

Building a Market-Community

Paradoxes of Culturalization and Merchandization in the Internet

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I. Introduction

The Internet has two major characteristics: On the one hand it is a big market-place, on the other hand there are lots of non-proprietary social phenomena where people meet each other in chat-rooms, share their music-files, engage in diverse discussions, find new friends or even intimate partners, contribute to collaborative projects like Wikipedia and so on. While these two orders seemed to be clearly differentiated in earlier stages of the Internet’s evolution, their dynamic is now becoming more complicated. In its early days both of these virtual orders already coexisted in the digital information environment – but in a somewhat separated manner. Today – in the age of “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly 2005) – their interpenetration is fostered by complex digital environments of different kinds. A curious example much discussed recently is the online-platform “Second Life” which is provided by Linden Lab. By sharing the access to the source code of programmable 3D-animations with their consumers and by selling some additional rights (e.g. to buy virtual land), the company “offers a truly collaborative, immersive and open-ended entertainment experience, where together people create and inhabit a virtual world of their own design”.¹ What therefore seems to be big fun for a dispersed online-community with millions of members at first glance is more though on closer inspection. There is one little virtual artefact – a very simple code-structure compared to other virtual creations – that is exempted from the customer’s access and escapes their ability to modify their common second life (while it may nevertheless be subject to some attack by hackers): the “Linden-Dollar” which is convertible into real US-Dollars.

What does this implementation of money into “Second Life” mean, and what does it do to the virtual community? It is this sort of question that my paper is interested in. In the first part I will give a short overview on the relationship between markets and communities as well as its

¹ URL: <http://lindenlab.com/about>.

development in the Internet (II). Afterwards I will look at a special case that raises similar questions as “Second life” does: the online-shopping-platform that is provided by the Ciao-AG which combines a rich virtual community life with the commercial environment of online-shopping (III). It is my suspicion that this framing of cultural life by the world of commodities and vice versa will lead to the building of a market-community with many paradoxical effects. What from one point of view may seem as an effort to culturally re-embed the anonymous market appears from another perspective as a way of how the consumer-oriented capitalistic enterprise colonizes and transforms the autonomy of culture by seemingly adapting to its complex conditions.

II. Markets, Communities and their Dynamics in the Internet

In the online market-place, advanced catalogue-selling has long been the major paradigm. Here the customers in the most typical cases operate in social isolation. Even if the technology facilitates a networked two-way-communication, a common mode of using the internet is getting things by visiting trusted e-shops or corporations, searching information from diverse institutions or receiving entertainment from the media-industries. Some things may be for free, others are not, but the dominant social arrangement in all these practices is market-like: individual consumers on the one hand, organized providers of some online service, information or material on the other hand. George Ritzer (2005: 195-224) for example refers to the big consumption-websites – with some exception of auction-sites like eBay – in order to sustain his thesis that globalization amplifies social and cultural emptiness. As the main characteristics of these virtual sites he identifies their formal structures, their exchangeability of content, their lack of significant others, their loss of a binding history as well as their absent locality and their programmed aim to guide and control the user who – as a consumer – has to do all the work on these sites. While presuming the dominance of an ongoing rationalization process in the economy which controls the construction of the world wide websites, Ritzer also recognizes other aspects of the Internet where people meet each other to jointly do things without commercial interest. But in view of the enormous investments from big business he is quite sceptical about their power to shape the future of the digital information environment.

In this regard the early visionaries represent the opposite position. They take the virtual community and the productive aspects of internet-usage as paradigmatic for its further development. For internet pioneers like Howard Rheingold (1993) or Sherry Turkle (1995) mailing-lists, discussion boards, open-source software production, chat-rooms, multi-user-online-

games and so on lie at the heart of a rich cultural life in the World Wide Web. Beyond the creation of new consumer oriented markets the first innovation of the Internet stems from its technological infrastructure and its capability to connect people in a very inexpensive and easy way. In its basic material features the Internet is thoroughly communalized insofar the users are in possession of the necessary computer-technology – except of existing cable-networks they easy can get access to. Growing up from early use- and newsgroups with their style and ethics of collaborative working, the Internet will never be completely under control of big media-corporations but will always provide some space for decentred, spontaneous, open and non-proprietary social engagements online. The fascination of the emerging communities stems from social practices which often entail anonymity as well as an ethics of gift-exchange. Even when there are important struggles going on over the rights and technologies to share files in peer-to-peer-networks on such grounds, the capacity to build communities of different kinds will – in this view – still powerfully shape the face of the Internet.

Thus, concerning the Internet's social character, a "community model" can be distinguished from the "consumption model" (Barkardjieva 2005: 165).² This distinction is very useful as long as it is used in Max Weber's sense of ideal types. Then the first model refers to communication rituals, a social, non-proprietary mode of production and its norms of reciprocity which help to constitute forms of personal friendship, of social belonging, of trust, of continuous solidarity, but also of social exclusion and so on. And on the other hand we may find disenchanted areas in the Internet where private individuals primarily make strategic use of product search and information, of price comparison machines and seemingly do not engage in any significant social contact. Those different social logics of connectivity, which we refer to as markets as a kind of *Vergesellschaftung* and communities as results of *Vergemeinschaftung* respectively are still important, even when they are massively mutually entangled in all empirical cases – particularly with regard to the institutional embedding of most structured forms of cooperation. Therefore Barkardjieva's term "virtual togetherness" (2005: 166) should in my view be used to refer to the whole empirical continuum of all social relations to be found in the Internet, because it refrains from excluding the commercial consumption sites. The market, the money, the technology and the law of supply and demand bind domestic consumers virtually together even when they seem to be socially isolated while they are surfing

² After her introduction of these two concepts, Maria Barkardjieva (2005: 168) argues against a strong concept of community. She prefers the term "virtual togetherness" for the first model because of the broad spectrum of social engagements occurring in the web. Here, though, she unnecessarily abandons the theoretical fruitfulness of the first distinction in order to present a concept that is more appropriate in respect to her empirical data. – For a similar approach to the "Internet in everyday" life that focuses more on the empirical consumption practices see Lamla (2007b) and Lamla/Jacob (2005).

and shopping alone. The weak social bonds of market-interdependencies become more obvious when e.g. amazon.com recommends a book and explains that “customers who bought items you recently viewed also bought these items”. This is a form of socializing in the market-sphere which fully corresponds to the criteria of virtual togetherness, while it is very far from building a community and much closer to the consumption model of the Internet.

