

Power to the people? Amateur media and everyday creativity

Is digital technology giving the people control of the means of production? Are we living in a new age of do-it-yourself media? In this article, I seek to challenge some of the more inflated claims that are sometimes made about these issues, drawing on my research about amateur and domestic video-making.

Amateur media production is a commonplace activity, which has been around for a long time. We can look back almost forty years to the first affordable portable video cameras; and of course there is a long history of home movie-making and amateur photography. However, the advent of digital technology has undoubtedly led to an enormous increase in the quantity of amateur media-making. Mobile phones and digital still cameras with a video facility are pretty much universal; and editing software is constantly becoming cheaper and more accessible. Worldwide, there are almost 400 billion photographs taken every year; and 300 million of them are uploaded to Facebook every day. Almost half of UK teenagers claim to make videos using a smartphone or tablet; and over 300 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute.

Enthusiasts often claim that this is an empowering development. New media technologies, they tell us, are finally giving power to the people. We're seeing the end of Big Media, and the emergence of a new age of democratic media participation. Henry Jenkins' concept of 'spreadable media' is just one influential instance of these claims (although it always makes me think of margarine...); while David Gauntlett's celebration of 'making as connecting' is another.

The idea here is that new digital forms of media production and distribution – ironically, the products of major multinational companies like Google, Apple and Facebook – are somehow part of a massive democratisation of public communication. Ordinary people are no longer consumers: they have become producers or 'prosumers' in their own right. The old hierarchical model of *mass* media is finished. These arguments are proclaimed through a new collection of feel-good terms and concepts: participation, creativity, the wisdom of crowds, collective intelligence, 'we media'...

While I share some of these democratic instincts, I want to challenge such claims, on several grounds. One of the problems with the discussion is that there has been much enthusiasm about a few rather untypical examples, but not much reliable evidence about what's going on more generally. I think we need to look more carefully at who is using these media, what they are doing, and what difference any of it makes. Our research suggests that much of what is happening is rather less spectacular, and more mundane, than some of the euphoric accounts of do-it-yourself media are inclined to suggest.

However, that doesn't mean that I want to dismiss it. On the contrary, I want to offer a kind of defence of the mundane, and even of the banal. Practices like amateur video-making – which is my main focus here – may not necessarily be cool and glamorous, nor indeed are they always subversive or empowering. We need to

resist the temptation to superficial celebration; but we do need to take them more seriously.

While there has been some interesting historical research on home movie-making, and on family photography, the technology of digital video raises some new questions. Certainly when compared with film, video is much easier and less expensive to use, and this potentially makes a big difference in terms of what people choose to record, and how they see themselves as media-makers. The advent of online sharing vastly extends the potential audience; digital editing is available on every basic home computer; while mobile technology means that video-making and photography are instant and ubiquitous. Over little more than a decade, visual representation (and self-representation) has become embedded in everyday life, with consequences that are difficult to assess.

Diverse practices

Discussions of these new media practices tend to employ a range of overlapping terms and categories: amateur media, community media, alternative media, independent media, participatory media, user-generated media, DIY media, and so on. Yet we need to make some distinctions here. There is a range or continuum of broadly non-professional production practices that occur in different contexts. Some key differences might be to do with:

- access – who’s involved
- motivation – why it happens
- pedagogy – how people learn
- technology – how it’s made
- funding – how it’s paid for
- settings – where it happens
- audience – who it’s for

In thinking this through, I have made a very provisional attempt at a taxonomy, identifying six distinct but overlapping practices:

PRACTICES	PEOPLE	CONTEXTS
Professional	Trained experts	Commercial, <u>subsidised</u> (public service)
Semi-professional	Aspiring entrants	Precarious <u>labour</u>
Radical (alternative, independent) media	Activists	Social movements
Community	‘Ordinary’ people trained by facilitators	Local institutions, <u>subsidised</u>
Serious amateur	Self-taught, ‘hobbyists’	Communities of practice, self-funded
Casual	Untrained, ‘ordinary’ people	Domestic, everyday life

The space of the amateur

My main interest here is in the final two categories. I'm drawing on research that was completed a few years ago now – quite a large-scale project, which took a multifaceted approach to studying people's everyday uses of portable video cameras. I should emphasise that this is about video specifically: the arguments may not apply in the same way to other media.

Although they overlap, it is important to make a distinction between the amateur and the domestic. The term 'amateur' implies a different kind of social practice, which is more organised and committed, and also more self-reflexive than the more casual forms of everyday video-making.

The American sociologist Robert Stebbins has developed a sustained analysis of what he calls 'serious amateurs', whom he distinguishes from casual amateurs. He looks at how amateur practices are organised across a wide range of different fields, and how communities of amateurs are formed. Amateurs often have 'amateur careers', which involve considerable perseverance and expenditure; they are assiduous learners; and they may come to see their activity as a key aspect of their identity. There is often a complex interface here between amateurs and professionals, who may be involved as teachers or facilitators. These phenomena are apparent in other sociological studies, such as Ruth Finnegan's account of amateur musicians and Howard Becker's work on the relationship between professional and amateur artists.

