



Media and Participation

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Abstract

The wide variety of meanings attributed to the concept of participation both enables and complicates its academic deployment. The first part of the chapter provides a roadmap through this diversity, by distinguishing between two main theoretical approaches – the sociological approach, which defines participation as taking part, and the political (studies) approach, which sees participation as sharing power. Grounded in the political approach, the second part of the chapter engages with a series of theoretical and research-based subfields within Media and Communication Studies. One overview, of the use of participation in audience studies, Marxist and anarchist media studies, deliberation and public sphere approaches, and development/international communication, demonstrates the

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theoretical diversity in participation studies. A second overview, of the analyses of participatory practices in three locations – community and alternative media, television talk shows and reality TV, and online media/Internet studies, then shows the differences in participatory intensities and their normative evaluations.

Keywords

Participation · Power · Sharing power · Taking part · Audience · Marxism · Anarchism · Deliberation · Public sphere · Development communication · International communication · Community media · Alternative media · Television talk show · Reality TV · Online media

Introduction

Within Media and Communication Studies, participation re-established its presence from the turn of the century onward, mostly driven by the need to theorize user practices in relation to online media, and in particular Web 2.0 and social media. Even if participation appears to be a straightforward and easy-to-use concept, its political-ideological nature and its complex set of overlapping histories require a more careful unpacking of the concept.

In this chapter, the two main theoretical approaches – the sociological approach (participation-as-taking-part) and the political (studies) approach (participation-as-sharing-power) – will be mapped out, both in general and in relation to the media field. This will allow in showing the theoretical richness of participation studies, but also the choices that need to be made when engaging in the analysis of participatory practices. Grounded in the political approach, the second part of this chapter will then engage with a series of theoretical and research-based subfields – within Media and Communication Studies – in order to show the different articulations of participation in a series of theoretical subfields and the different participatory intensities and their different evaluations in three locations of media participatory practice.

Theoretical Approaches to Participation

This first part outlines the different theoretical approaches to participation and reuses text that has been published before in Carpentier (2016). The starting point of this overview is that the literature on participation, including media and participation, has produced many different positions (see, e.g., Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) and Allen et al. (2014) for two recent media-related debates). Arguably, two main approaches to participation can be distinguished in these debates: a sociological approach and a political (studies) approach (see also Lepik 2013). The sociological approach defines participation as taking part in particular social processes, a definition which casts a very wide net. In this approach, participation includes many (if not all) types of human interaction, in combination with interactions with texts and

technologies. Power is not excluded from this approach, but remains one of the many secondary concepts to support it. One example of how participation is defined in this approach is Melucci's (1989: 174) definition, when he says that participation has a double meaning: "It means both taking part, that is, acting so as to promote the interests and the needs of an actor as well as belonging to a system, identifying with the 'general interests' of the community."

The sociological approach results, for instance, in labeling consumption as participatory, because consumers are taking part in a consumption culture and are exercising consumer choices (Lury 2011: 12). Also for doing sports, the label of participation is used, as exemplified by Delaney and Madigan's (2009) frequent use of the participation concept in their introduction into the sociology of sports. We can find a similar approach in what is labeled cultural participation, where participation is defined as individual art (or cultural) exposure, attendance, or access, in some cases complemented by individual art (or cultural) creation. As Vander Stichele and Laermans (2006: 48) describe it: "In principle, cultural participation behaviour encompasses both public and private receptive practices, as well as active and interactive forms of cultural participation." In practice, this implies that the concept of participation is used for attending a concert or visiting a museum.

Within media studies, the sociological approach can, for instance, be found in how Carey (2009: 15) defines the ritual model of communication in *Communication as Culture*, as the "representation of shared beliefs," where togetherness is created and maintained, without disregarding the many contending forces that characterize the social. For Carey, the ritual model of communication is explicitly linked to notions of "'sharing', 'participation', 'association', 'fellowship' and the 'possession of a common faith'" (2009: 15), where people are (made) part of a culture through their ritualistic participation in that very same culture. (Mass) media, such as newspapers (used by Carey as an example), play a crucial role by inviting readers to participate in a cultural configuration, interpellating them – to use an Althusserian concept – to become part of the society by offering them subject positions or, as Carey (2009: 21) puts it, social roles, with which they can identify (or dis-identify). This type of ritual participation (Interestingly, Carey (2009) does not use the concept of ritual participation in *Communication as Culture*. He does use "ritual of participation" (2009: 177), which refers to a very different process, namely, the emptying of the signifier participation as an elitist strategy. This use of the participation concept, mainly to be found in Chapter Seven of *Communication as Culture* ("The History of the Future," co-authored with John J. Quirk), is much more aligned with the political approach toward participation.) again defines participation as taking (and becoming) part, through a series of interactions, with – in Carey's case – media texts. Others have also used the ritual participation concept (and the sociological approach to participation it entails), for instance, in relationship to media (Real 1996; Dayan and Katz 2009: 120).