In terms of Barry Wellman or Manuel Castells the empirical continuum between the “community model” and the “consumption model” could also be described as different manifestations of what they call the “networked individualism” (Wellman 2002; Wellman et al. 2003; Castells 2005: 142-146). This concept does not only want to give a realistic empirical view but also reminds us not to ignore the wider societal context of the Internet. Thus the sociability of the Internet stays in close contact with our post-traditional society where single individuals claim to be the constitutive unit of all social orders and where even strong communities like families adapt to the model of chosen social networks. As we know from Georg Simmel (1989), this individualism has a lot to do with the developed market economy. Therefore all kinds of social relations we may experience in the Internet do not only bind people virtually together. They are also based on a technical medium, an economic infrastructure and cultural forms of life which already entail an individualistic mode of entering into social worlds and relations. If then both ideal-typical orders are in some of their aspects ubiquitous, they will never be realized as a pure formal rationality in online-consumer-markets or as social bonds and boundaries which are as strong as those in traditional rural communities.

But in the age of Web 1.0 this complex set of empirical dispositions did not hinder us to identify segments, practices or even historical trends in the Internet that tend either towards the consumption model or towards the community model. E.g. in the first volume of his trilogy “The Network Society”, Castells (2003: 415ff.) predicted the evolution of an integrated multi media environment which would divide the users into an “interacting” minority which knows how to use the emancipatory social capacities of the technology and the mass of “interacted” consumers who find themselves confined to choose from what the digital cultural industry has to offer. And in his book on the “Internet Galaxy” (Castells 2005) he describes the core of the Internet’s sociability empirically as predominantly sustaining weak social ties between dispersed persons who would never have built any social relation without the new technology. Additionally the Internet fosters already existing communities (families, associations and so on). In some cases it may even induce strong friendships or intimate relationships between persons who first dated online. But these cases are as exceptional in virtual communities as

those excessive forms of Internet consumption which result in a pathological social isolation and depression. All these empirical diagnoses and descriptions rely on the assumption that we can still make a useful distinction between fields and practices which are dominated by principles of consumer-markets and other areas which are guided by some logic of non-proprietary togetherness.

To be sure, even today this might be true for many applications of the Internet. We still find for example those areas in the web where people discuss and help each other in an unselfish manner to cope with their uncommon diseases. And the same is true to many shopping environments or web-presentations where consumers only use the top-down direction to buy commodities or obtain information. But there are also fields in the empirical landscape of the Internet where the distinctions between the consumer and the community model or between proprietary and non-proprietary modes of cooperation lose their discriminatory power. The unpaid work that is done by consumers in many internet settings – the self service in perfection – is already softening the clear-cut boundaries of the consumption model (Voß/Rieder 2005: 53-82). Another example is given by the open source movement: Instead of developing the web browser “firefox” for its own use, the community started an aggressive market-campaign that was addressing the ordinary consumer and was constantly mapping the success in its competition with Microsoft’s internet explorer. Here the community’s performance took over the market and consumption model in many regards. But this blurring did not seem to be significant as long as it was far from becoming the normal case.

That’s exactly what’s occurring today. The successful business models which now dominate the Internet – e.g. Google, eBay, Amazon – share important features with the most successful collaborative open source projects like the online encyclopedia “Wikipedia”, non-proprietary file-sharing tools like BitTorrent or the massively growing Blogosphere. In order to shed some light on these common features Tim O’Reilly (2005) introduced the concept of “Web 2.0”. A lot could be said about this discussion and I only want to highlight some aspects here: The most important principle of these new technological environments is their radicalization of the decentralization of production by using the consumer’s online-capacities in all possible ways. While Google’s successful search engine relies on the clicks and links which are made by others, eBay is also providing simply the organizing platform for decentred economic exchange by millions of users who often are consumers as well as suppliers. To make profits by appropriating user-generated value is not necessarily an exploitation of the users by those corporations, because the consumers – who become active users – may get their benefits from

these different forms of “crowdsourcing” (Friebe/Lobo 2006: 213-239): There are systems of micro-payments for different kinds of stupid click-work – e.g. you can collect “webmiles” on a virtual account by clicking advertisements or you can use Google’s advertising service on your own homepage and earn some money if the ads are clicked by someone else. And eBay is paradigmatic for a radical decentralisation of markets that offers new income opportunities for a lot of people who only have to pay small fees to the provider of the platform.³

While lots of such technical applications in the “Web 2.0” rely on the “wisdom of crowds” and reduce the requested contributions by single persons (Surowiecki 2004) there are also forms of participation in the market sphere where ordinary users should contribute using their creative capacities, their intelligence and their social commitment.⁴ E.g. Amazon does not only provide space and technical opportunities to the consumers, which allows to sell their old books or to build their own stores. The company is also interested to gain something from the consumer’s special market-knowledge and their lively experiences and asks for product-reviews and recommendations to other consumers. Yahoo has now combined some features of the “Blogosphere” – the highly networked system of published, interactive web-diaries written by ordinary users – with its own market-platform and product search engine in order to start a project called “Shopsphere”, where users obtain webspace to build their own “pick-lists” of recommendable consumer-goods.⁵ This implies a smooth transition from a wider user-participation in the market sphere to the utilization of mutual help. This mutuality is motivated by social gratifications which essentially include a non-proprietary dimension.⁶ Here the principles and cultures of virtual communities come into play, and it is my hypothesis that this is part of a more general convergence of different modes of cultural and economic production – in the Internet and beyond.

³ For a critique of Web 2.0 see Lanier (2006): “The Web 2.0 notion is that an entrepreneur comes up with some scheme that attracts huge numbers of people to participate in an activity online – like the video sharing on YouTube, for instance. Then you can “monetize” at an astronomical level by offering a way to bring ads or online purchasing to people in your gigantic crowd of participants. What is amazing about this idea is that the people are the value – and they also pay for the value they provide instead of being paid for it. For instance, when you buy something that is advertized, part of the price goes to the ads – but in the new online world, you yourself were the bait for the ad you saw. The whole cycle is remarkably efficient and concentrates giant fortunes faster than any other business scheme in history.” (http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06.2_index.html)

⁴ One example for the first case is Amazon’s “mechanical turk” (see <http://www.mturk.com/mturk/welcome>) whereas the opposite is represented by contributors of Wikipedia (see <http://www.wikipedia.org/>).

