

## **Participations: Dialogues on the Participatory Promise of Contemporary Culture and Politics**

### **PART 3: POLITICS**

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**Henry Jenkins:**

There have been long-standing discussions of “participation” in political theory. So, what ideas from this literature do we think might be useful for discussing the “participatory turn” in contemporary culture? To what degree has the rise of networked computing encouraged us to reimagine the public sphere? If we can move this discussion beyond established frames, such as “Twitter revolutions” or “slactivism,” what meaningful claims can we make about the ways that expanding access to the means of media production and circulation has impacted the available political identities, tactics, and discourses? Has the expansion of communicative capacity impacted the range of political options available to groups that have historically been disenfranchised from political elites and institutionalized politics? What obstacles have blocked the full achievement of the promises of a more participatory culture?

**Moya Bailey:**

I offer my thoughts as someone labeled an unsatisfied member of generation Y and early adopter of many social media platforms. My research examines how gender-marginalized people of color use digital media to create representations of themselves that challenge mainstream depictions and offer more diverse narratives. The use of social media has facilitated unprecedented success for independent projects, and it is forcing more mainstream media to take note. I see new media allowing more people to become content creators of a variety of representations that can hopefully move people beyond one-dimensional stereotypes that unfortunately inform the political realities of many marginalized communities.

I am reminded of Black social media leadership in galvanizing a national conversation about the murder of Trayvon Martin, which forced the district attorney to charge George Zimmerman (six weeks later). The use of social media by people who are often disenfranchised from the traditional political process is telling. Why is it easier to vote for your favorite contestant on a reality show than it is to vote in a local or presidential election?

Political participation via social media often feels reactionary. People use social media to protest or support something already in motion. I’d love to know of more examples of strategic and generative political participation in the digital age. I fear the rapid response model will lead to increased burnout, because people are inundated with so much information. It seems overwhelming to respond to every injustice that comes across my time line. More of an effort to connect political issues and address the root causes as opposed to simply respond to individual impact would better serve political movements. I do see this happening in spaces such as the Allied Media Conference and other spaces that articulate necessity of media in long-term political projects. Do you experience digital political participation as reactionary?

**Ramesh Srinivasan:**

I’ve been working in the Arab world for the past three years, particularly in Egypt. This work has been dedicated to exploring the networks that are shaping collective action by activists across the political map, from the now assailed Muslim Brotherhood to many of the youth/left/labor activists. It did not take much work to realize from the field how overstated social media technologies were in terms of shaping the

dynamics on the ground—from issues of lack of access to false positives provided by Twitter to the fact that networks of communication are circumscribed by your social status (what Ronald Burt and others have described as homophily). Though, at times, new technologies open a space for new political information to surface, they also can serve as watertight walled gardens. I observed some of these themes dating back to fieldwork I conducted in revolutionary Kyrgyzstan in 2007 (Srinivasan & Fish, 2009).

Most of the scholarly literature armchairs the role of media within cultural and social environments. In contrast, field studies allow networks to be reenvisioned based on their embeddedness within a particular place and time, and in the context of the social life of a set of communities or citizens. In this space, I've identified several key elements that recognize the roles of new technologies in political mobilization within the Arab world. Each space I identify defies the over-the-top "naturalized" descriptions of technologies that are either off-the-cuff dismissive or revelatory. Let's keep our eyes off the elites of Silicon Valley and look at the embedded practices of 99.9% of the world's population. We're asking and trying to answer important questions here—and as scholars we must ground our work in a critical empiricism to better understand what is changing and what is being imagined in today's increasingly technology-penetrated world.

**Mirko Tobias Schäfer:**

In my book, *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*, I distinguish between explicit participation and implicit participation. Explicit participation describes the conscious and active involvement of users. Henry Jenkins' investigation of fan culture bears many examples of explicit participation (e.g., Jenkins, 2006). The definition of participatory culture by Jenkins et al. (2007) aims at media practices, which I would call explicit participation. Implicit participation, however, describes the implementation of user activities and media practices into easy-to-use interfaces and into business models. Users participate implicitly simply through using the platform and often contribute in ways they are unaware of (i.e., Facebook users inherently provide information useful for targeted advertising and other means).