In contrast, the political approach produces a much more restrictive definition of participation, which refers to the equalization of power inequalities, in particular decision-making processes (see Carpentier 2011; Carpentier et al. 2014). Participation then becomes defined as the equalization of power relations between privileged

and non-privileged actors in formal or informal decision-making processes. For instance, in the field of democratic theory, Pateman's (1970) *Participation and Democratic Theory* is highly instrumental in showing the significance of power when introducing the two definitions of partial and full participation (Pateman 1970: 70–71). Also in the field of urban planning, Arnstein (1969: 216) in her seminal article *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* links participation explicitly to power, saying “that citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power.”

The political approach also emphasizes that participation is an object of struggle and that different ideological projects (and their proponents) defend different participatory intensities (One complication is that the concept of participation itself is part of these power struggles, which renders it highly contingent. The signification of participation is part of a “politics of definition” (Fierlbeck 1998: 177), since its specific articulation shifts depending on the ideological framework that makes use of it.). More minimalist versions of participation tend to protect the power positions of privileged (elite) actors, to the detriment of non-privileged (non-elite) actors, without totally excluding the latter. In contrast, more maximalist versions of participation strive for a full equilibrium between all actors (which protects the non-privileged actors).

The more restrictive use of the notion of participation in the political approach necessitates a clearer demarcation of participation toward a series of related concepts that are, in the sociological approach, often used interchangeably. One key concept is engagement (Despite its importance, this will not be used in this chapter in order not to complicate things too much.), which Dahlgren (2013: 25) defines as the “subjective disposition that motivates [the] realization [of participation],” in order to distinguish it from participation. In earlier work, Dahlgren (2009) argues that the feeling of being invited, committed, and/or empowered and also the positive inclination toward the political (and the social) are crucial components of engagement. In his civic cultures circuit, Dahlgren also emphasizes (apart from more materialist elements like practices and spaces) the importance of knowledge, trust, identities, and values for (enhancing) engagement. Engagement is thus different from participation (in the political approach) as engagement refers to the creation, or existence, of a social connection of individuals or groups with a broader political community, which is aimed at protecting or improving it.

Other related, but still distinct, concepts are access and interaction. In earlier work, I have argued that access refers to the establishment of presence and interaction to the creation of socio-communicative relations. As a concept, access is very much part of everyday language, which makes clear definitions rather rare. At the same time, access – as a concept – is used in a wide variety of (academic) fields, which we can use to deepen our understanding of this concept. One area where access is often used is geography, when the access to specific spaces and places is thematized. More historical (spatial) analyses, for instance, deal with access to land and the enclosure of the common fields (Neeson 1996). The importance of presence for defining access can also be illustrated through a series of media studies examples: in the case of the digital divide discourse, the focus is, for instance, placed on the access to (online) media technologies, which in turn allows people to access media

content. In both cases, access implies achieving presence (to technology or media content). Access also features in the more traditional media feedback discussions, where it has yet another meaning. Here, access implies gaining a presence within media organizations, which generates the opportunity for people to have their voices heard (in providing feedback).

A second concept that needs to be distinguished from participation is interaction. If we look at the work of Argentinean philosopher Bunge (1977: 259), we can find the treacherously simple and general definition of interaction “two different things x and y interact if each acts upon the other,” combined with the following postulate: “Every thing acts on, and is acted upon by, other things.” Interaction also has a long history in sociological theory, where it often refers to the establishment of socio-communicative relationships, as was already mentioned. An example can be found in Giddens’s (2006: 1034) definition of social interaction in the glossary of *Sociology*, where he defines social interaction as “any form of social encounter between individuals.” A more explicit foregrounding of the socio-communicative can be found in Sharma’s (1996: 359) argument that the “two basic conditions of social interaction” are “social contact and communication.” While the social dimension of the definition of interaction can be found in concepts like contact, encounter, and reciprocity (but also [social] regulation), the communicative dimension is referred to by concepts such as response, meaning, and communication itself.

The Many Locations of Media Participation (Analysis)

The analysis of media participation has a diverse theoretical background, combining – among others – media theory, political theory and philosophy, and development theory (This part is a shortened and updated version of Carpentier (2011)). The specificities of each of these theoretical fields have had their impact on the concept of participation and how it was deployed in research practice. Moreover, research into media participatory practices also brought in their specificities, given, for instance, the different participatory intensities that characterized these locations. This part of the chapter first discusses four more theoretical (sub)fields – audience theory, Marxist-anarchist media theory, public sphere theory, and development theory (combined with UNESCO debates) – making sure that also the frameworks that include more maximalist participatory approaches are represented. Then this part of the chapter turns the attention to three locations of media research which have prominently featured media participation: community and alternative media, television talk shows and reality TV, and online media.