⁵ See <http://shopping.yahoo.com/shopsphere/>. One “picklist” e.g. recommends the essentials that are needed for a long hike – from the “Patagonia Bucket Hat” to the “Pocket First Aid Kit” – and links you directly to the shop or to a price-comparison.

⁶ The gratifications stem from orders of mutual recognition and social esteem. These social orders need to hold a distance to the order of commodity exchange and rely on the ceremonial character and generosity of the gift that produces some gratefulness and thus binds people together (Ricoeur 2006: 290-306; see also Adloff/Mau 2005).

How far this convergence reaches and which mode prevails over the other are as well empirical questions as what its consequences might be. As Yochai Benkler (2006) puts it, under conditions of the new Internet-technologies it is much easier for millions or even billions of volunteers to participate in a social mode of wealth production. To analyze the dynamic of what he calls the “networked information economy” – in opposition to the “industrialized information economy” – he firstly distinguishes between an individualized and a cooperative mode of social information production. Both are opposed to the commercial, property based market production. This is useful in order to separate the broadening of the market by its adjustment to individual user-capacities from those dynamics that emerge directly from non-proprietary social peer-production, community-building or sharing-practices. For Benkler the broad movement towards “social software” has now changed the material conditions for those non-market social practices and patterns and has facilitated their advancement – even in the economy: “They have come to play a substantial role as modes of motivating, informing, and organizing productive behaviour at the very core of the information economy. (...) It is the feasibility of producing information, knowledge, and culture through social, rather than market and proprietary relations – through cooperative peer production and coordinate individual action – that creates the opportunities for greater autonomous action, a more critical culture, a more discursively engaged and better informed republic, and perhaps a more equitable global community” (Benkler 2006: 92). While he is aware of the ongoing “battle over the institutional ecology of the digital environment” (Benkler 2006: 22-28, 383-459), his main aim is to highlight the opportunities this dynamic brings about for the autonomous individual as well as for the global society as a whole. Thus he develops an optimistic view of the economic utilization of social production and asks for the appropriate institutional conditions to realize the prospective “wealth of networks”.

Comparing it with markets and hierarchies as well as with the former “industrial” information economy instead of only measuring it according to high normative ideals of democracy Benkler identifies some competitive advantages of social production in regard to the transaction costs.⁷ And if the technological infrastructure of the digital environment clearly enhances the freedom and autonomy of the individual user to participate wherever she wants, there is no need to be afraid about the observable convergence of proprietary and non-proprietary modes of production. It may even be the case that those corporations which now get involved in social peer production and sharing – and together pay billions of dollars to buy social network-

⁷ The market is more efficient, Benkler (2006: 106-116) argues, if the allocation of scarce resources is at stake. But under conditions of the digital economy this scarcity disappears in many regards. Therefore the order of private property begins to restrict rather than to enhance the given opportunities of wealth production.

ing platforms like YouTube, MySpace, StudVZ and so on – will lose some of their power to control the production of culture (Benkler 2006: 91-127; see also van Bömmel 2003). It depends on the empirical contexts of these processes. While Benkler widely agrees with institutionalist approaches in economic sociology, and as a liberal professor of law, he focuses on contextual dispositions like the law of property in the information economy, the institutional power-relations of consumers and providers, and the mechanisms of filtering and accreditation that are necessary to avoid the information overload in the Internet. He also recognizes the *impact of culture* on these processes, but he does not undertake a sufficient analysis of its contextual dispositions.

But such an in-depth analysis, I think, is necessary for every empirical diagnosis concerning the convergence of the market and the community in the new digital information environment. To understand their dynamic interplay and to accurately appraise the empirical prospects for the institutionalization of a liberal and democratic social order today, we have to take into account the wider cultural history of our societies. Whereas the consumers may be liberated to become active users and participants by institutional and technological designs for the digital environment, they may nevertheless be dependent on their habitual cultural orientations and routines. In other words: The future path for the convergence of communities and markets in the Internet is in my view strongly influenced by an ongoing and already advanced integration, or the “new syncretism” of culture and capitalism (Rifkin 2000; Boltanski/Chiapello 2003; Neckel 2005; Franck 2005).

Looking at the wider cultural contexts of our societies, we get aware of their massively entangled relations with the social and economic order of capitalism. While sociologists like Max Weber ([1904/05] 1996), Daniel Bell ([1976] 1991) or Albert O. Hirschman ([1977] 1984) pointed to different and changing cultural embedding, legitimating and motivating conditions in the history of capitalism and other classics like Georg Simmel ([1900] 1989) or Walter Benjamin (1974) looked at its cultural consequences for modern lifestyles and political orientations, critical theorists like Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno ([1944] 1988) have additionally argued that culture is not only the contextual disposition but also the fundamental resource in late capitalism. By resource we do not only have to think of “social” and “cultural capital” as means of social distinction and economic competition in Bourdieu’s (1982) sense. While these aspects are still relevant for economic action we also have to highlight those transformations underlying the possibility to make culture an object as well as a means of commoditization and marketing. In this regard scholars have drawn much attention to the

consumerist culture as a complex mode of subject formation and symbolic attraction in advanced modern capitalism supporting the expansion of market-principles into many social fields (Baudrillard [1968] 1991; Campbell 1987; Featherstone 1991; Bauman 2003, Schrage 2003; Prishing 2006, Reckwitz 2006: 500–630; Lamla 2007a). But this is not necessarily a one-way-street: As part of cultural practices, a commercial mode of consumption could in principle also enhance the autonomy of life, individual self-realization and modes of emancipation from traditional norms. It depends on the ways in which commodities of any kind are used and culturally embedded (de Certeau 1988; Illouz 2003). Thus the intensified economic orientation towards the consumer is contextualized by a general development in contemporary capitalism which first of all increases the impact of culture in the whole process of economic production and reproduction – with different possible outcomes (Lash/Urry 1994).

