

## The Simpsons: A Metanarrative of the Western-Global Prosumer Middle Class

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Simpsons, uno degli show televisivi più longevi sono la rappresentazione di una società in miniatura, in cui tutte le principali istituzioni (educazione, famiglia, mass media, politica, religione ed economia) vengono descritte attraverso l'esperienza di un nucleo familiare e le sue interazioni con la comunità locale. Grazie al successo globale si può affermare che la serie sia un ritratto delle contraddizioni, dei vizi e delle virtù insite della classe media occidentale, nella società capitalista e dei consumi. La popolarità della serie ne ha permesso un'amplissima diffusione, al punto che l'immaginario creato ed i suoi protagonisti sono stati riprodotti in ogni forma di gadget, come oggetto delle più disparate forme di remix culturale, sotto forma di wiki o di contenuto generato dall'utente, rendendo labili i confini tra narrazione e realtà. In altre parole, la ricorsività degli episodi è diventata così diffusa da divenire parte dell'immaginario sociale di molti, facendo diventare i protagonisti attori e opinion leader anche nella cosiddetta vita reale, proponendosi come un esempio del teorizzato continuum tra mondo reale e mondo digitale. Fin dagli inizi, tutti gli episodi hanno avuto come linea guida tematiche sociali o politiche rilevanti; tematiche come questioni di genere, etnia, immigrazione, consumi, lavoro, famiglia o religione. L'obiettivo del nostro contributo, all'interno di una selezione di sei episodi, appartenenti a differenti stagioni televisive, vuole essere quello di analizzare il ruolo del prosumer, attraverso l'osservazione degli elementi che identificano i protagonisti come tipici rappresentanti della classe media globale e descrivere come la loro ambizione al raggiungimento di un migliore status sociale li coinvolga in attività che li caratterizzano per essere: makers, fixers, sharer o tester.

The Simpsons portrays a mini-society that encompasses all of the major social institutions – education, family, mass media, government, religion, economy – through the experience of a nuclear family and their local community and is the longest prime time show running on television airing 596 episodes since 1989. Due to its global success we may say that the show is nowadays a portrait of the consumerist western-global middle class contradictions and how all its vices may turn out in a positive capitalist morale. The show has been so popular that the spread ability and cross mediality of their characters have reached by a side both any media form and kind of gadgets in the market, and by the other has been object of a variety of remix forms, user generated content and wiki, to the point that we may support the hypothesis of a metanarrative of western-global prosumer middle class through a long time seriality that lead to reality. In other words, the reclusiveness of the episodes has become so diffuse that they have become part of the social imaginary, they become key actors and opinion leaders in real life, merging the gap between fiction and reality in the same way, like in our view nowadays there is no more a clear distinction between physical and digital worlds. Episodes from the beginning are addressing social and political issues, such as gender, race, immigration, consumption, addictions and religion always emphasizing the contradictions of contemporary society. Our contribution objective is to analyze the prosumer role within a selection of 6 episodes of different seasons in which the protagonists seek to reach a better social status getting involved into activities that characterize them as makers, fixers, sharers and testers, as testimonials of a global western-middle class prosumer.

Key Words: Prosumer, Globalization, Seriality, Capitalism, Simpsons.

The objective of this paper is to describe and analyze the role of the prosumer in contemporary society, through analysis of six milestones episodes of the Simpson TV series. To this end, and as a starting point of our analysis, we believe it appropriate to reference the global society as the framework within which this and other complex social phenomena are the lifeblood and environment in which they spread.

Our theoretical conception is that the role of the prosumer is the expression of a contradiction, a qualified, but at the same time, exploited person, voluntarily and forcibly, free and yet imprisoned. Prosumer as a result of a multiple utopian vision derived from cyberutopia, brandtopia, the Californian ideology and the ecologist utopia. A subject who molds his awareness of freedom in the marketplace through the market, only partially aware of being qualified in some contexts and exploited in others, even more than in traditional capitalist logic. Our focus then moves on to try to problematize the main challenges the digital society requires us to understand, through a sociological approach, and how the prosumer action fits within this context. The role of the prosumer is then contextualized within the digital society. Undeniably the increasing digitization of products and services, as well as many aspects of contemporary life changes the relationship between consumption and production, to the point that the role of the prosumer and the concept of prosumerism arise as interpretive paradigms of a reality in transition. The phenomenon of prosumerism in the digital society becomes ever more widespread and pervasive; despite not being a historically new phenomenon it has specific features in the global society, on the net and in the sphere of consumption.

## Why the Simpsons

The Simpsons portrays a mini-society that encompasses all of the major social institutions – education, family, mass media, government, religion, economy – through the experience of a nuclear family and their local community and is the longest prime time show running on television airing 596 episodes since 1989.