Audience Theory and the Active/Passive Dimension

There are many approaches to structuring how the concept of audience is theorized and a “totalizing account [is] a logical impossibility” (Jenkins 1999). Nevertheless, Littlejohn’s (1996: 310) *Theories of Human Communication* offers a good starting

point when he writes that “disputes on the nature of the audience seem to involve two related dialectics. The first is a tension between the idea that the audience is a mass public versus the idea that it is a small community. The second is the tension between the idea that the audience is passive versus the belief that it is active.”

In particular the first dimension – the active/passive dimension – is of importance here. The assumption of the human subject as an active carrier of meaning is already echoed in the development of Eco’s (1968) aberrant decoding theory and Hall’s 1973 encoding/decoding model (published in 1980). The concept of the active audience (see, e.g., Fiske 1987) emanated from these models. In addition, uses and gratifications theory of (among others) Katz et al. (1974) and deduced models, for example, Palmgreen and Rayburn’s (1985) expectancy-value theory and Renckstorf et al.’s (1996) social action model, all rely to a large degree on the concept of the active audience (Livingstone 1998: 238).

But this “traditional” active/passive dimension often takes an idealist position by emphasizing the active role of the individual viewer in the processes of signification. This position risks reducing social activity to such processes of signification, excluding other – more materialist – forms of human practice. In other words, the active dimension hides another dimension, termed here the participation/interaction dimension. The interaction component of audience activity refers to the processes of signification and interpretation triggered by media consumption. Obviously, polysemic readings of media texts are an integrative part of this component. But also work on identity, where audiences engage with the media texts offered to them, is included in the interaction component of audience activity.

The participatory component of audience activity refers to two interrelated dimensions which can be termed participation in the media and through the media, inspired by Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) who distinguish between democratization in and through the media. Participation *through* the media deals with the opportunities for mediated debate and for self-representation in the variety of public spaces that media sphere serves as a location where citizens can voice their opinions interacting with other voices. Participation *in* the media deals with participation in the production of media output (content-related participation) – captured by concepts such as user-generated content (UGC) and produsage (Bruns 2008) – and in media organizational decision-making (structural participation). These forms of media participation allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life and to put into practice their right to communicate.

Marxist and Anarchist Media Studies and the Media Participation Debate

Marxist theory – in its broad sense – directly or indirectly has contributed to media studies in a wide variety of ways. Wayne’s (2003) *Marxism and Media Studies* and Fuchs’s (2016) *Reading Marx in the Information Age* are good examples of the direct application of the Marxist toolbox, but Marxist theory has also played a key role through its integration into the political economy of communication (Fuchs and

Mosco 2016) and cultural media studies (Ogasawara 2017). One of the main concerns of political economy approaches is related to the colonization of public spaces, where the (growing) domination of corporate power in the communication industry is deemed problematic for media production, distribution, content, and reception. Participation in the media becomes blocked by the communication industry's market logics and focus on professional employment, but participation through the media is also hampered by the media's circulation of dominant ideologies that continue to serve the interests of the dominant class (Wayne 2003: 175). In cultural media studies, we find similar concerns, elaborated more through a mixture of (post)structuralist and (post)Marxist theory. Here, the focus is on the hegemonizing capacities of media and the (potential) diversity of audience interpretations. An early example appears in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Hall et al. 1978), where Hall and his colleagues research the moral panics caused by the appearance of a "new" form of criminality (mugging) and the way that it supported a dominant societal (repressive) order.

Also from an anarchist theory perspective, there have been some substantial contributions to the media and participation debates owing to the fact that the focus of anarchist theory is not always on the state as such. The more Chomskian strands of anarchist theory have incorporated the vitriolic critiques of the mainstream media system, although even alternative media come in for some criticism, as Bradford's (1996: 263) analysis of pirate radio suggests. Some authors have managed to incorporate anarchist theory in subtler ways, with participation and self-management featuring prominently. Downing et al. (2001: 67 ff), in their book entitled *Radical Media*, distinguish two models for the organization of radical media: the Leninist model and the self-management model. Downing et al. (2001: 69) explicitly relate the latter – where "neither party, nor labor union, nor church, nor state, nor owner is in charge, but where the newspaper or radio stations runs itself" – to what they call a "socialist anarchist angle of vision." Another author that should be mentioned here is Hakim Bey – the pseudonym used by Peter Lamborn Wilson – who, in his essay *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (TAZ) (1985), reflects on the upsurge (and disappearance) of temporary anarchist freespaces. Distinguishing in this essay between the net and the web, he sees the net as the "totality of all information and communication transfer" (Bey 1985: 106), while the web is considered a counter-net that is situated within the net.

Deliberation and the Public Sphere

Communication plays a key role in the deliberative democratic model and in Habermas's model of the public sphere, described in Habermas's (1996: 360) definition of the public sphere as "a network for communicating information and points of view." It is no surprise that these models play a prominent role in theorizing the connection between participation and communication. First, participation in the public sphere is seen as an important component, since it relates to the basic assumptions that characterize the communicative action that takes place within the

public sphere, and where “participants enter into interpersonal relationships by taking positions on mutual speech-act offers and assuming illocutionary obligations” (Habermas 1996: 361). But, in Habermas’s two-track model of deliberative politics, there is also a strong emphasis on the connection of the public sphere to realities external to it and on participation through the public sphere.

