrace this structure because of what they stand to gain, indicative of the individualization that is characteristic of neoliberal culture (Couldry, 2010). Interestingly, a discourse of addiction also emerged among a few respondents when talking about the frequency of their engagement on hR, which speaks as well of the kind of consumption-oriented interaction that occurs in this environment, and tends nonetheless to be viewed in a positive light.

Company versus Community

These rationalizations point to how neoliberal culture pervades not only hR as a group, but the day-to-day lives of its members who carry their personal experiences into this process, and adapt willingly. This is not entirely unexpected. As Couldry, Kidd and Rodriguez, and others have said, it seems that the neoliberal culture of the media continues to overshadow the valuation of voice, particularly with reference to producing hRoTV (S1) through crowd creation. However, reflecting upon hR's process in a separate capacity from its moneymaking projects (as alluded to in the segment on interaction) does give insight into a dynamic that favours a more lateral distribution of power in the group.

Drawing on the same dynamic of Hollywood versus artists, it is not unusual for interviewees to use the term community[2] more often than company, with company only used when alluding to the 'official' definition. The words 'we' and 'our' are often associated with a

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[2] This is a term that I as researcher likewise favour throughout this essay for its more inclusive nature.

discourse of art and creation – opportunities for self-expression and the articulation of voice – and of hR as a functioning whole. On the other hand, 'they' or 'their' are used once in a while to describe a degree of distance from the hR staff and their responsibilities, especially in the context of decision making for monetized productions. The distribution of power becomes more level among members when the dynamic of decision is not involved. These interactions between hitRECorders – old and new members, collaborations, re-mixing – take place continuously outside of monetized productions but are easily driven to the edges of priority in the event that big projects hRoTV (S1) are in production.

It is of note that there are no prohibitions on hR members from releasing their original work and collaborating with others on any material even if these would not be marketed as something under the hitRECord brand. One respondent discloses how he has helped initiate activities and interactions for hitRECorders outside of hR, whether for personal or professional collaborations, without consequence. This is where we can see the normative hR community in action, wherein self-expression on one's own terms and without prejudice can take place in an environment that is not motivated by profit or visibility to an external audience. Creating and sharing original work as is done on hR implies an emotional stake in the outcome, and there is awareness among hitRECorders that this emotional investment is something that must be fostered and protected. All respondents highlighted that the community is always encouraging and constructive with one another, whether in hRoTV (S1) or other projects. However, it remains unavoidable that this community dynamic is fostered more often than not within the boundaries of hR. The upside is that hR does carry out certain processes that are progressive in production contexts: hR allows paid artists to view the breakdown of their earnings and critique the distribution of profit. It also allows artists to choose how they represent themselves (in this case, members can be paid even while remaining completely anonymous). All members are on an equal footing in terms of starting or suggesting projects and collaborations for the group to work on. But the neoliberal undercurrent still facilitates overall collaboration in specific ways. Again, members are aware of this, and have expressed their sentiments and suggestions to the hR staff through the site itself as well as through rarer opportunities for interaction sponsored by the staff, such as a live 'Town Hall' event held online in real time. However, whether or not changes in ways of working based on their suggestions will be implemented is, as they are aware, not within their power.

A balance between community and company intentions is definitely difficult to achieve, because viewing hR as one or the other implies different goals, even if the dynamic of crowd creation does operate on both levels.

hitRECord on TV: Following Conventions

An analysis of several episodes of hRoTV (S1) affirm the most dominant perceptions of crowd creation that have been discussed: though the creation of this programme is presented as an opportunity for the articulation of voice, voice is really only offered at a limited, almost token extent, at least for this pioneering effort of hRoTV (S1), and is not pursued much more beyond the level of presentation.

The programme is presented from the perspective of a clear and dominant narrator, who also clearly represents perspectives and expectations as dictated by Western neoliberal industry and society. Whether in terms of referencing proverbial common knowledge, popular culture, or points of authority such as industry players or fields of study like science and technology, this narrator (embodied by actor and hR director JGL) is the thread that binds the variety show's various segments together. As such, he represents the perspective that rationalizes these segments, why they have been used in the programme and deemed relevant or of interest to audiences.

It is of note that the programme is explicit about the nature of hR as a company and community, comprised of many people from all over the world who have various contributions in the final programme. In this way, this TV show reveals rather than conceals its discursive nature (Casey, et all, 2008; Previato, 2014), or the forces that work within it to create the meanings and representations it contains. However, the process by which the community's many contributions are selected for inclusion in the show are not disclosed. This shows that the revelatory nature of the programme might be part of its content, and is meant to be a point of interest to draw viewers in to the programme.