In my paper I will now try to demonstrate how new forms of the consumer-oriented capitalistic enterprise colonize and transform the autonomy of culture by seemingly adapting to its complex conditions. For this purpose I want to analyze a very significant example of the enhanced connectivity of markets and communities which can be found in the Internet. If Giddens ([1990] 1995) is right to describe social practices as increasingly disembodied from their local cultural contexts in late modernity – partly due to abstract systems like money or science, but also other mechanisms which enhance the time-space-distance of interdependent social action or our “institutional reflexivity” – this should have consequences for online-sociability as well. A special reason, then, for the reinvention of some community-culture in virtual marketplaces could be the re-embedding of already disembodied practices, possibly their re-enchantment, in order to solve problems of trust. Therefore it may be worthwhile to look at empirical cases where such problems are at stake to find out more about the co-evolution of culture and capitalism in the Internet and beyond.

III. Case-Study: Ciao’s Shopping-Portal and Consumer-Community

My empirical focus lies on www.ciao.co.uk (figure 1). This is a commercial internet-platform where consumers on the one hand deliberate about the quality of hundreds of thousands of products in different categories, while on the other hand it also serves as a complex shopping-portal. The platform is provided by the Ciao-AG, founded in Munich in 1999, a marketing-corporation which sells detailed survey-data on consumer behaviour and is the European market leader in this online-sector. In 2005 the corporation has been taken over by the Greenfield Corporation in order to copy and transfer the successful model to the US-market.

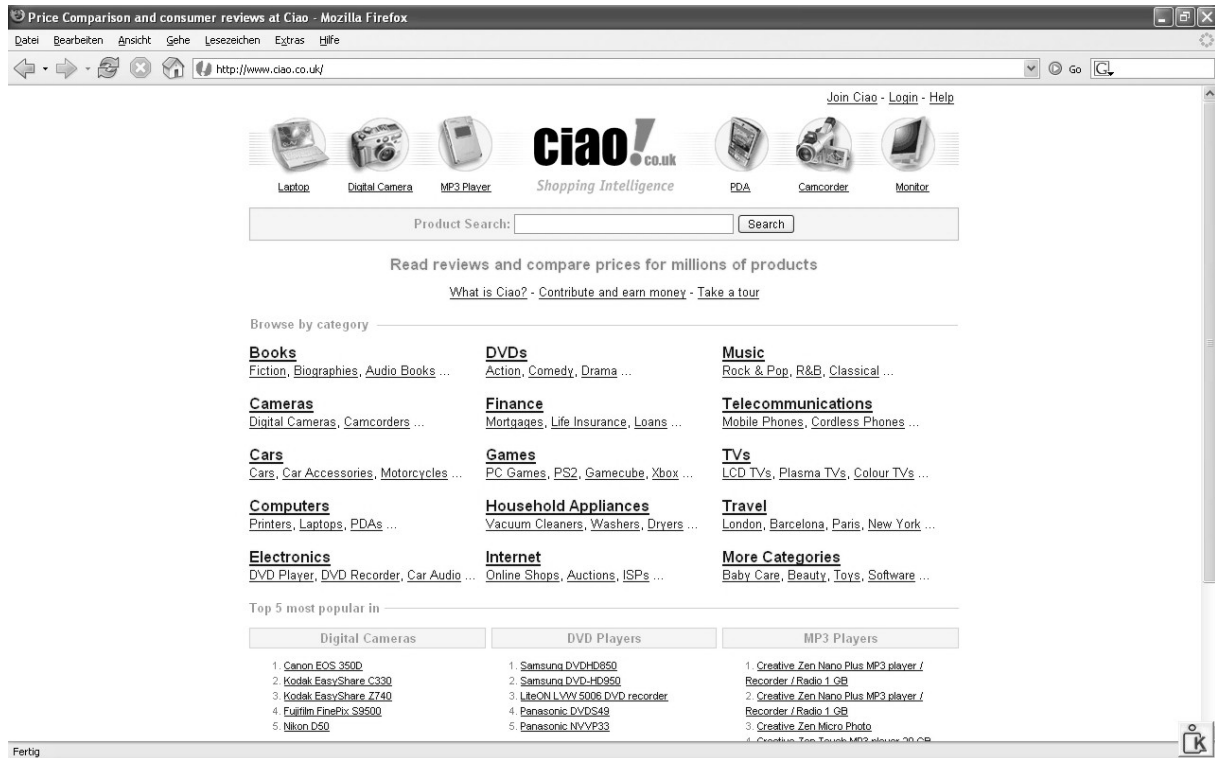


Figure 1: Ciao's Homepage

To demonstrate why this sort of internet-platform is significant for the ongoing changes of market building in contemporary capitalism, I will now reconstruct some of its features step by step, using a methodological mix of hermeneutics, structural analysis and Grounded Theory (see also Jarret 2003). I will begin with the official mission statement of the website (1). In a second step I will analyze some community-functions of the platform (2). I will then, thirdly, turn to the blueprint for writing a product-review (3) and finally address the consumer's contributions themselves, looking at its mental effects for those who virtually live and experience their lives in terms of product-reviewing (4). In my summary the empirically generated concepts will be put together and related to the preceding considerations (IV).

III.1. Mission Statement: Ideal Market?

Literally translated from the German original, the label would mean something like "Independent Consumer-Advice" instead of "Shopping intelligence". Semantically the website's main aim is not to provide a search engine, price-comparison-functions or collections of product-information as many other shopping-portals do. Rather its focus lies on the consumer's ability to help each other with their so called "authentic reviews". Let's have a look at the first sentences which are found in the "Help Centre" to get an impression of what Ciao's official mission statement is: "Ciao is a multi-million-strong online community that critically reviews

and rates millions of products and services for the benefit of other consumers. Available free of charge to consumers in local-language versions in major western European markets, Ciao combines unbiased consumer reviews and up-to-date price information from hundreds of online merchants to make it the most comprehensive source of shopping intelligence on the web.”

Ciao brings merchants and consumers together on a big scale, offering a rational filter for the amorphous mass of product-information as well as enhancing the ability to critically evaluate and articulate needs and preferences. The free, uncensored and egalitarian communication-platform is open for critical deliberation, re-establishes market competition, encourages and activates consumer-participation, balances economic power and so on. In addition it facilitates fulltime availability and global accessibility to the market and rewards corporate efforts to heighten transparency. In short, it seems to epitomize the ideal or perfect market. In the post-industrial age of information and communication technology Adam Smith’s dictum according to which “consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production” seems to be validated (van Bömmel 2003). Or is there still too much attendance to the producer’s interest here?