However, we should not forget that Habermas’s (1991) older work on the public sphere – *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in German in 1962 – is a historical-sociological account of the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere. But later, Habermas (1996: 360–362) more exclusively emphasizes the formal-procedural nature of the public sphere (instead of conflating it with its historical origins), while maintaining a focus on communicative rationality and consensus in which the public sphere is seen as a social space generated through communicative action. The public sphere, positioned as part of the two-track model of deliberative politics, remains for Habermas a crucial site of participation and communication, which simultaneously “relieves the public of the burden of decision making; the postponed decisions are reserved for the institutionalized political process” (Habermas 1996: 362 – emphasis removed).

Even if Habermas currently remains the most significant theoretical voice in the study of the public sphere, a variety of public sphere theories and models have been developed (Dewey 1927; Arendt 1958; Negt and Kluge 1983; Fraser 1990; Hauser 1998) which have – together with Habermas’s work – been used in a variety of ways in Media and Communication Studies. One important dimension is the more normative versus the neutralized-descriptive usages of the public sphere model, where the latter has – following Nieminen (2006) – two sub-approaches: a normative-prescriptive sub-approach and a historical-sociological sub-approach. In the normative-prescriptive sub-approach, the public sphere is a regulative idea, “an ideal which may never be fully realized but which can act as a normative framework for critical evaluation” (Nieminen 2006: 106). Equally normative, the historical-sociological sub-approach focuses on the “historical and sociological (pre)conditions of the phenomenon we call the [...] public sphere” (Nieminen 2006: 107). Characteristic of the normative approach – and its two sub-approaches – is that the public sphere is articulated with a concern for the democratic-participatory process, where participation, in the Habermasian version, is “governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and open debate” (Benhabib 1994: 31). There are also neutralized-descriptive approaches to the public sphere, which do not use an explicit normative framework. In these approaches, the public sphere concept is still used to demarcate “a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas 1996: 360), but they do not attribute specific democratic characteristics to the public sphere, which makes them less relevant for participation studies.

UNESCO, Communication Rights and Development Communication

A fourth location where media participation is discussed intensively is located at the intersection of international and development communication. As Servaes (1999: 83) argues, several Latin American scholars, such as Beltran, Bordenave, and Martin-Barbero, in the 1970s discussed the role of participatory communication as a tool to create a more just world. Indicative of this is Bordenave's (1994) article *Participative Communication as a Part of Building the Participative Society*, in which he defines participatory communication as "that type of communication in which all the interlocutors are free and have equal access to the means to express their viewpoints, feelings and experiences" (Bordenave 1994: 43). This re-articulates communication as "a two way process, in which the partners – individual and collective – carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue" (MacBride Commission 1980: 172). Freire's (1992) theories, in particular, have had a considerable impact on this domain, as Thomas (1994: 51) remarks.

The debate on participation and development moved onto the global stage in the 1970s when the struggle over the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) began within UNESCO. For instance, the 1976 General Conference approved the *Recommendation on Participation by the People at Large in Cultural Life and their Contribution to it* (UNESCO 1977), which contained a section on audience participation that stated that:

Member States or the appropriate authorities [should] promote the active participation of audiences by enabling them to have a voice in the selection and production of programmes, by fostering the creation of a permanent flow of ideas between the public, artists and producers and by encouraging the establishment of production centres for use by audiences at local and community levels. [...]

In December 1977, the 16-member International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems was established, headed by Sean MacBride. Its report (MacBride Commission 1980), *Many Voices, One World. Towards a New More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*, took a strong position on audience participation. The chapter on the Democratization of Communication describes the following four approaches to breaking down the barriers to the democratization of communication, with the objective to strengthen the so-called right to communicate:

(a) broader popular access to the media and the overall communication system, through assertion of the right to reply and criticize, various forms of feedback, and regular contact between communicators and the public [...]; (b) participation of non-professionals in producing and broadcasting programmes, which enables them to make active use of information sources, and is also an outlet for individual skill and sometimes for artistic creativity; (c) the development of 'alternative' channels of communication, usually but not always on a local scale; (d) participation of the community and media users in management and decision-making (this is usually limited to local media). Self-management is the most radical form of participation since it presupposes an active role for many individuals, not

only in the programmes and news flow, but also in the decision-making process on general issues. (MacBride Commission 1980: 169)