Whereas examples of explicit participation shape the narrative of new media as enabling, implicit participation constitutes its commodification. Here participation is reduced to a mere rhetoric, most convincingly displayed by Facebook, where CEO Zuckerberg invited users to vote on the terms of use in a video note that uncannily emulates presidential address notes. I do not claim that there are not successful forms of user participation. However, I want to stress that the participatory turn has two sides: (1) the explicit participation of users and citizens and (2) the implementation of participation rhetoric into platforms and interfaces that limit user participation and give platform providers even greater means of user management.

I would like less focus on what is happening on the front end, the user interface, and more on what is happening on the back end of popular Web applications. User activities generate data that can be used for all kinds of purposes, including targeted advertising and data mining (finding meaning in user messages, interpreting the sentiment of a Twitter-using crowd, mapping the network of users liking a Facebook page)

for content evaluation and moderation. Speaking of security, features in the popular social media platforms show how an “algorithmic turn” (Uricchio, 2011) in governance will most certainly affect our understanding of democracy and freedom of expression. From algorithmic content moderation to automatic content screening for potential copyright violations, many features are in place that shape the so-called user-generated content according to corporate rules.

On the level of public administrations, an overly enthusiastic discourse dreams of a big data mining governance that employs apps to connect citizens and delegate many tasks through crowdsourcing. Participation is often reduced to merely participating in solving everyday problems. Questions of deliberative processes about how to shape society, how to distribute cultural and natural resources, how to redistribute wealth and assign responsibility are largely excluded from this discourse.

We must scrutinize the rhetoric of participation, determining to what extent participation is actually enabled and what activities are stifled by design. We should keep in mind that only a tiny minority is actually interested in political participation; our celebration of the 99% embraces a framing of politically concerned and actively engaged citizens.

***Nico Carpentier:***

Political theory (and more particularly, democratic theory) is only one of the many key fields where theoretical reflections about participation have developed. Democratic theory still takes a privileged position in the theoretical discussion on participation, because it immediately shows its political nature. But the political-democratic approach does not stop at the edges of institutionalized politics, and once one enters other societal fields, participation is still very present, both as a material practice and as discourse. Struggles about the distribution of power in society in fields such as media, the arts, and development, and the attempts to make that distribution more equal, are what participation is about (Carpentier, 2011). An analysis of these fields shows the pervasiveness of participation as a deep social construction and people’s desire to gain some degree of control over the processes in which they find themselves.

Analysis of these fields shows the central role of power in discussions of participation. Here’s my working definition of participation, very much inspired by political theory: “a situation where the actors involved in (formal or informal) decision-making processes are positioned towards each other through power relationships that are (to some extent) egalitarian” (Carpentier, Dahlgren, & Pasquali, 2014, p. 124). These power relationships are not stable, but part of a struggle throughout society (and its many fields). That said, not all processes labeled participatory are participatory. We need to focus on particular processes (and their contexts) to see what exactly is occurring. In my opinion, we need to be careful about making broad-sweeping statements (about participation in “the” media, for instance), but need to investigate who decides on what, and what kind of participatory intensities, we are dealing with. At this point, we see various participatory intensities, where sometimes people manage to exercise a degree of control, but in many other cases we can see only what I like to call more minimalist versions of participation where (to quote Mirko) participation is reduced “to a mere rhetoric exercise.”

**Jack Linchuan Qiu:**

I've researched the Internet in China, especially in relation to Chinese workers and labor movements. Let me share two initial responses.