Due to its global success we may say that the show is nowadays a portrait of the consumerist western-global middle class contradictions and how all its vices may turn out in a positive capitalist morale. The show has been so popular that the spread ability and crossmediality of their characters have reached by a side both any media form and kind of gadgets in the market, and by the other has been object of a variety of remix forms, user generated content and wiki, to the point that we may support the hypothesis of a metanarrative of western-global prosumer middle class trough a long time seriality that lead to reality. In other words, the reclusiveness of the episodes has become so diffuse that their have become part of the social imaginary, they become key actors and opinion leaders in real life, merging the gap between fiction and reality in the same way, like in our view nowadays there is no more a clear distinction between physical and digital worlds.

The show since has been aired as had huge spreadability and even if has begun way before the internet was a global widespread phenomena has had a great capability of adapting its contents to the evolving media context. Due to the fact that has become a global success marketing strategist have been capable to build a system of satellites products and gadgets of various kind, moreover the show has become so popular that a specific theme park has been hosted at Universal Studios Orlando Florida. In other word the Disneyzation (Bryman, 2004) and McDonaldization process (Ritzer, 2004) in the nineties may be clearly applied to the Simpsons still nowadays, moreover the success of the show has been capable of turning something out of nothing.

The Simpson have been since its early years a disruptive cartoon describing the complex relationship of a contemporary middle class family witch the characters may be easily spotted at global level. Vice more than virtue describe any character and each one is defined by its social role emphasizing the disillusion of contemporary society with a labeling theory classical approach, just to give some quick example we may quote Mr Burns the avid capitalist, Winchester the lazy cop, Apu the immigrant, Barney the alcohol addict and Quinby the corrupt politician.

The long success of the show aired since 1989 and the seriality within the seriality of the opening theme the family couch and Bart's chalkboard have rapidly and constantly become part of the global social imaginary to the extent that the cartoon has become part of everyday life hosting guest star characters of the mundane lifestyle such as pop bands, U2, Rolling Stones and Red Hot Chili Peppers, sports stars such as Magic Jhonson, Payton Manning or Cristiano Ronaldo, politicians as Clinton, Bush and many others have been simpsonized just to give some examples.

Moreover the Simpson made an excursion in the so called real world in a 3D episode, emphasizing the nothing something continuum or merging theoretically speaking the gap between real virtual. Due to this reason I decided to choose 6 different episodes from different epochs in order to analyze the evolution of the prosumer theory within the series. The episodes took in consideration are:

1. Oh Brother, Where Art Thou? - Epi. 15th Season 2nd Aired February 24 1991;
2. Deep Space Homer - Epi. 15th Season 5th Aired February 24 1994;
3. Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield - Epi. 14th Season 7th Aired February 4 1996;
4. El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer - Epi.9th Season 8 20th Aired January 5 1997;
5. MyPods and Boomsticks - Epi. Season 20th Aired November 30 2008;
6. Weekend at Burnsie's - Epi. 16 Season 13th Aired April 7 2002.

I decide to choose two episode per era, identifying a pre internet epoch before 1995 (episode n. 1 & 2) considering the global release of Windows 95 the beginning of the internet as a global social phenomenon and the beginning of the digital natives.

A internet diffusion epoch from 1996 to 2000 episodes 3 & 4 and a post internet diffusion form 2002 episodes 5 & 6.

## Prosumer Theory

The concepts of prosumerism, the interrelated process of consumption and production, and prosumer were introduced by Alvin Toffler more than thirty years ago. Despite the popularity of the work of Toffler, his ideas had little impact in the academic world, and not only that, for several decades. This happened mainly because the concept of prosumerism was overshadowed by his ideas apparently more important, for example that of the "future shock" and that, as a popularizer and futurist, Toffler enjoyed little credibility in the academic world.

The digital revolution and the global spread of the Internet, however, have helped to change things, today in fact are many Web sites that are based and require activity on the part of those who rightly call themselves prosumers.

As a result, the ideas and theories associated with the concepts of prosumer and prosumerism have recently garnered a great deal of attention both academic (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), which to a greater extent in mainstream level (Rifkin, 2014).

You can say that the prosumerism today can be considered both as an original phenomenon that as an evolutionary process, triggered by a series of opportunities that generate what can be defined as the new world of prosumers.

Since the 70s of the twentieth century the concept of co-production in various sectors, services (Bell, 1976), hospitals (Goffman, 1961) or transport (Hochschild, 1983) just to name a few has shown its theoretical relevance, but is only when Toffler introduced the term prosumer that the concept has been considered also as the phenomenon identified Negri (1989), Virlio (2000) Hardt (2002) as the displacement from the production factory to society, or by Ritzer (1998) as the mass to work carried out by the model of the consumer's Mc'Donald.

