Introduction to Civic Media in 10 Twinkle Points

by kanarinka | Published September 10, 2012

I have recently joined the Center for Civic Media/MIT Media Lab as a Research Assistant. My background is in visual and media arts, software development and higher ed. In the arts, one thing I always worked against was the notion that "Art" (capital A, fancy Art) is the product of a lone genius working apart from society. I make artwork collaboratively with groups like the Institute for Infinitely Small Things and Platform2. And many projects involve the participation of specific publics such as the Institute's map The City Formerly Known as Cambridge where we invited residents and visitors to the city to propose new names for Cambridge's public spaces.

I'm interested in questions of authorship and labor, the meaning of participation, the quality of our public spaces and landscapes, and the value of creative, emotional engagement in relation to social change. My artwork, and these questions, have circled near civic media for some time so I'm psyched to be taking Sasha Costanza-Chock's Introduction to Civic Media course to learn more about this nascent field both from a practical and theoretical standpoint.

Our first assignment is this blog post to introduce ourselves and summarize our first class. Curiously, I feel a mild discomfort with making my class assignment a public text associated with my Googlable name (somewhat ironic because I have asked my students to do such things for a long time). But I am running with it for the moment and chalking it up to the fact that in our efficiency and production-oriented society we must recognize that every action from liking something to doing class homework is not just about the action itself but becomes part of a network of data points that can be used to sell things, build brands, and create value (financial, social). Hopefully this is a further talking point in our class. So here I go to create a little bit of value for me, the class, and the Center…

In our first class we used a tool called 10 Points Tool which is part of a suite of tools with a lovely name – "Intertwinkles" – developed by Charlie DeTar here at the Center to collaboratively and synchronously define 10 principles of Civic Media. We worked in groups of 3-4 people to create statements about what Civic Media is and what Civic Media does. The results of this 45-60 minute exercise are not bad at all, despite the fact that we were doing it way past my bedtime. They include statements like:

- Civic Media aspires to be participatory
- Civic Media fights against social inequality
- Civic Media promotes action and engagement

An interesting question broached during the exercise was how aspirational vs. true the statements are and whether we use aspirational language ("aspires to", "strives to") to denote this or not. The group decided to keep the aspirational language in most of the points.

Part of our assignment this week is to offer up our own definition of civic media based on this exercise. For me, it's always hard to develop definitions of concepts apart from specific enactments of them. What I can observe from the results of the exercise is that our interpretations of Civic Media are grounded in a couple ideas:

1. Power and resources are not evenly distributed at any scale (nations, communities, individuals)
2. The institutions and frameworks that control and distribute resources are not necessarily fair and just
3. But they are permeable

4. There is hope for change through coordinated information dissemination, community storytelling, creative intervention, activist confabulating, grassroots multiplying, and collaborative conspiring

The last emotional bit – hope – is what is interesting to me as an artist and what I am also wary of in relation to social change. One thing I want to learn in my time here at the Center is how to channel our aspirations for the liberatory powers of media and information technologies into meaningful social transformation. And to be wary of places where all we are doing is building our own brand.

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