First, long before Web2.0, the field of development communication (including ICT4D) had gone through significant debates concerning the so-called participatory paradigm. This is a rich tradition in the developing world, which essentially puts the conventional, elitist, modernization paradigm on its head in designing and implementing bottom-up inclusive frameworks, where the disenfranchised can exercise control and where the subaltern can speak (Sparks, 2007). These participatory projects, such as those promoted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have been critiqued, even as "soft imperialism" (Davis, 2006, p. 75), because they provide excuses for the state's failure to deliver basic services.

Although decades old, this debate about participation in development communication studies remains relevant. The participatory turn in contemporary culture, of course, has a technological dimension. But underneath the technology of networked computing, attention must be paid to the power structures, their durability, and their long-term impact on the disenfranchised.

Second, does participation really empower small potatoes, or is it helping Big Brother? Social control, from the panopticon to the panspectron (Braman, 2006), is another classic theme in political and cultural theory that should inform our dialogue. It applies well in the Chinese context, where the combination of the world's largest Internet user population and one of the fastest growing social media markets is not accompanied by the flattening of political structures. The stronghold against the labor movement in China has not been weakened by the spread of Weibo, China's most popular Twitter-like service, which has attracted labor activists, NGOs, and some ordinary workers. Instead, the structures of control seem to have gained from the new wealth of user-generated content, which benefits the powers that be more than anyone else.

Indeed, no one should underestimate the capacity of traditional power centers to benefit from this participatory turn. Consider Edward Snowden and the Prism. Should we call our tweets and Weibo posts acts of participation, or, more precisely, instances of free labor to input data for the National Security Agency?

**Why Public Sphere When Speaking About Social Media?**

**Mirko Tobias Schäfer:**

Stepping beyond the common platitudes of social media as a new public sphere (Twitter revolution, slacktivism, etc.), one might want to look up Habermas again. The usual Habermas bashing includes most certainly a reference to Nancy Fraser's excellent account (Fraser, 1990). But instead of limiting our revision of Habermas to the common emphasis of class and gender exclusion in Habermas' reading of civic practices in the 18th and 19th century as well as his ignorance of marginalized publics—which Fraser correctly questions—I want to emphasize Fraser's critique of Habermas' dogmatic distinction of civic body

and politicians. Habermas reduces citizens to an audience simply discussing political affairs and considers them as strictly separated from those who actually have agency in shaping policy. But those domains can hardly be separated. When analyzing social media conversations, we can see their dynamic interactions.

Fraser's notion of multiple publics, especially strong and weak publics, offers a much more accurate account of framing the social media as an expansion of the public sphere or a part of it. Another reference to the public sphere discussion is Habermas' own reframing of the public sphere as simply "a network for communicating information and points of view" (1996, p. 360). This network has been rapidly expanding since Habermas first published his research on the structural transformation of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1990). The Arab Spring and the Occupy movement are examples that indicate to what extent connected media serve as networks for communicating information and points of view (Constanza-Chock, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011). Undeniably, social media are also used for sharing information and discussing points of view, and they are used by activists as much as they are employed by politicians. They became a part of the carefully monitored public opinion, and an emerging industry of social media monitoring companies provides the services for watching and analyzing the discussions online as well as stepping in and manipulating opinion. These examples also show how those activities unfold seamlessly within the traditional public space and its online expansion.

After the first wave of enthusiasm about social media has cooled down, critique of the inherent power structures in popular social media platforms has emerged in media studies. These can be distinguished in terms of three areas: free labor, privacy, and the public sphere.

I have doubts about the free labor criticism (e.g., Andrejevic, 2012; Scholz, 2012), because I find it a rather shaky argument. It would hold more water if, instead of the surplus value generated from user activities, critics would focus on the extraction of cultural value from the commons to the commercial domain (e.g., the use of your photos, your intellectual labor as writing texts, and communicating and interacting with other users for targeted advertising analysis).