From the Internet boom or the triple revolution (Lee & Wellman, 2013), the web can be considered both as a platform and a metaphor for any collective activity (Mazzoli, 2009) that is activated by the passions of the people and becomes an entity greater than the sum of its parts (Gauntlett, 2012), has revived all the theoretical assumptions of the studies on coproduction making it clear that this process is repeated on the global scale, through the transformation between production and consumption of the contents of digital in the form of user generated content (UGC), has triggered a structural change in the forms of capitalism (Beer & Burrow, 2007; Newman, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Scholtz, 2013), in the direction of what is considered "free labor" (Terranova, 2000)," working" consumers (Kleemann et al., 2008 , Rieder & Voß, 2010; Voß & Rieder, 2005)," voluntary work "(Dujarier, 2008), most recently summed up as" unpaid work" in the sense of Ritzer and JurGenson (2010). The sociology of labor and consumption, through the relationship between consumers and businesses, based on production capacity of consumers, has identified four types of consumer activity, whereas job: what to do and how consumers (Daniellou, 2005; Dujarier, 2014):

1. The social division of labor and management;

2. Actual Work: what to do to produce / consume;
3. Work done: what is the end result of the process;
4. Work experience: the meaning ascribed to the process.

All of these work activities that consumers put into practice, often supervised by the production system, are generating profit. Dujarier (2014) is due to what it considers the three configurations of the social work of the consumer: the self-directed, which essentially external-simple tasks vying for consumers, co-production collaborative that leverages the collective work, and the so-called organizational work, such as innovative interpretation of the activities in which the consumer is involved.

Our hypothesis, that the prosumer has a contradictory role in the digital society now goes through what may be considered a typification of agency prosumer same, through the dominant feature of their being inserted in the production process consumption.

Regardless of which players operate at the individual level, to procure or collective (Hewson, 2010), in a collaborative or competitive (Sennett, 2012), their behavior should be supplemented or deviant (Campbell, 2007) compared to values proposed by marketers or that are oriented towards nothing or something (Ritzer, 2004), they are empowered or exploited (Cova, 2009), they are still involved in trying to mediate contradictions through the generative possibilities of their actions at symbolic level (Bartoletti, 2009), which passes essentially through their knowledge and want to do, fix, share, or head-king.

Hence our proposal to identify a typing that you can somehow place as a response to the emergence of the prosumer, prosumer machines through the power that individuals bring into, useful to identify the meaning at the same time concrete and symbolic individuals attach to their actions.

The four main categories that we offer are:

1. Makers: those in the process of production-consumption emphasizes the do-no;
2. Fixers: those who are in the process of production-consumption emphasize the repair;
3. Sharers: those who are in the process of production-consumption emphasizes the role of the no-sharing;
4. Testers: those in the process of production-consumption emphasizes the test and evaluation.

In our typing we want to emphasize how the models, we consider the sources of prosumerism can be considered as intraspecific hybrids, are not exclusive of each other, but rather interconnected; makers to be an example does not mean it can not simultaneously be a tester, or being a fixer does not exclude the occur at the same sharer, for this reason we prefer to specify that the process emphasizes a prosumerism actions, not excluding the many possibilities and keeping in mind the three configurations of the work of social consumer proposals from Dujarier.

Specifically, the term refers primarily to makers as theorized by Anderson (2012) according to which a subject, or a group, produce products with the aim to commercialize

them. Assumes the dimensions of a movement, the fact that an increasing number of people active in the processes of DIY, do-it-yourself (DIY), or to do with the other, do-it-with-others (DIWO) to develop unique objects.

Generally, the DIT and the DIWO allows subjects to create sophisticated technological devices-will, through collaboration and sharing textual resources, videos and tools in the network.

The term fixer can be applied to the culture and the movement of its makers as a sub-dimension, component or if you prefer, but in our sense wants to have a different classification. The concept refers to those who instead of creating new objects, they specialize in the repair, hack or improve certain existing products. From the point of view of innovation and ability to transform the object, in this case we refer to a process and a challenge that even before being technological culture, everything that breaks you can repair. The fixers tend to operate in a context similar to that of the makers, where size is collaborative and competitive balance through the market, as well as the level of competition and deviance. Their creed is to modify, repair and improve the system as a product of mass production, developing and promoting a culture of eco-oriented elongation of the life cycle of the products and the reduction of waste.

The third category is that of sharers wants to put the emphasis on the opportunities offered by the so-called collaborative economy also known as sharing economy, where sharing becomes the generating element of the value. The theme of the common good of the collective, cross the four types, but is particularly relevant for this. In the sharing economy consumption and property give way to the use and cooperation. The generative possibilities of the economic model of sharing are expanding rapidly as possible including those who were relegated to the margins of the market economy (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). A generative economic system has the potential to move from a model focused on the exploitation of Marxian mold, in favor of a more equitable system based on the concepts of Emile Durkheim's division of labor and organic solidarity (ibid.).