The debates on participation and the right to communicate continued in the 1980s and featured in a number of general conferences, but the concept of the right to communicate (almost) received its coup de grace when the USA (1984) and the UK (1985) pulled out of UNESCO (for the first time) (Jacobson 1998: 398). During the 1990s, the right to communicate disappeared almost completely from UNESCO's agenda (and from the agendas of other international organizations), with the exception of forums such as the MacBride Round Tables (Hamelink 1997: 298). Only in 2003, in the slipstream of the UN WSIS (<http://www.itu.int/wsisis>), was the debate on communication rights reinvigorated (For more recent publications on communication rights, see, e.g., Dakroury et al. (2009), Raboy and Shtern (2010), and Padovani and Calabrese (2014).), in part, thanks to initiatives such as the Communication Rights in the Information Society Campaign (CRIS) (<http://www.crisinfo.org>). However, in the final texts of the summit meetings, participation played only a minor role; it received minimalist significations and did not feature very often. More maximalist meanings of participation, linked to communication rights, were missing, which provoked rather skeptical evaluations: "A surge, at least in the short term, in the political will to incorporate such rights in a new international declaration is unlikely, regardless of the WSIS document's recommendations about the need to respect human rights" (Mansell and Nordenstreng 2006: 30–31). This does not mean that participation and communication rights were erased from the summit. The WSIS Civil Society Plenary (2003), which published an "alternative" declaration, uses the concepts of full participation and empowerment and elaborates on communication rights, providing shelter for the more maximalist articulations of participation.

Participation in Specific Media Technologies, Organizations, and Genres

In this last part, the attention is turned to three (academic) debates on participatory media practices (and to the articulations of participation they contain), since these debates have generated a considerable literature on media participation: community and alternative media, talk shows and reality TV, and online media. All three cases of media practices provide unique perspectives on the notion of (media) participation in different contexts, different periods, and different participatory intensities.

Community and Alternative Media

The discussion of the role of participation in the NWICO debates contained a considerable number of references to community and alternative media, and it is difficult to ignore their key role in participatory theory and practice. At the same time, their diversity makes them difficult to capture: They can take many different organizational forms and use various technological platforms (print, radio, TV, web-based, or mixed). As Atton (2015: 8 – emphasis in original) wrote in his

Introduction to The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media: “[. . .] the diversity of alternative media presented in this *Companion* shows how content will always be linked with social, cultural and political contexts.”

Despite their differences, community and alternative media share a number of key characteristics, which distinguish them from other types of (mainstream) media organizations like public service or commercial media. Their close connection to civil society and their strong commitment to maximalist forms of participation and democracy, in both their internal decision-making process and their content production practices, are especially important distinguishing characteristics that establish community and alternative media as the third media type, distinct from public service/state and commercial media.

One way to capture their diversity and understand what unites them is to combine the four approaches that have been used in the literature for the study of community media (discussed in Carpentier et al. 2003; see also Bailey et al. 2007; Carpentier 2011). Support for this position can be found in Atton’s (2002: 209) argument that “This encourages us to approach these media from the perspective of ‘mixed radicalism’, once again paying attention to hybridity rather than meeting consistent adherence to a ‘pure,’ fixed set of criteria [. . .].” Taken together, the four approaches to community and alternative media allow their complexity and rich diversity of to be unveiled, together with the role of participation:

- The community approach focuses on access by, and participation of, the community, the opportunity given to “ordinary people” to use media technologies to have their voices heard, and the empowerment of community members through valuing their skills and views.
- The alternative approach stresses that these media have alternative ways of organizing and using technologies, carry alternative discourses and representations, make use of alternative formats and genres, and remain independent from market and state.
- The civil society approach incorporates aspects of civil society theory to emphasize that citizens are being active in one of many (micro-) spheres relevant to everyday life, using media technologies to exert their rights to communicate.
- Finally, the rhizomatic approach uses Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) metaphor to focus on three aspects: community media’s elusiveness, their interconnections (among each other and, mainly, with civil society), and the linkages with market and state. In this perspective, community media are seen to act as meeting points and catalysts for a variety of organizations and movements.

Participation features in all four approaches, as the community that is being served through the facilitation of its participation, as the provision of a maximalist participatory alternative to nonparticipatory (or minimalist participatory) mainstream media, as the democratic-participatory role of civil society, or as the participatory rhizome. Tabing’s (2002: 9) definition of a community radio station as “[. . .] one that is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community” makes clear that participation in the community (and alternative)

media organization is not only situated at the level of content production but is also related to management and ownership or to use Berrigan's (1979: 8) words, community media "[. . .] are the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community."

Television Talk Shows and Reality TV

Within mainstream media, a series of genres and formats have allowed for a certain degree of participation by ordinary people. It should be emphasized immediately that participation in this context is structurally limited, as mainstream media only rarely allow for structural participation (or participation within the media organization's decision-making structures themselves). Moreover, mainstream media have a variety of objectives, and the organization of societal participation and audience empowerment is not always part of their primary objectives (despite some authors protesting that it should – see Keane 1998). Nevertheless, mainstream media remain significant societal players that merit our attention, also because the achievements and failures of the participatory processes they organize can be very enriching to the debates on media participation. In this section I want to focus on two audiovisual genres – talk shows and reality TV – in the knowledge that other genres (in print and in audiovisual media) provide equally relevant (albeit slightly less well-discussed) examples.