The conventions that the programme adheres to are also conventionally mainstream, including editing techniques and choices of visual styles and music, which generally fall into more recognizable genres, such as heteronormative narratives, music genres like hip-hop, pop, and easy-listening. However, the programme does make some leeway for a variety of topics and varying levels of video footage quality that would not be conventionally acceptable to mainstream industry in genres for daytime television. It also makes a conscious effort to display diversity by including segments that highlight other languages and countries besides English and the US.

CONCLUSION

In the expansive field of mainstream media, methods of content creation that conform to moral standards are often overshadowed by the neoliberal culture that dictates industry conventions. The potential of the internet, together with other forms of alternative media, to promote more democratic forms of participation, has been touted as a silver lining but with mixed results thus far. In the same way, the trepidation surrounding the potential of crowd creation to create a space for the articulation and valuing of voice (Couldry, 2010; Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010; Tacchi, Watkins, & Keerthirathne, 2009) as explored in this study, points to the unrelenting influence of neoliberal culture. As a culture that pervades not only the media industry, but also the everyday lives of those involved in activities like crowd creation, the power relations between authorities that are informed by mainstream ideologies and conventions and their crowd communities remains inevitably skewed, and repressive of voice. In the context explored of hitRECord, the social reality that is reflected in the group's process of production (as well as their output, specifically hRoTV (S1)) is still one that promotes neoliberal culture. Voice remains a small component of the process that is given a limited amount of value.

However, a normative standpoint behoves us to look deeper for the the merit of having explored crowd creation and its potential as an alternative method of production in the contemporary industry. To address the research question therefore: the distinct capacity of a crowd creation-based group operating within the neoliberal media landscape to pursue productive relationships with the powers-that-be, as well as with peers, within the same space but to different results, allows the value of voice, however limited, to be preserved to some degree and therefore maintain the capacity to increase in value later on or if circumstances change. While crowd creation for the purpose of saleable media output has yet to find a way of functioning in any capacity outside a neoliberal structure, it likewise gives birth to an avenue within which alternative values can circulate – still under the eye of authority perhaps, but unhindered by it. Such is the dynamic that emerges in hitRECord which can be described as a community, and not a company. Members interact, create, trust, and listen to one another in a continuous web of relationships that exist outside of any specific profit-oriented production. It remains to be seen whether the curation of this dynamic might lead to more active intervention in the neoliberal structure of a crowd creation-based group, therefore opening up more potential towards a production model that strikes a balance between mainstream and alternative media motives.

This study in its limited capacity remains optimistic of the progressive potential of crowd creation, but foresees the difficulties that must be faced in further attempts to pursue a truly transformative, alternative process that gives value to voice within the mainstream industry. Perhaps paying greater attention to the overlap between crowd creation and alternative forms of media and participatory culture existing in localities as discussed in the literature, as opposed to the mainstream Western context, could lead to more promising results. Furthermore, future research in the area should take into consideration the fact that groups such as hR, and in fact the whole crowd creation industry, continue to evolve; hRoTV has, at the time of writing, just released season 2 of the programme, which is worth noting in any study that continues to examine hR's model.

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APPENDICES

Interview Topic Guide

A) About you and how you got started with hitRECord

1. Name and/or username?
2. Age/location/occupation?
3. How did you first hear about hitRECord?
4. Why did you decide to get involved? What attracted you to it?
5. Do you have any particular role in the community besides being a member? If yes, please elaborate.

B) About your thoughts and activities on hitRECord

6. How would you describe hitRECord to someone who has never heard about it?
7. What do you like/not like about hitRECord?
   o What encourages you to continue to be part of it?
8. How do you spend most of your time on hitRECord?
9. What factors do you consider when you are contributing records or remixing/participating in collaborations?

- o New or featured requests?
- o Prefer to contribute your own material/express yourself/browse randomly?
- o Any criteria that you look for in potential collaborations/projects?

10. How do you find the interaction on the site?
- o Do you feel comfortable interacting with anyone in the community?
- o Do you think the community is conducive to "openness" and "collaboration"?
- o Do you think yours is a typical situation (considering ACTIVE members)?

11. Do you think the community has any particular goals or aims it is trying to achieve (or has already achieved) besides creating art/media projects/productions?
- o If yes, what might these goals be?
- o If yes, do you think such goal-setting is deliberate? Please elaborate.

12. Do you think that hitRECord is able to do things that other online groups or platforms can't?
- o If yes, what are these?

C) About your thoughts and involvement in "hitRECord on TV" (Season 1 - 2014)

13. How would you describe the show to someone who hasn't heard of it?

14. What do you like/not like about the show?

15. What do you think about the choice of episode themes (#1, Fantasy, Trash, Space, The Other Side, Games, Money, Patterns)?
- o What do you think about how the themes were decided on?
- o What do you think about how they were treated?

