

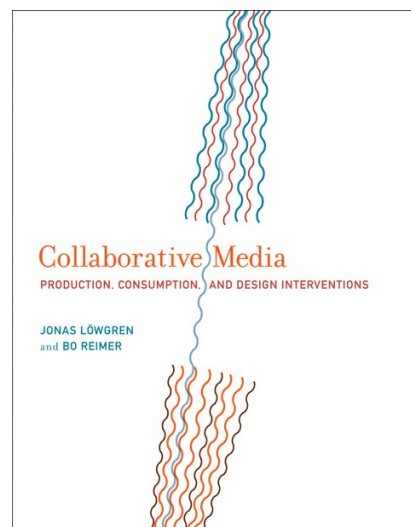
Book Review: Collaborative Media: Production, Consumption, and Design Interventions by Jonas Löwgren and Bo Reimer

*With many new forms of digital media – including social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr – the people formerly known as the audience no longer only consume but also produce and even design media. **Jonas Löwgren and Bo Reimer** term this phenomenon collaborative media, and in this book they investigate the qualities and characteristics of these forms of media in terms of what they enable people to do. Their analysis of projects in collaborative media that range from small multidisciplinary research experiments to commercial projects used by millions of people enriches the existing academic and public debates, writes **Vyacheslav W. Polonski**.*

Collaborative Media: Production, Consumption, and Design Interventions. Jonas Löwgren and Bo Reimer. MIT Press. December 2013.

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The emergence of digital communication technologies has significantly changed the traditional media landscape, providing users with new means for communication and creative expression. In this context, a number of claims have been put forth by academics, policy makers and pundits alike regarding the nature of this change, leading to heated debates on the effects of digital media and the re-imagined relationship between media producers and consumers. In their new book *Collaborative Media*, [Jonas Löwgren](#) and [Bo Reimer](#) provide a fresh perspective on the changing patterns of infrastructure, design, production and consumption of new media, as well as the practices and properties of its novel cultural forms.



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The authors posit that the nascent communicative and cultural practices associated with digital technologies are transformative, insofar as these practices cut across established media paradigms of society and institutions, lowering the material and communicative barriers of expression and allowing a larger proportion of the population to participate in creative expression and public discourse. To Löwgren and Reimer, this change originates from the widespread diffusion of “collaborative media” – a set of emergent cultural forms that are mediated by digital technologies and are re-shaping the existing media infrastructure by emphasising action-oriented empowerment and collaboration among media users. The authors note that this phenomenon has important implications for societal change, the transformation of media institutions, and the development of communality within smaller social structures.

The book provides ample evidence for these claims, which is not merely anecdotal, but grounded in 9 in-depth case studies chosen from a broad repertoire of previous practice-based design interventions by the authors and their colleagues. In the first chapter, the authors begin their analysis with an exposition of the early antecedents of collaborative media, such as the DIY movement, Modding, Machinima and Fan Fiction. Further, the authors provide a useful analysis of the chosen terminology behind “collaborative media”, distinguishing it from other popular terms, such as “new media” and “social media”. Next, the theoretical claims are laid out and evidence is provided on three analytically distinct levels: Chapter 4 presents three cases that deal with societal development and governance through collaborative media. Subsequently, chapter 5 discusses three cases on how transformation can be ignited by researchers in collaboration with institutions. Finally, the three cases in chapter 6 examine patterns of cohesion, altruism, and communality on the smaller level of social groups, which are pointedly conceptualised as “tribes”. Overall, all these cases provide rich descriptions and thought-provoking analysis of diverse collaborative media practices that cover a variety of cultural, social, economic and political

contexts. When combining the results from the cases, the authors conceive of technology as an enabling factor, skilfully manoeuvring between the opposing camps of social shaping theorists and technological determinists by explaining that collaboration stems from a delicate interplay among technological, cultural, and social factors at historically specific points in time.



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While the book offers a compelling account of contemporary socio-technical and cultural dynamics of collaborative media, it remains somewhat ignorant of the phenomenological perspective related to the conscious experiences, emotions and judgements of new communicative practices. For example, are Internet users collaborating for the sake of the collective good, or merely using the available tools for achieving their individual goals, such as self-marketing and the attraction of attention and prestige? Besides, are Internet users distributing their own opinions, or merely recycling media products from traditional production-consumption media structures? Finally, how do Internet users judge different channels of collaborative media against each other, and how do they coordinate and choose a single platform for further activities? Given the novelty of collaborative media, it would have been worthwhile exploring some of these themes in greater detail.

Moreover, it is debatable whether elements of collaborative media culture have become already sufficiently broadly adopted across a wide range of demographics to be considered “mainstream”. Arguably, only a small proportion of the population actively engages in collaborative practices that result in creative output e.g. films, images and experiences – notwithstanding their prominent exposure on the Internet and in traditional mass media outlets. Accordingly, Löwgren and Reimer’s view of the Internet as an exhaustive cultural and informational space where users are empowered to creatively express themselves is challenged in the light of information asymmetries and incomplete information of the real world. Furthermore, a distinction needs to be made between “speaking” and “being heard” since the perfect distribution of cultural information is essentially limited by

individuals' attention span, indicating that online media content continuously competes for users' attention. This is exacerbated by the fragmentation of cultural information sources and discussion spaces into myriad issue publics that tend to create echo chambers around polarised viewpoints. As a result, the inequalities in the dissemination of content allow traditional media structures to persevere and continue to set the media agenda based on seemingly outdated and suboptimal decision rules. Thus it remains to be seen whether we will see a more extensive adoption of collaborative web-services for creative expression in the near future, or whether they will continue to be used by a relatively small group of creative enthusiasts.

In summary, there is an extensive literature pertaining to media choice and media effects on both theoretical and empirical levels. However, the analysis provided by Löwgren and Reimer goes further in synthesising academic perspectives with practice-oriented design interventions in a transdisciplinary fashion. In this regard, the patterns and themes emanating from this book could be useful for diverse audiences: academics, designers, policy makers and the general public. In fact, the authors state that they envision this book to become a call to action, facilitating a combination of analytical and design-oriented methods in researching and understanding communication practices around collaborative media. This book contributes a number of interesting insights on the implications of digital communication technologies to the literature of computer-mediated communication, exploring how people formerly known as the audience have become more active and empowered with respect to their collaborative, mediated practices. Löwgren and Reimer thoroughly analyse a complex set of issues related to this cultural shift, enriching the existing academic and public debates with new evidence from original case studies and a detailed theoretical discussion of what constitutes collaborative media in the 21st century. I salute the authors for this achievement and highly recommend reading this book.

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