The talk show genre does facilitate participation within the mainstream media again to a certain extent, but the existence of many subgenres complicates this discussion. As is often the case with media genres, this label clusters together a wide diversity of actual program formats. They have the common core element of a host talking to people in a studio setting (Leurdijk 1997: 149) and are aimed at a mixture of entertainment and information; as Hallin (1996: 253 – emphasis in original) puts it, "These new forms of media are often described as providing 'unmediated' communication. This is clearly not accurate: they are *shows*, often carefully scripted, each with its own logic of selection and emphasis." One subgenre, the audience participation talk show or audience discussion program, is of particular interest here. This subgenre finds its origins (partially) in what Munson (1993: 36–37) calls the "interactive talk radio" format, the call-in or the phone-in. These talk shows successfully transferred to television and became in the 1990s a popular subgenre (Iannelli 2016: 26ff). Despite their intra-genre differences, all these programs were based on the principle that "an active role is accorded to the studio audience which participates in a discussion about social, personal or political problems under the supervision of a presenter" (Leurdijk 1999: 37, my translation).

Audience discussion programs (and other talk show subgenres with participatory components) have provoked many and very different evaluations. In the academic literature on these talk shows, two main approaches can be distinguished: the emancipation and the manipulation approaches. The emancipation approach argues that these programs contribute to the democratization of the mass media (Hamo 2006: 428) since they provide access for ordinary people to public spaces and allow them to participate in the production of media content. Not surprisingly, the concept of the public sphere is often deployed here (e.g., Carpignano et al. 1990). Livingstone and Lunt (1996: 19) refer to the participants in audience discussion programs

as citizen-viewers, who are “seen as participating, potentially at least, in democratic processes of the public sphere.”

In contrast to the emancipation approach, several authors highlight the manipulative or pseudo-participatory nature of these programs. One line of argument focuses on the production context, which does not escape the processes of commodification. Their discursive diversity is seized on by some authors as a point of criticism, in which the absence of a rational discussion that results in a critical consensus (à la Habermas) leads to a risk of trivialization of the performed utterances (Priest 1995: 17). Livingstone and Lunt (1996: 175) argue: “It remains problematic that giving voice may not affect real decision making and power relations in society, but only give the illusion of participation.” In addition, the power imbalances within these programs, with media professionals unavoidably playing a significant role in organizing the participation in a context that is “theirs” to control, are approached critically. For instance, Leurdijk (1997), White (1992), Tomasulo (1984), and Gruber (2004) describe how participants lose control over the narration of personal stories because editorial teams try to orchestrate, canalize, structure, and/or manage the debate.

The second genre, reality TV, became very popular in the 1990s and 2000s, but also has a long history going back to such programs as *Candid Camera* (1948). As a genre, it is based on the construction of both people and situations as real. In other words, ordinary people are featured prominently (although their presence in these programs is sometimes unplanned) and are placed in situations related to everyday life. The claim to reality, which is supporting the genre, is translated into a series of visual strategies, through the use, for instance, of fly-on-the-wall camera techniques, which, in turn, are supported by technological evolutions such as the lightweight camera and the possibilities for audiences to create their own content. Nevertheless, the genre spans a very large group of structurally very different programs, which has led some authors to call reality TV a trans-genre (see Van Bauwel and Carpentier 2010).

The combination of reality TV’s reality claim, its focus on the ordinary and the everyday, and the management by media professionals who control many of reality TV’s production aspects also makes it a highly relevant genre in relation to the discussion on media participation. Again, in this debate we can find approaches that focus on the concept of emancipation, while the more critical approaches point to intervention, manipulation, and pseudo-participation. First, reality TV provides ordinary people access to the TV sphere or to the machineries of mediation that render their existence, practices, and utterances visible to an outside world and (in some cases) allows them to acquire celebrity status (Biressi and Nunn 2005: 148). As Andrejevic (2004: 215) phrases it, “The promise of reality TV is not that of access to unmediated reality [. . .] so much as it is the promise of the access to the reality of mediation.”

Of course, all is not well with the participatory process of reality TV programs, as pointed out in the manipulation approach. Even if some ordinary people are granted access to the TV sphere and the TV screen, the kinds of presences, practices, and discourses they are allowed to generate are questionable, and the levels of interaction

and participation are often considered problematic. One of the harshest critics is Andrejevic (2004: 215), who claims that reality TV might result not in the demystification of TV but rather in the fetishization of TV. A crucial factor limiting the participatory intensity of reality TV is the specific position of its media professionals and the skewed power balance between them and the ordinary participants. This type of argument can be found in Turner's (2010: 46) critique on the democratainment concept, which, Turner says, "over-estimates the power available even to these newly empowered [...] citizens." Of course, the broad context of the commodified media sphere creates a context in which (some) ordinary people are transformed into what Rojek (2001) calls "celetoids," or people whose public careers cater to the interests of the media industry itself. In practice, this implies that media professionals exert strong levels of control over the participants and their actions. Participants are invited into these program contexts and then find themselves exposed to this heavy management, which is legitimized through the (psychological and legal) ownership of the program by the production team.