16. Do you have a favourite episode or segment? Least favourite?
- o What do you like / not like about it?
- o If you could, would you change anything in particular in the show?

17. What do you think about the show's production process?
- o Workflow/structure (specifically regarding communication/interaction, not so much site features): Ideation > Contributions >Final decision making?
- o Payment scheme ("monetization")

18. What do you think about Joe's (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) role in hitRECord and on the show?
- o Why do you think he decided to make a TV show?

19. Do you think that this TV show is able to accomplish things that other TV shows aren't?
- o If yes, what are these?

20. Do you think that the show's first season (in 2014) was a success? Why or why not?
- o Do you think the show represents the community well?
- o Do you think it represents you as an individual?

21. What do you think is next for hitRECord?

22. What other words, feelings, or thoughts come to mind about the show, hitRECord, or your experiences with them?

Coding Framework (Interviews)

	CAT	Sub-cat / Description - Data shows the following in hR practice	CODE	NOTES	
1	Voice				PRESENCE OF VOICE
1.1		Process of ("Physical") Voice // Capacity to speak/Account of life/self	VOC		
1.2		Reflexivity // Capacity to reflect on self, evaluate own thoughts & actions	REF		
1.3		Valuing voice/voice as value // Voice is given privilege & is listened to on principle; can contribute to social change	VAL		
2	Social Grounding				
2.1		Interaction with others essential // collectivity/speaking+listening	INT		
2.2		Participation // Internally democratic process, collective decision & meaning making, & governance	PAR		
2.3		Recognition // Inclusive, legitimate, unashamed, contribution to dialogue and social change	REC		
3	Power Relations				POWER STRUGGLE
3.1		On established power/authority // Complicit? Challenging? Enable marginalized voices to be heard, ability to ask questions	POW		
3.2		Diversity // Heterogeneity of ideas, content, voices; Inclusive or Exclusive? To what extent?	DIV	/ INC	
3.3		Listening // Institutional commitment to listening, contributing to social change	LIS		
4	Neoliberal Culture				ABSENCE OF VOICE
4.1		Mainstream market-based organization/industry structure // Capital, exchange value given emphasis	MAIN		
4.2		Competition // Encouraging people to compete as commodity	COMP		
4.3		Individualization // emphasis on individual freedom	IND		
5	Culture of Judge				

	ment				
5.1		Judgement culture // by an external authority/class politics/hierarchy		JUD	
5.2		Misrecognition // Lack of speaking & recognition in the guise of choice or empowerment; Tokenist voice		MISR	
5.3		Conformity // to standards imposed and inability to question decisions/acceptance of arbitrary decisions		CONF	
Emerging codes					
Technological determinism		Viewing the internet as an enabler, breaking boundaries and allowing connections across space, maximizing opportunities		TECH	

Coding Framework (Episodes)

	CAT	Sub-cat / Description - Data/content shows		CODE
1	Voice			
1.1		Process of ("Physical") Voice // Whose voice is represented in the text?		VOC
1.2		Reflexivity // Community/narrator capacity to reflect on self, evaluate own thoughts & actions		REF
1.3		Valuing voice/voice as value // Voice is given privilege & is listened to on principle; can contribute to social change		VAL
2	Social Grounding			
2.1		Interaction with others essential // collectivity/speaking+listening		INT
2.2		Participation // Internally democratic process, collective decision & meaning making, & governance		PAR
2.3		Recognition // Inclusive, legitimate, unashamed, contribution to dialogue and social change		REC
3	Power Relations			
3.1		On established power/authority (bigger context - the world outside the show)//Valid postitions/ideologies in text?		POW
3.2		Diversity // Heterogeneity of ideas, content, voices, images, subjectivities; Inc/Exc? Relations to difference? Counter-narratives?		DIV
3.3		Listening // Institutional commitment to listening and not just railroading		LIS

		ideas, contributing to social change		
4	Neoliberal Culture			
4.1		Mainstream market-based organization/industry conventions // Emphasis on capital, exchange value given emphasis		MAIN
4.2		Competition // Encouraging competition in neoliberal context		COMP
4.3		Individualization // emphasis on individual freedom		IND
5	Culture of Judgement			
5.1		Judgement culture // By an external authority/class politics/hierarchy; Types of identity validated?		JUD
5.2		Misrecognition // Lack of speaking & recognition in the guise of choice or empowerment; Tokenist voice		MISR
5.3		Conformity // Establishing some standards better ,arbitrary decisions		CONF
	Emerging codes			
		Technological Determinism		

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