The communities of shared interests, systems of redistribution and collaborative lifestyles, have already begun the process of redefining the meaning of it-what we consume and also questioned how the consume. The collaborative consumption appears more and more widespread and mature, which bases its assumption on the existential value of the commons, trust among strangers, that are necessary in a few simple basic knowledge to be able to be actors and, finally, the fact that has already reached a critical mass that assert their own autonomy (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). These four elements are inter-related to the sharer and weigh equally, even if they are not always equally represented at the phenomenological level.

Finally, the testers are those who in their activities and tests products or services, are the protagonists of what is called the reputational economy. In a traditional logic are those that were defined early adapters. These people in the digital society acquire a great importance, not only because they are for the economy reputational marketing speakers of commercial messages, but also because by amateurs and volunteers are able to generate consumer surplus by acting as a department of research and development among peers. The speed of innovation means that commercial products tend to become obsolete more

quickly while remaining constantly in beta, for this reason the consumption and utilization have become a testing process from which to draw ideas and suggestions for subsequent versions. Sometimes the solutions found by others are co-opted for the improvement given by the experiences of prosumers that generate behaviors which in turn lead to a concrete action of self-improvement.

Our typing want to restore a classic vision and no modern concept of work and the act of consuming, which refers to idleness and to store the result of a relational activity and not taking into account the different phases of the process of production and consumption, but that somehow enhances the value of the community and of how the process of digital prosumerism is possible to think in terms of effectiveness and efficiency not only aware of the fact that the contradiction in which they are involved you can resolve in a situationist but not strategic.

## Conclusion

Aware of the fact that prosumer social imaginary is grounded upon an utopian view made utopias that are inspired by the view that marketing is society (Boccia Artieri, 2012) and that they have the role of the prosumer as a central participant in common, as a methanarrative of global prosumer middle class, let's define the Utopias which shape prosumer consciousness: Brandtopia, Cyberutopia, Californian Ideology and Ecotopia. In details the term Brandtopia or utopia of the brand refers to the utopia created by the brand to the extent that ownership of the brand is instrumental in building its identity. Cyberutopianism, comparable according to Nelison (2004), is a post-modern secular religion which is for some a promise of freedom in opposition to the exploitation of the capitalist system (Turner, 1999) and for others the ideological foundation of a control strategy on subjects implemented through the so-called social-networking platforms (Morozov, 2011). The Californian Ideology pledges that every member will become a successful hi-tech entrepreneur through information technologies, the empowerment of the individual and the drastic reduction of the power of the Nation-State. The utopia of Californication refers to a specific consumption culture that identifies California as the mythical place where representations of the global economy come to life. According to some freedom of thought reigns, to others a global neo-medieval purgatory in which the utopia of dynamism and mobility collapses in dystopia and stasis (Featherstone, 2013). According to ecotopia the growth concept must be interpreted in harmony with that of long-term sustainability in such a way that the good to have is not confused with the good to be. In this light it is necessary to revisit the concept of GDP in the way that it includes factors which have always been considered marginal for growth such as the environment, health, social relationships, etc. GDP must become GDW, which is gross domestic wellbeing. At the same the classic economic logic must be overcome and moved towards renewable energy, clean technology and green businesses.

Our hypothesis of the Simpsons as a methanarrative of the global prosumer middleclass is validated by the analysis of the episodes belonging from the three main epochs of the show.

The pre internet episodes (1 & 2) clearly describe the skepticism of a society still grounded upon what may be defined the atoms economy in which the professional is still leading the amateur in the process of creation of value and in a market where the consumer is still considered as a target and a cash cow. The Homer attempt of building a car has been defined “the most epic failure of automotive industry” in a society in which the bottom up process both in communication and production system is still ruling the production consumption dynamics. The second episodes emphasize the power of the amateur and how Homer become an astronaut without no skills at all because the media system needs a common man as a protagonist may be considered as the rise of the reality show model as a form of presumption.

The internet diffusion episodes (3 & 4) are expressed by the DIY dream of Marge and her attempt of making the typical middle class social escalate through presumption purchasing and constantly modifying a Chanel branded dress, represent how goods may be perceived as pass partout into different context and the know how the consecration of the DIY lifestyle. Episode 4 clearly shows how a prosumer may be contemporary maker, fixer, sharer and tester in the process of presumption and how this in Homer’s view the contradiction between empowerment and employment is a dream of setting the subject free from the traditional capitalistic logics that may turn out in a nightmare.

Least but not last the internet boom episodes (5 & 6) in which Homer smokes as a tester medical marijuana and the maple store episode express a techno optimistic view of the world typical of the cyberutopia and of the Californian ideology that needs prosumers in order to literally put consumers to work and emphasize the contradiction hypothesized at the beginning of this article.

## Nota biografica

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