Online Media/Internet Studies

The arrival of another generation of so-called "new" media drastically affected the nature of the discussion on participation and the media. From the 1990s onward in particular – and in some cases earlier (for instance, Bey's *TAZ* [1985]) – the focus of theoreticians of participation and audience activity shifted toward online media. The development of the Internet, and especially the web – the focal point of this text – was to render most information available to all and to create a whole new world of communication, the promise of a structural increase in the level of (media) participation, within its slipstream, extending to the more maximalist versions of participation.

These academic debates on online media and participation contain a wide variety of articulations of the key concepts of access, interaction, and participation. Ordinary users are seen to be enabled (or empowered) to avoid the mediating role of the "old" media organizations and publish their material (almost) directly on the web, on self-managed websites and blogs, or on social media. These novel practices have affected discussions over access and participation in a fundamental way. In a first (pre-Web 2.0) phase, the two key signifiers of access and interaction gained dominance, although participation did not (completely) vanish from the theoretical scene. Later, the concept of participation made a remarkable comeback to reach a prominent position in the 2000s.

In the 1990s (and in some cases before then), the importance of access increased structurally, as techno-utopianism emphasized access for all, to all information, at all times (Negroponte 1995). This argument had an explicit political component since the increased potential of access to the public sphere was also emphasized. The potentially beneficial increase in information, which challenges the "existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media" (Rheingold 1993: 14), the strengthening of social capital and civil society, and the opening up of a new public sphere, or a "global electronic agora" (Castells 2001: 138) began to take primacy. In turn, increased access was seen as affecting subject positions. To use

Poster's (1997: 213) words, "the salient characteristic of Internet community is the diminution in prevailing hierarchies of race, class, age, status and especially gender." The critical backlash to these and other rather bold statements focused on the lack of access of some, foregrounding the notion of a digital divide, but still remaining within the realm of access. At the same time, in the pre-Web 2.0 phase of the Internet, the notion of interaction and the derived concept of interactivity played a significant role in discourses about online media, much more than participation did. For instance, in Rheingold's (1993) summary of new media consequences – supporting citizen activity in politics and power, increased interaction with diverse others, and a new vocabulary and form of communication – interaction is featured prominently.

The mainstream pre-Web 2.0 approach favored interaction over participation, implicitly reducing the intensity of participation, but the concept of participation still managed to maintain a presence in a number of academic subfields. The theoretical reflections on electronic (direct) democracy and online media especially offered a safe haven for participation. These elaborations partially continued the work of earlier participatory-democracy theorists such as Barber. In *Strong Democracy*, Barber (1984: 289) focuses mainly on "interactive video communications," but already is referring in a balanced way to the potential use of networked computers: "The wiring of homes for cable television across America [. . .], the availability of low-frequency and satellite transmissions in areas beyond regular transmission or cable, and the interactive possibilities of video, computers, and information retrieval systems open up a new mode of human communications that can be used either in civic and constructive or in manipulative and destructive ways" (Barber 1984: 274). In a later work (1998: 81), Barber refers more explicitly to the web: "the World Wide Web was, in its conception and compared to traditional broadcast media, a remarkably promising means for point-to-point lateral communication among citizens and for genuine interactivity (users not merely passively receiving information, but participating in retrieving and creating it)."

At the end of the 1990s, the situation changed, as Web 2.0 (Using Web 2.0 as a time-delineating concept has a problematic side. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 2000s, Web 2.0 became a nodal point of online media discourses on democracy, which legitimizes its use. However, the label "Web 2.0 period" is used in a broad sense, referring to new media discourses on democracy that were articulated from the 1990s onward.) slowly came into existence, and the concepts of participation and democracy became more explicitly (re-)articulated within the realm of online media, allowing for more discursive space for the maximalist versions of participation. Arguably, four clusters can be distinguished in these debates:

- First, a series of e-concepts (such as e-governance, e-democracy, e-campaigning, e-canvassing, e-lobbying, e-consultation, and e-voting – see Remenyi and Wilson 2007; and see Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (2007) for three Estonian examples) was used to point to the possibilities for increased participation in institutionalized politics, but also to discuss the increased possibilities for political actors to reach out to the political community (see, e.g., Williamson et al. (2010) on the digital campaign).