Take a Tour

New to Ciao? Welcome! You can find out more about Ciao here. Our two brief tours will give you a quick overview of how Ciao works and how you can benefit from it.

Tour 1: Ciao as a provider of Shopping Intelligence
Find out how Ciao helps you buy the best products at the lowest price from the best and most trusted stores.

[Take the Shopping Tour >](#)

Tour 2: Ciao as a fun and friendly community
Find out how you can make money, make friends and have fun by taking part in the Ciao community.

[Take the Community Tour >](#)

Figure 2: Ciao’s tours for new users: Separation of the market and the community

To answer this question, we have to go beyond the symbolic level: Structurally we have to record the distinction of two main areas of action brought together here. This can manifestly be illustrated by the website’s tour for new users (figure 2): On the one hand Ciao offers a shopping portal for the more than 10 million consumers who visit the site every month and want to buy something; on the other hand it is a review-site, approaching the consumer not as

a customer but as a calculating, fun- and community-oriented provider of authentic experiences. As with other price-comparing search-engines, most ordinary online-shoppers get to this website by searching for product-information via Google or Yahoo. While the site offers lots of product-information in different categories, store ratings, technical support for price- and product-comparisons and direct links to virtual shopping carts comprising eBay's Auction-sites, the possibilities to read or even write reviews are of secondary importance here (figure 3). Users who want to buy do not have to register, log in or engage into the community in any respect. This structural separation indicates some instrumental use of the community-functions and -contributions by shoppers, merchants and the corporation itself. Therefore it is not surprising that even the Community-Tour addresses in the first instance not the intrinsic motivation to participate in this collective enhancement for the market. In fact the economic incentive to earn some money by writing reviews is in the foreground of the company's effort to recruit new community members here.

The screenshot shows the Ciao website interface in a Mozilla Firefox browser. The page title is "DVD Recorders : Read reviews and compare prices at Ciao.co.uk". The navigation menu includes categories like Appliances, Books, Cameras, Cars, Computers, Electronics, DVDs, Music, Phones, Travel, and More. A search bar is present with the text "Enter your search term". The main content area displays "DVD Recorders (752)" with filters for Price, Manufacturer, Portability, and Playback options. A table lists three DVD Recorders: Sony RDR HXD 860, Philips DVDR 3380, and Panasonic DMR-EX 75. Each product entry includes a "compare" button, a picture, the product name, a "sort by" dropdown, a product rating (stars and reviews), and a "Compare prices" button with the best price and number of shops. An advertisement on the right side promotes the "Ciao! community portal" with the text "GRAB a ciao product, write and become famous!".

"DVD Recorders". Item 1 to 15 out of 752		sort by	sort by	sort by
		Product name	Product rating	Price
<input type="checkbox"/>		Sony RDR HXD 860 DVD Recorder - without Real Dolby - without Show View - with DivX Playback	★★★★★ 3 reviews	Compare prices > in 2 Shops Best Price £297.00
<input type="checkbox"/>		Philips DVDR 3380 DVD Recorder - without Real Dolby - with Show View - with DivX Playback	★★★★★ 4 reviews	Compare prices > in 2 Shops Best Price £112.00
<input type="checkbox"/>		Panasonic DMR-EX 75 DVD Recorder - Real Dolby AC3 - with Show View - with DivX Playback	★★★★★ 1 review	Compare prices > in 3 Shops Best Price £286.89

Figure 3: Ciao as a shopping portal (here with an ad-banner of its community portal)

III.2. Community Functions: Culturalization of Markets or Merchandization of Culture?

The tensions following divergent expectations on the symbolic vs. structural level of participation may be of relevance for the community's formation process. So let's have a closer look at the Community, its organizational structures, technical conditions and cultural practices (vgl. Marotzki 2004):

- Members of the Ciao-Community may indeed earn money by writing reviews, by participating in paid surveys or by inviting friends to the Community. The in fact very small remunerations for reviews depend on the feedbacks given by other members: “Reviews of some products will be awarded a small cash payment every time a member rates them ‘helpful’, ‘very helpful’ or ‘exceptional’”. Thus the system of economic incentives relies on the community’s willingness to reward.
- Control of behaviour does not need extensive ruling, filtering or censoring by the site-owner or a hierarchy of rights for moderators, administrators and so on. In accordance with its liberal mission statement, sanctions will only be imposed in case of abuse, as a means of publishing offensive or unlawful content. Also forbidden, but difficult to sanction, is surreptitious advertising. These abuses are supposed to be reported by the members themselves.
- More important are the technical conditions of Ciao’s communication platform. For example you have to write a minimum of 120 words in your review. Otherwise you are not able to post it. Thus the input mask includes a lot of implicit guidelines. The most important one is the technical regulation of the click- or pathway to the review-form. First of all you have to grab a product in Ciao’s product-categories. This technically confirms the rule that reviewing requires real experience with a product or service.⁸
- If you are logged in, the logo of the site has changed from “Shopping Intelligence” to “The Consumer Community”. To be observed by others brings some normative standard about for being a good community-member. Insofar the Community decides by rating which review will earn some pennies, it has power to sanction deviant behaviour. By using the rating-buttons, and combined with the opportunity to comment on reviews (figure 4), a culture of evaluation and gratification emerges on this communication platform. What style of communication and perhaps deliberation evolves in this constellation? Possibly community members only tend to reward one another because they do not distribute their own money but that of Ciao’s Merchant Partners and advertising clients.⁹ On the other hand online-communities tend to build power-structures including a watchful ‘discursive police’ (vgl. Stegbauer 2001). Look for example at Tricksty’s comment to a review on Canon’s Ixus 750 digital camera by Darkhodge (figure 5): “Welcome to ciao! Your review had lots of useful info, but maybe could be a bit more personalised? If you

⁸ In its help centre Ciao answers to the question “Who can write product reviews?” as follows: “Any registered Ciao member can write product reviews. The only prerequisite for writing reviews is real knowledge and experience of the product in question: please do not write reviews on the basis of things that you have read elsewhere or heard second-hand; users turn to reviews to hear the opinion of somebody who has already used the product so please draw on your own experiences and not hearsay.” (URL: <http://www.ciao.co.uk/faq.php/Id/2/Idx/4>)

⁹ In fact the emergence of rewarding “klick-circles” is a very familiar phenomena on Ciao’s platform.

change it at all let me know and I'll re-rate." Here the economic rewarding-system backs up a request for personalized information.