In popular usage, the term 'amateur' carries both positive and negative connotations. The amateur may be seen as less adept and accomplished than the professional; but the amateur is also (in Latin languages) a 'lover', who is free of the constraints of the professional. Thus, while digital media has been seen to promote a kind of shoddy amateurism, and to undermine the work of true professionals – as in Andrew Keen's book *The Cult of the Amateur* – others, such as the UK think tank Demos, have argued that serious amateurs (or what they call the 'pro-ams') may be an engine for cultural innovation more broadly.

Amateur cultures

We started our research by looking historically at how amateur film- and video-making has been defined and promoted in advice literature, such as handbooks and magazines. In these contexts, the serious amateur is often defined in opposition to the casual domestic user. Unlike those who just pick up the camera to film their kids' birthday parties, the serious amateur undertakes sustained and deliberate planning. While the home video-maker is not concerned with improving the quality of their work, the amateur has a developed interest in the technology, and engages in a systematic and committed pursuit of learning.

We went on to look at a range of video-making communities or subcultures, of various kinds. We looked at adolescent boys making and distributing spoofs of dramatic or quasi-documentary productions via YouTube; and at people participating in networks and festivals of mobile phone video-makers. We spoke to people making amateur pornography, and considered the problematic status of the 'amateur' in the

porn industry. We observed elderly people participating in local video-making clubs, and compared these with online video-making communities, in the light of broader debates about the loss of 'social capital'. We studied some of the video diarists involved in the BBC's Video Nation project, looking at the interface between the industry and the 'ordinary' person. We examined the practices of so-called citizen journalists, and people using video in the context of 'hyperlocal' media, discovering that the reality was rather more mundane than some of the hype.

One of the most interesting examples from my point of view was that of video-makers who specialise in skateboarding. Like other areas of youth culture, skateboarding is at once commercial and anti-commercial. There is a long history of photography and video-making in this context, dating back to the 1960s, which raises significant questions about identity, representation and authenticity. I gathered data on a large website called Skate Perception, and interviewed several makers of skateboarding videos. These videos have a range of distinctive visual aesthetics, involving the use of particular shots (such as the long lens tracking shot) and technologies (such as fisheye lenses). Video-makers often seek to achieve a 'signature style', involving distinctive visuals, music and post-production graphics. Video-making served functions in terms of learning particular skateboarding tricks, but it was also a developed practice in its own right. The Skate Perception site involved a good deal of deliberate instruction: more experienced film-makers would act as mentors for 'newbies', giving tips, assignments and critiques of their work – a process in which the distinction between the amateur and the professional was sometimes quite blurred.

This aspect of the research was essentially about what Stebbins calls 'serious amateurs' – self-conscious hobbyists who invest a lot of time and money in seeking to get better at what they do. These groups are diverse, not just socially but also in terms of their motivations: they interact and organise themselves in very different ways. They have very different stances towards mainstream media: while some are attempting to imitate the professionals, others are trying to challenge them, or to create alternatives – while in some cases, they are creating media for entirely private purposes, with no reference to any mainstream. I do not believe that these diverse communities (and of course there are many others) can simply be added together to make a coherent 'DIY media movement'; nor do they necessarily represent some kind of incipient revolution in the media landscape.

Furthermore, these people are by definition untypical. One of the broader problems with some of the hype around amateur media is the tendency to generalise from unrepresentative cases: Henry Jenkins, for example, seems to build a much broader theory about people power on the basis of a few spectacular examples of fan production – fans who build websites or create mash-up videos or political campaigns. This is part of a broader tendency in media research to take the dedicated fan as a kind of paradigm case for the media user in general – whereas in fact committed fans are mostly quite unrepresentative. Whether we look at everyday media consumption or production, most media use doesn't involve this kind of intense investment: most of it is much more casual, contingent and mundane.

Private practices

Accordingly, the second aspect of our research focused on home video-making. By contrast with the work of the serious amateur, this is a much less deliberate and self-reflexive practice. Most people acquire and use a video camera in quite a casual way. They make less investment of time and money than the dedicated amateur. Many have an initial flurry of interest and then don't take it any further. For most people, video-making is less an activity in its own right than something that can be used to serve other purposes: it offers a means of documenting family life, hobbies or travels, but it has limited interest beyond that.

We gave simple video camcorders to twelve households in the immediate neighbourhood of our research lab in downtown London, and we looked at how they were used (or indeed not used) over an 18-month period. We visited them at home to conduct interviews and we studied their footage – and in return, they got to keep the camcorder. These were ethnically and socially diverse households, including some traditional families but also some single parents and one elderly man living alone.

We gathered lots of painfully boring footage of people waving the camera around, showing off in front of it, and leaving it running for no apparent reason. Predictably, there was a lot of casual footage of holidays and family celebrations, but there was also some more unusual and bizarre material. A couple of individuals took to editing films (for example to send to other family members living abroad). We had kids doing re-makes of *Jaws* and TV wrestling, a retired bus driver who recorded bus journeys across town, quirky comedy sketches and personal video diaries. However, these were largely the exceptions.