- A second cluster of debates within the domain of participation through the media uses the concept of deliberation, as the deliberative turn also affects online media studies. Online media are here seen as potentially instrumental in providing a (series of) sites where deliberation can be organized. To use Gimmler's (2001: 30) words, "Here it is clear that, since it generates knowledge and functions as a medium of interaction, the internet can play a significant role in the deliberative public sphere." One strand of work is concerned with fragmentation and narcissism, where the Internet becomes (seen as) a series of echo chambers for the likeminded (Sunstein 2001). There are also more positive positions: Gimmler (2001: 31), for example, points to the positive contribution of the Internet to deliberative democracy by providing access to information and opportunities for interaction and by encouraging the exchange of services and information.
- Thirdly, alternative approaches to the public sphere as, for instance, captured by the concept of counterpublics, open up space to see online identity politics (and the politics of identity), culture jamming, cyborg politics, and pop protests (Iannelli 2016) as forms of participation of counterpublics in the cultural realm, while retaining the broad political dimension. Within this framework, online media become articulated as mobilization tools, assisting in political (in the broad sense) recruitment, organization, and campaigning, again contributing to participation *through* the Internet (Langman 2005; Dynel and Chovanec 2015; Iannelli 2016; Vromen 2016).
- In contrast to participation through the Internet (and ICTs), participation in the Internet focuses on the opportunities provided to non-media professionals to (co-) produce media content themselves and to (co-)organize the structures that allow for this media production. One entry into this debate, which also captures some of its complexities, are the already-mentioned concepts of user-generated content (UGC) and produsage (Bruns 2008), which again incorporate many different meanings and practices: Mainstream media organizations that have organized participation through online media often revert to the concept of citizen journalism to label the involvement of ordinary people in the media production process. However, the broad category of UGC also leaves room for a wide variety of non-mainstream practices and forms of eye-witnessing (Mortensen 2015) and online alternative journalism (see Atton and Hamilton 2008, for a broad approach to alternative journalism), which allow for more maximalist versions of participation (e.g., the Indymedia network [Kidd 2003]). However, we should not lose sight of the impact of the contemporary media industries on the participatory process, where structural participation in the decision-making process of the involved companies, for instance, is excluded. Fuchs (2015: 102) refers to the "corporate colonization of social media," while Jenkins (2006: 175) argues that the corporate interpretation of participation still leans toward the more minimalist forms, while consumers strive for more maximalist versions (which, especially at the level of structural media participation, are often out of reach). Still, examples such as the online encyclopedia Wikipedia show that collaborative cultural production can still be grounded into a maximalist participatory model (O'Sullivan 2009: 186), even though, as always, not without problems.

Conclusion

We can find a wide diversity of articulations of participation in (and beyond) the field of Media and Communication Studies; this is a diversity that has only increased after Web 2.0 and social media studies provided a new impetus for the study of media participation. This diversity is a challenge for academic research, as it complicates dialogue and comparison, but it also reflects the political-ideological nature of participation, within both the field of academia and media. The concept, the definition, and the practice of participation all remain objects of political struggle, where some defend the more maximalist versions of participation, and call for a strengthening of the already existing pockets of maximalist media participation, as, for instance, can be found in the worlds of community and alternative media, in the alternative web, and in the more activist usages of media technologies. Others would consider the more minimalist participatory intensities as sufficient, applauding the increased visibility and activity levels of citizens without asking for “the impossible” (defined as the structural equalization of power relations in and beyond the media field). The high levels of interaction that mainstream media, including mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter, have to offer are then met with approval, without problematizing the low levels of structural participation.

Even if this political struggle remains unresolved and a quick resolution remains out of sight, this struggle also shows the coexistence of interactive, minimalist-participatory, and maximalist-participatory practices in the media field. Even if one could argue that the interactive and minimalist-participatory practices remain the dominant mode in the second decade of the twenty-first century, maximalist-participatory practices also continue to exist. What is also important here is that no particular media technology has become wholly minimalist- or maximalist-participatory. There are simply too many platforms, interfaces, genres, formats, organizations, usages, practices, and people involved to be able to have a linear connection between one particular media technology, or even one media organization, and one particular level of participatory intensities, whether it is minimalist or maximalist. This means that one media organization, whether it is a television broadcaster, a newspaper, or a social media organization, can have very different participatory intensities in its constitutive components (its editorial teams, its pages, its programs, its groups, etc.), which renders it often very difficult to make generalizing statements about particular media technologies or organizations, without studying these “lower” levels.

Moreover, the popularity of participation research has also shown that a series of research-related problems continue to surface. Arguably, these problems are located at three distinct, but still interrelated, levels. Firstly, there is still hardly a consensus on how participation should be theorized, or even defined. The resulting plurality of approaches toward participation can only be welcomed and embraced, but at the same time there is a need for clarity to ensure that academic dialogues can be organized and academics can build more on each other’s work to better understand the role of participation in contemporary societies. Secondly, there is also considerable vagueness about how participation should be researched. All social practices are

characterized by complexity, but, in the case of participatory processes, this complexity is further enhanced by the discursive and material struggles that are intimately connected with these participatory processes. Analytical models, which might support researchers better in tackling this complexity, remain rare. Thirdly, there is no sufficient debate on how participation should be evaluated. On some occasions, the impression might arise that any kind of social action can be labeled as participatory and then celebrated as part of the trajectory toward a democratic nirvana. There is a need to acknowledge the political-ideological nature of participation, which brings about normative discussions into the desirability of particular participatory intensities.

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