Figure 4: Rating-buttons and -options

Comments on review Canon Ixus 750 by Darkhodge	Author	sort by Date
Very detailed and helpfull Leave a comment on this review	shimashima	21.11.2005 17:04
Welcome to ciao and havnt you been busy, good opp nicely set out.. caz. x	cabsookie	15.09.2005 19:12
Welcome to Ciao! Your review had lots of useful info, but maybe could be a bit more personalised? If you change it at all let me know and I'll re-rate.	Tricksty	14.09.2005 10:33

Figure 5: Comments

- There are additional features for enhancing community-life here: Members may present themselves by opening a profile, building personal websites and posting pictures. They all have public and private guestbooks for a communication beyond reviewing and they can invite up to one hundred other members to join their “Circle of Trust”. Active members who often write reviews and comments, receive good ratings and are trusted by many others, additionally earn lots of “community points”. Though they cannot buy anything with it, they do earn more attention by others – and that is a powerful currency in the age of “mental capitalism” (Franck 2005). For some members this may become a functional equivalent to the loss of earnings in this economic order of information production.¹⁰

While we have clarified some structural dispositions for living and acting in that community so far, the intermingling of culture and economy is not yet fully understood. In what direction does it take the engaged consumers? From old Frankfurt School’s point of view, the commoditized environment allows only alienated social interaction. Cultural studies on the other hand consider people not as incapable victims of the cultural industries. To clarify how far cultural autonomy reaches, we have to analyze cultural effects not only on the level of normative and technical regulation and social integration but also on the deeper level of knowledge-systems and forms of reporting and working on experiences. In the following part I will dedi-

¹⁰ As I talked to some “famous” German members of the Ciao-Community (while I was visiting an “offline-meeting” last year) they explained that over the years the Ciao-AG has clearly reduced or even cancelled the remunerations in many product-categories. Therefore those reviewers whose contributions were motivated by economic incentives at the beginning found themselves more and more restricted by the company. While they were able to earn up to 80,- or exceptionally 100,- € per month (by writing at least one review a day) in Ciao’s first years, they are now disillusioned in their economic expectations. Today they are motivated only by their status and gratifications from the community (e.g. becoming a “gold” member with over one million community points) or even by the fact that product reviewing has become a routine part of their everyday life.

cate myself to the blueprint for writing a review in order to hermeneutically reconstruct some mental or cognitive aspects of the consumer's life-world.

III.3. Review your experiences: A blueprint for the commoditization of authenticity?

An analysis of the “guidelines for writing a review” (figure 6) discloses the difficulties and structural dilemmas of that task. The first two passages indicate that on the one hand the reviewer has to write for others who want to make a buying decision while on the other hand her “OWN” experience is of paramount interest here. The orientation towards others' need for help binds the reviewer and limits her opportunity to illustrate much of her particular life-situation beside the judgement about the usability of the product in regard to its exchange value. But under conditions of anonymous market-relations, authenticity as well as trust is a scarce resource and therefore reporting everyday experiences is what makes the difference to other sources of product-information. This is the reason why consumers should contextualize the commodity by narratives about their everyday practices, plans for life, or self-identity. But to what extent can they do so? There is a point where the review switches from product-testing to self-portrayal. On this account the reviewer is urged to find the balance between her own partialities and objective criteria for specifying advantages and disadvantages of a product.

What you should consider when writing a review

- Write your review as a decision aid for others**
 Bear in mind that other users will be making product choices based on your review. Therefore, try and cover all aspects that will be relevant to their decision without repeating the product specifications found in the product comparison tables. Make it clear whether, and for whom, you would recommend the product.
- Describe your OWN experience**
 Readers want to hear about products and services from the consumer's perspective. By structuring your review around your own experiences, you will better enable them to judge what the product is like to use and whether it would be appropriate to their own needs.
- Tell readers both what you like and what you dislike about the product**
 Try and make your review as balanced and objective as possible by describing both sides of the story. This will make sure that your review is still helpful, even if your reader's requirements are entirely different to your own. For example, if you are reviewing a television set which had poor sound quality and was thus the wrong choice for you, please don't omit to mention that the picture quality was excellent, because this may be your reader's main requirement.
- Write in a factual, clear and well-structured way**
 A well-reasoned argument, built on the evidence of your own experiences, will make your evaluation of the product or service easier to read and understand. Make sure that you always explain both what you think of the product, and WHY you think it.

Figure 6: Extract of the “guidelines for writing a review”

As a result most review-stories are neither very personalized nor comparable to any professional product-testing but try to simulate both. A German consumer advice centre took a random sample of products valued insufficient by the “Stiftung Warentest”, Germany’s most trusted institution after the churches. Nine of ten products obtained plenty of praise by the Online-Consumer-Community (Verbraucherzentrale Nordrhein-Westfalen 2005). This is not surprising since consumers who already bought a product tend to think positively about their decision and in addition do not compare it to others. On the other hand subjectivity and authenticity are reflexively filtered by checking their generalized relevance for commercial decision making. Therefore reasoning is limited on both sides: Instead of deepening self-understanding the presentation of experiences is shallow, discretionary and typified by lifestyle vocabulary. And instead of arguing in a strong manner of expert-language a missing substantiation will be compensated by performance (e.g. writing in factual, clear and well-structured way; using accurate grammar, spelling, capitalization and heeding the hint that the most appreciated reviews are neither entirely positive nor negative).