There were three main themes that emerged from our analysis. Firstly, we were interested in what researchers call the 'domestication' of the technology – how it fits into the routines of everyday life. This means looking at why technologies are purchased, where the equipment is kept, when and how it's used, and who's in charge of it. We found that, despite the ease and affordability of video, people tended to do many of the same things they used to do with home movies: they mostly recorded the 'front stage' activities of family life (special occasions, holidays, birthdays, celebrations) rather than the mundane 'back stage' (eating breakfast, going to the bathroom).

Our participants had high expectations and fantasies about what they were going to do with the camera, which mostly never materialised. This was partly, as one of them put it, because 'life got in the way': the realities of busy family life made these aspirations impossible. However, it was also because there wasn't much motivation to do anything more. What most of them wanted to do was simply to document family life, and few were interested in anything beyond this. Only a couple of them learned to edit (despite us offering support); and many of them did not even look back at what they had recorded or show it to anyone outside the household.

However, this is not to imply that home video-making is necessarily banal or conservative, as some have suggested. The second theme in our analysis was to do with the emotional, subjective dimensions of this practice: why people do it, and

what it means for them. We found that video-making could play important functions in terms of a sense of security and belonging, and in terms of memory. In our interviews, we explored the fantasies and fears that come into play when seeing yourself on screen (such as the fear of exposure), and when you are behind the camera (the discomfort at being removed from the action).

We also explored the longer-term dimensions of the process. Many of our participants were consciously making videos for the future: they wanted to archive their memories for posterity, as a way of overcoming the feelings of passing time (their children growing up), and the sense of loss that they would experience in years to come. Video would both feed and allay the nostalgia that they anticipated they would feel. As such, they didn't necessarily feel they had to watch their videos now: having them stored in a shoe-box under the bed or a computer folder for later viewing might offer them a defence against the passing of time, even a sense of a consistent and coherent identity, that would provide a degree of security and a place in the world.

Our third theme was to do with learning. We were interested in how people learnt to use the technology – which was generally a matter of trial-and-error rather than systematic application, much less reading the manual. We also explored how people learnt the 'language' of the medium – for example, how to compose and frame shots, and how to combine them into meaningful sequences that other people might want to watch. These are important dimensions of 'media literacy' that have been largely ignored.

Here again, the question of motivation was crucial. Our participants didn't want to become movie directors, or even to make 'films'. By and large, all they wanted was to keep a record; and what they liked about video was that it made it fairly easy to do this. In their recording, they favoured a naturalistic approach, without artifice and deliberation: setting things up specially, or trying to be 'arty', would contradict this. Furthermore, very little of what they did made any reference to mainstream media. There were occasional parodies and *hommages* – we had versions of *Jaws* and *Lost* and *Property Ladder* – but generally home video was not perceived as having anything to do with what you would see on TV. It was not a challenge to dominant modes of cultural production, or a replication of them: it was something different entirely. The few instances where it became more ambitious occurred where there was a sense of audience – particularly of distant family members, and occasionally peers. In these instances, there was a need to make a video that would be 'watchable' – but in most cases, this was seen to be unnecessary.

As this implies, home video-making is largely a mundane and banal activity. However, this should not be a reason for criticism or regret. On the contrary, this is its power. In the terms of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it is a popular aesthetic, a popular cultural practice: it's not about stepping outside the everyday (as with 'high art'), but rather remaining in the everyday. This is perhaps what also makes it difficult to research – a difficulty that caused us much pain as we worked our way through hours of material. For us, the videos were boring because they were meaningless – we did not really know the people or the context. For our participants, they were intensely meaningful; although that meaning was not something we could simply read off the screen.

Power to the people?

So what are the consequences of this apparent proliferation of non-professional media making? Are we seeing a process of democratisation, with ordinary people seizing control of the means of production? Is it generating genuine alternatives to mainstream media? Or is it just a trivial pastime, that doesn't have anything much to do with mainstream media, let alone change it? Is it symptomatic of a more general collapse into the society of the simulacrum, where all we have is mediated representations, and reality has disappeared? Or is it part of a surveillance society, where cameras are everywhere and everything we do is being recorded, where everything is performance?

Our research doesn't support the view that DIY media represents a revolution, although it does suggest that digital video may be opening things up in a way that cine-film and Super 8 generally didn't – not least because of the cost. What we may be seeing is greater diversity, and the emergence of different forms of self-representation that were less possible before – although that very diversity makes it difficult to generalise about what it all means, not least socially or politically. This is even more the case when we look beyond the amateur and the domestic, to consider the wider range of non-professional practices I have mapped out above.

Ultimately, we need to resist the temptation to overstate, to romanticise, and to over-politicise these developments. It is important to avoid grandiose claims, and to look much more carefully at the mundane, everyday realities of media use – however unglamorous and unexciting they may appear.

*This article draws on the research I did a few years ago with Rebekah Willett and Maria Pini. There's much more in the two books *Video Cultures* (Palgrave 2009) and *Home Truths?* (University of Michigan Press 2011). My paper on the skateboarders can be found on my Academia site: https://www.academia.edu/679738/Skate_perception_self-representation_identity_and_visual_style_in_a_youth_subculture.*