

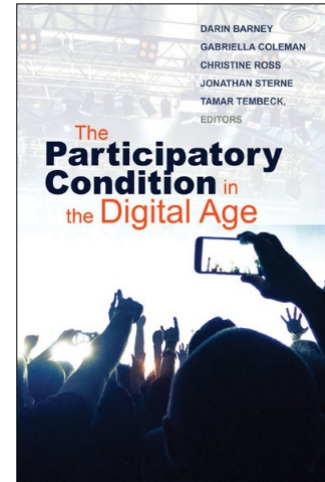
Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, and Tamar Tembeck (Eds.), **The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 352 pp., \$27.00 (paperback).

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“Participation” is a highly contested yet increasingly used buzzword across many spheres of academia. How this term is problematized, however, differs between disciplines. **The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age** pulls some of these differing definitions together in 15 transdisciplinary essays that investigate the relationships between participation and politics, openness, surveillance, and aisthesis. In particular, the edited collection does a great job of distinguishing between the rhetoric of participation with actual participation, and the text highlights how the diffusion and prevalence of digital media has contributed to the “muddying” of this term. The editors define participation as a “general condition in which many of us live or seek to live” which involves “being involved in doing something and taking part in something with others” (p. vii). While “participation” has arguably always been part of our lives, the popularization of digital media has meant that it has increased in relational possibilities. The authors in this collection critically probe and question whether the participatory nature often attributed to new media has truly enabled increased participation, or if this claim obscures a reality that reinforces existing power structures.



Following a detailed introduction from the editors that discusses the participatory condition more broadly, the collection splits into four sections. The first section focuses on the politics of participation. Nico Carpentier opens the section, positing that power is inseparable from participation. He challenges the dichotomization of participation, arguing that we should view participation in relation to distributions of power rather than classifying it as either “authentic” or “fake.” He warns of the “strategic use of the rhetorics of participation to protect a status quo in power imbalances” but concludes that participation is “deeply embedded in our political realities” (p. 16). Cayley Sorochan furthers this argument, using the Occupy Wall Street movement as a case study to argue that we need to move beyond analyzing decision-making processes and concentrate on critiquing the ideal of participation itself. In particular, she demonstrates how participation, especially participatory democracy, as an ideal became the core of the Occupy Wall Street movement and thus inhibited its ability to operate as a functional organization. Drawing on the use of media in the Middle East and Northern Africa since 2010, Jillian C. York analyzes how the penetration of the Internet contributed to revolutionary change in the region. Indeed, she claims that “the new face of Arab media is online” (p. 43). She argues that social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter created opportunities for activists to express themselves without being subjected to the restrictions and censorship placed on traditional media in the region. It also created a space for those based in the region to (re)connect with far-flung diaspora, potentially creating a global movement for local issues. Trebor Scholz concludes the section by proposing that crowdsourcing content, services, and goods is the future of work. Scholz calls for

what he terms “platform cooperativism” to encourage “moments of solidarity among geographically dispersed digital workers” (p. 60). Maybe the future of work isn’t so dire after all.

The second section focuses on openness, a much-needed area of critique in relation to the participatory condition. As the editors note, “Like participation, openness tends to be rhetorically invested with such a positive valence that it stands resistant to critique” (p. xxv). Christina Dunbar-Hester examines how the ideals of activism manifest as participation, particularly drawing on a case study of media activists and their engagement with communications technologies. Graham Pullin highlights that while participatory design—or putting people at the center of the design process—is good in principle, the reality of implementation means that practice is often wanting. Based on perhaps one of the most unusual case studies in the collection, Alessandro Delfanti and Salvatore Iaconesi examine collective action mediated by digital technologies, demonstrating that openness can help mobilize knowledge production and sharing. In 2012, Iaconesi “open sourced his cancer” (p. 123), publishing medical data and research about his brain tumor online and seeking contributions from artists, activists, designers, engineers, peers, and physicians to find a “cure.” In doing so, the authors argue that this kind of open source data represents a move toward digital solidarity, advocating for “the building of common open, and autonomous spaces” (p. 126) which can “trigger public responses that enable collective reappropriations of standard experiences” (p. 139). Slightly reminiscent of Scholz’s earlier chapter, Bart Cammaerts discusses the rise of mutual cooperative practices, particularly in the post 2008 Global Financial Crisis era. These practices, according to Cammaerts, can be viewed as alternatives to capitalist exchange models, which are increasingly mediated through digital communication technologies. He examines a range of mutual cooperative practices, from nonprofit versus profit-driven initiatives to those with strong network ties versus weak ties.

Where exactly is the line between openness and surveillance? The three essays in the third section of this collection debate just this. Surveillance is often purported as necessary in the name of public safety and urban development, but Kate Crawford questions whether big data gathered through urban experiments is truly justified, and asks how this aligns with civic participation. Indeed, she concludes her chapter by arguing that in determining whether our cities are truly participatory, “we have to ask who is listening, how they listen, and whether those social categories can be contested” (p. 184). Mark Andrejevic demonstrates that active participation in the digital age not only involves deliberate forms of action, but also generates data about itself. More importantly, this data, which is often more comprehensive than data generated through intention, is increasingly automated. As Andrejevic points out, most users are generally less aware of interactions between themselves and the “various entities that collect information about their activities and communications” (p. 200). Can it be participatory if it is largely unrealized? Julie E. Cohen furthers this discussion, arguing that the rhetoric around participation and innovation has meant that surveillance has essentially become exempt from legal and social control. Particularly drawing on gamification as part of the surveillance-innovation complex, Cohen claims that the framing of users as “autonomous and consenting feeds into the neoliberal framing of regulatory choices” (p. 222). Examining the context of participation is thus essential to understanding the impact of surveillance.

The final section takes a different approach, focusing on how the aisthesis generated in participatory media has rekindled not only the debate about aesthetics, but also analyzes the participatory process, especially who can take part in the creative process and what specific forms of art these practices

generate. Jason Edward Lewis discusses the representation of indigenous peoples in media, noting this group is rarely featured and, when it is featured, the representations typically reinforce negative stereotypes. These various forms of media, particularly of the science fiction variety, tend to influence how we imagine our future. Lewis thus describes trying to create a "future imaginary" whereby indigenous viewpoints and worldviews are clearly populated. Rudolf Frieling examines the nature of art when there is "no unique object that can be identified . . . only concepts, codes, instructions, copies, and relationships" (p. 251). Indeed, as Frieling points out, the "open and participatory work of art [runs] counter to the institutional framework of the museum" (p. 253). On a different track, Bernard Stiegler (translated by Daniel Ross) argues for the inclusion of the heuristic experience in university training of primary and secondary school teachers. In the final (very short) chapter of this collection, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Krzysztof Wodiczko describe their live augmented reality installation "where people's presence in the public space is detected and projected onto the very ground where they are standing" (p. 285). This is a sharp reminder of the previous section on surveillance, and the role that art can play in highlighting this debate.

Overall, this edition collection is a much-needed contribution to the current scholarly debates around the participatory condition. It draws on theories and case studies from communication and media studies, cultural studies, art, philosophy, political science, and sociology in an attempt to better understand the participatory condition as it currently is (and could potentially be) in the digital age in which we now live. It is a useful introduction to anyone who has thought about what participation really entails.