Thus Ciao’s masses of data deliver an insight into how the simultaneous merchandization of everyday culture and culturalization of markets may work. Millions of community members add a cultural surplus value to the products as they ennoble them with some authentic experience (opposed to the glamour of conventional advertisement). And simultaneously at least a lot of them adapt their self-experience to commercial speech. In a small review-sample I typically found patterns of personal identification with the product, fetishisation of everyday practices by copying advertisement phrases, elements of religious promise and assurances of great experience especially concerning the entertainment industries. At the same time the stories are contextualized by a standard buying situation and enter only slightly into the problems of private life. But framing this situation nonetheless as a personalized decision, its ambiguous effect is a certain affirmation or glorification of the consumerist existence. This effect is even paradoxical, because it reduces the narrative which should enrich the world of commodities by contents from “real life” to a cultural plot that does not go far beyond typical market experiences of consumers. The explanatory statements for a buying decision for example sometimes refer to advertisements in TV or to other market contingencies (“I wanted to try a new one”; “after reading around here I have chosen that”; “it is a birthday present from my mother”). Another curious example is the detailed description of the *packaging* of the goods or the unpacking procedure (“This comes in a white box, with red writing on it”; “after pur-

chasing, I went home and took it out of the box”).¹¹ This has to be interpreted as a metaphorical closure: as a compensating solution of the problem to add a narrative *frame* to the review that *culturally* embeds the product or service. While it is still an open question, what this embedding form does to the social life and cultural expression of the virtual community, from the merchant’s point of view the reviews seem to come up to their task: It’s hard to find negative product-ratings and the reviews affirm the world of commodities by painting their usefulness in bright colours.

III.4. Ciao-Café: How far does exploitation reach?

This new form of marketing and market-research represents a form of exploitation, regardless of the occurrence and reach of cultural transformations, simply as it uses time and attention of consumers to add some (nearly unpaid) value of authenticity to already existing products (vgl. Franck 2005: 219ff.). When I was visiting an offline-meeting of members from the German Ciao-community, it became more obvious to me that their participation on the platform has sure enough transformed their purchasing behaviour. Those who often write reviews have enhanced and modified their shopping experience by forming a habit to scan products and services for still outstanding reviews. Does this exploit their culture and how far does exploitation reach here? One could just as well argue that parts of the boring everyday life are culturally enriched by new opportunities to embed and reflect the economic behaviour. But to adequately evaluate this point it is not sufficient to analyse cultural effects in the market-sphere itself. We also have to look at the wider cultural context of the community.

The way Ciao makes use of the community limits the reasoning of its members. Turn taking as a mode of debate for example is restricted to conversation via public or private guestbooks.¹² It is redefined as a tiff with another member and no longer related to the product. This is as well a restriction of the community as the virtual framing of the deliberation by an immediate buying situation: Here the interest in cooperative problem solving is limited by the fact that future problems or considerations, experiences and sufferings which are not product-related are largely out of sight in the comprehensive shopping environment. Therefore the

¹¹ If a review has a strict formation, it often entails also the “packaging” as one of its standardized elements. But comparing the German and the British website, I found much more structuring in German reviews which in most cases are also much longer than those from the smaller British consumer-community.

¹² While the comments to a review are readable for non-members, who are interested in the product, the entries into public guestbooks are restricted to the registered community. If a member would answer to a comment by writing an additional comment to her own review – what sometimes happens –, she would be attacked by other members, because by commenting one receives a few community points. Therefore even when the turn taking would be (self-)critical in content, the community would condemn the second order commentary as self-praise.

website does not enhance the quality of marketing in relation to the life-world and its issues. Although the community is part of the game and although its members have to bring in some cultural use-value beyond pure exchange-value, their political dimension as a networked association of consumers is neutralized (Bieber/Lamla 2005: 69). Freedom of opinion is desired as long as it fits with the conditions of individualized market actors.

Even when collective protest against these restrictions is absent and hardly to organize, there are sometimes ephemeral indications of discomfort with the corporation. When Ciao for example introduced the “video reviews” (following the trend set up by YouTube) it has redeployed its pecuniary rewards from the conventional written reviews to the short films (which were really very well paid at the beginning). But the community was not amused and did not immediately change the means of self-expression. Members told me that they did not want to be ignored concerning their cultural effort due to the written language, which should not be replaced by a simple “show me, don’t tell me” attitude. Another example is given by reviews with exactly 120 words: Because they did not want to protest against restrictions like the minimum of length, but wanted to criticize the excessive writing of their fellow consumers, some members have developed an art of writing short but informative reviews by introducing the “120s”. This demonstrates that some autonomous community culture is nonetheless emerging in this environment. The question is how far this autonomy may reach.

In order to examine to which degree this culture is being commoditized we should visit the community’s Café, the only and somewhat hidden place, where non-commercial themes are discussed.¹³ A lot of community-activity is going on here. Although this site is dedicated to the community only, the structure is the same as on the main website. You have to recommend a theme; it will be put into one of the categories; you can look through the categories and choose a theme and then start writing. (Interestingly the German website contains more politicized categories compared to this British site, e.g. “Social Issues and Society” with sub-categories like “Unemployment” and so on.) To write on a topic in the Café you then have to fill the same input mask as elsewhere in the categories for products and services. Accordingly one has to rate the product called “All About me” and to sum up its “Advantages” and “Disadvantages”. You even have to give a “Recommendation” to potential buyers. All this does not prevent the community members from engaging in a lot of writing. There are about 1300 autobiographical self-reviews in this category – which is the most frequented but only one of

¹³ URL: <http://www.ciao.co.uk/cafe>

300 issues in the main category “Members’ Picks” (figure 7). Most other themes are not as much personalized through autobiographical narration but continue the review-style by providing “Member Advice” or simply private opinions to anything that could happen in life.

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying the product page for "All About Me" on Ciao.co.uk. The page includes a breadcrumb trail: Home > Ciao Café > Members' Picks > All About Me. The product title is "All About Me" with a 4-star rating and 1315 reviews. A description follows: "Hi, here's some information about the real me, the layout is in the form of questions and answers. The questions are in no order, just random. OK here goes..... 1) - Time :- 17.50 2) - Name : - Melissa Roberta Louise. 3) - Eye colour :- Bluey Grey 4) - Hair colour : ... Read review". There are tabs for "Overview" and "Reviews". Below is a table of reviews:

Reviews	Product rating	Date
<p><u>I'm not Stupid</u> Review of All About Me by saraha007</p> <p>Advantages: A lot has happened in my life so this is interesting to read Disadvantages: Having to face so many obstacles ...confused. I liked looking at all the colourful pictures though. My mum was often called into school to have meetings with the teachers, as they were worried about me. Some of the teachers used to be in tears because it upset them to see me so unhappy everyday. They thought there were problems at home, which always used to annoy my mum. She felt they were blaming her. This made her more determined to look into the problems I was having and see if ... Read review</p>	<p>Rating: ★★★★★</p>	<p>23.04.2005</p>
<p><u>It's my life!!!</u> Review of All About Me by unquietmind</p> <p>Advantages: What doesn't kill you makes you stronger</p>	<p>Rating: ★★★★★</p>	

Figure 7: Example from Ciao’s Café, Category “All About Me”

Therefore it seems to me that cultural studies are in some respect right when they point to the creativity of people to bring in some lively community-culture into the standardised schemes provided by the cultural industry (Hörning/Winter 1999). In some extraordinary circumstances members even may find a partner by using Ciao’s Café, guest books and so on. And the “networks of trust” do not only facilitate the rewarding practices of “click-circles” but also the emergence of friendly and useful contacts between members. Anyhow in most cases the narratives on self-experience in the Café indicate a quest for something like recognition or emotional help to conquer emptiness. The same may be true to those users who look for some distraction and spend hours a day by surfing around, reading through articles and commenting on reviews. But the style of feedback given by the community does not live up to those expect-

tations. Reviews of those experiences which leave the world of commodities behind and address more existential problems like illness or disabilities, trouble in the office, lovesickness, divorces and other traumatizing events in childhood or the attempts to write poems, the experiments with hidden aspects of ones self-identity, the obsession to publicly perform the own privacy and so on: all these expressions may receive not only ratings from other members but also some ‘empathetic’ comments. But this support which community-members give to each other is far from any mutual commitment and responsibility (and not at all does the corporation seem to have any cultural obligations here). What is going on in the café and around in the whole consumer community is more like “participating in a big daily soap with a reality touch” – as one of my dialog partners from the community described it. Thus its wider culture is false-faced insofar as the community members reproduce in the first instance a commercial entertainment script. They do neither seriously engage for the interests of ordinary consumers nor for the concerns of their fellow residents on this platform. While their culture is poor regarding the social and political needs of an active consumer community, its members produce sufficient authenticity and enough culture for improving the commercial market-sphere.

IV. Summary: The constitution of the virtual market-community

I wish to sum up some general lessons to be learned from this case-study:

- a) In its early period, the open structure of the internet has not only fired the imagination of a spontaneous emerging and well functioning public space, but also of an open, free and egalitarian market. However, in sharp contrast to these expectations the Internet did not achieve the perfect market. Structural developments of the internet indicate in most parts continuity of unequal economic power-relations (Dolata 2005). Even where newcomers like eBay or Amazon enter the field, a monopolization of advantages is observable. While these structural developments and network effects may not be surprisingly to sociologists, we nevertheless have to explore the social significances and consequences of such an ideological framework for the emergence of a virtual market-community (Jarret 2003). It may strengthen an individualistic mode of networking “productive consumers” at the expense of public modes of engagement for the common interest by “dispersed citizens” (Couldry 2004).
- b) The internet’s partial state of anomy and the efforts to build effective structures of trust reinforce the arguments of economic sociologists who point to the cultural and institutional conditions that necessarily have to embed the market-practices (Beckert 1997; Flig-

stein 2001). Internet platforms like Ciao do not only rhetorically foster the market ideology but actively create a sufficient cultural environment for online markets. They initialize the emergence of complex online-communities – with members producing a lot of cultural content, evaluating each other and therefore ensuring the duration of these practices by themselves – by providing a virtual infrastructure (and some economic incentives at the beginning). While the company is never able to fully control the dynamic of this cultural life, which necessarily keeps some autonomy, it is free to utilize it for its own economic interest, for example by relating the emerging social networks of trust to its shopping-portal, thus gaining an advantage in market competition, or by selling analyzed data on consumer behaviour to its merchant partners. Hence this amounts to an instrumental use of the Internet’s cultural capabilities as an economic resource. And it challenges Benkler’s (2006) idea of balancing proprietary and non-proprietary modes of life and production in the digital environment.

- c) Ciao significantly exemplifies design patterns of the so-called “Web 2.0”. As a shared feature, Websites like Ciao, Amazon, eBay, Wikipedia and many others let users add value to the offered material. The principles of collaborative peer production and sharing kept up by the open source movement are now partially transformed into a commercial strategy: Production and selling of commodities are economically rationalized by delegating work to the customers. While the decentralized structure of the Internet helps to create a general condition for the modern “prosumer” (Voß/Rieder 2005), the commercial review-sites particularly foster a cultural milieu where *consumers* together *produce* even the advertisement for the commodities which they bought. The extent to which the merchandization and exploitation of their culture could be balanced by cultural ideas and framings for a non-proprietary sociability in (or using) the Internet depends not only on the community’s internal formation process. It is also predetermined by structural decisions and path-dependencies on the technological and institutional level concerning the distribution of rights, powers and economic as well as informational resources. While workers have a political say in their firms, prosumers have nothing comparable. The enormous success of platforms like Ciao to bind members in a restricted commercial community-milieu raises scepticism about the prospects to politicize the decentralized “networked individualism” and therefore to transcend the consumerist disposition (Bieber/Lamla 2005; Lamla/Neckel 2006). On top of that, Google has modified its search-algorithms in November 2003 resulting in top listings primarily of review sites and price-comparison-engines (Batelle 2005). Since then the “commercial speech” (a.a.O.: 164) predominates the web.

d) In this commercial environment of the Internet a culture of deliberation is hardly able to evolve. Instead of using the authentic experience of domestic users to anchor a cooperative, egalitarian and rational mode of problem-solving in the life-world, an economic exploitation of culture in contemporary capitalism is backed by the ideology of the so-called “perfect market”, by technical, legal and institutional restrictions to the virtual community as well as its over-directed relation to the market-sphere and not least by the consumerist habits in our western culture itself. Under these conditions the pretended adjustment to the ‘autonomous’ and ‘authentic’ will of the people is a very efficient way to produce a market-community of “glass consumers” (Lace 2005) with masses of data for new marketing and advertising strategies to come. A preview is given by the developments in the above-mentioned platform “Second Life”: Against the background of my reconstruction and discussion of Ciao’s shopping-platform it is not surprising that corporations like Adidas have long invested in virtual land here to build a virtual company that sells virtual sports shoes which may be virtually designed and are virtually tested regarding their market success by members of a virtual community. Not least because it is already merchandized by the introduction of virtual money (which is convertible into real money), Second Life offers a cheap and optimized simulation of the emergence as well as the cultural dynamics of a giant market-community.

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