The violation of privacy and the far-reaching security apparatus emerging in the connected back ends of the social Web (e.g., Fuchs, 2009; Zimmer, 2007, 2008) are more tricky. I would argue that an approach that treats social media as an expansion of the public sphere could provide a valuable intervention. The issues raised by the authors representing the free speech and privacy criticisms are very much rooted in the fact that social media are perceived as part of the public sphere. Of course, this presents us with a dilemma, because social media are not public but corporate property. Problems of surveillance and corporate ownership appear as issues closely related to the emergence of social media as a part of the public sphere (Münker, 2009).

The term *public sphere* allows students of media to frame social media as an inherent aspect of the current media sphere; it also carries the notion of infrastructure for exchanging ideas and point of views, but we are aware of its hybrid character, being intertwined in media *dispositifs* and everyday practices far more than the traditional media have been (where the term *water cooler talk* sums up the extent of intertwined media sphere and other places of everyday life). It seems important to withdraw from the dogmatic normative concept of public sphere and limit—at least for analysis and research—the definition

to its reduced infrastructural connotation. Based on the outcomes of these discussions, policy makers and citizens might develop a normative framework that assigns roles and norms to the platforms as well as to the platform providers.

Looking at the practices forces us to acknowledge that the large majority of users don't fit Habermas' definition of the informed audience—the enlightened and concerned citizen pushing for social change. Ramesh reminded us to keep in mind what the 99% are doing. The 99% are basically indifferent consumers. Critical audiences are often small and easily overestimated by those sympathizing with them.

***Natalie Fenton:***

I agree with Nico that the most productive works on participation can be found in democratic theory, because it makes a direct link to this thing called democracy—with more participation in political life generally being seen as leading to better democracy. And, of course, political life does not just occur in traditional political institutions but also in civil society and in the domain of the social. The ability to participate and to be political, to accrue political capital and influence and ultimately to effect political and social transformation is resource dependent. We need to be reminded constantly that politics and its transformation rest on material conditions and their consequences both for individuals and for organizations and institutions. So I also concur with Nico that a politics of participation must be based on equality—if people have differential resources (cultural, economic, social, political, and technological), then their ability to participate will likely also be differential. Participation that leads to democratization, whichever way you interpret it (radical, liberal, or participative), requires the real and material participation of the oppressed and excluded, of the victims of the political system. This is not an argument simply for inclusivity; it is so much more than that. As media scholars, these distinctly preliminary points matter. Participation conceived of as access to communication can only ever be partial. Limiting our own analysis to mediated participation will, at best, only offer partial understanding of what participation means and, at worse, will give way to a fetishization of notions of participation.

To avoid this, we need a deep and radical contextualization that takes full account of the social and political order of the societies and hence of the media systems that we are concerned with. For many of us in the West, this process begins with an understanding of democratic capitalism and its recent unraveling in the form of the 2008 financial crash. Streeck (2012) theorizes the financial crisis as a product of the fundamental contradictions of "post-war democratic capitalism," whereby states have been structurally required to balance the needs of two sovereigns: "their people, below, and the international 'markets' above" (p. 64). The media, in mainstream forms, are, of course, part of these international markets. Since 2008, Streeck argues, "the dialectic of democracy and capitalism has been unfolding at breathtaking speed" (ibid.). For Streeck, this intensified crisis of democratic legitimation is marked by a transition from "people whisperers" to "capital whisperers." What are the implications of this unraveling dialectic of democracy and capitalism for those social science paradigms generated and heavily invested in the historical heyday of representative democracy; the suppositions of deliberative democracy; of democratic action/attainment and of the assumptions of the role of (public) communications in democratic processes? If we find ourselves (maybe inadvertently) fetishizing participation, are we all capital whisperers (Fenton & Titley, in press)?

**Alexis Lothian:**

As I read the conversation between Henry and Nico (Carpentier & Jenkins, 2013) that inspired this roundtable, I was struck by the frequent references to “utopia” as an ideal of full participation: something impossible and yet something we can strive toward. As a scholar of speculative narrative, this is a familiar idea to me. And yet when I think about utopia, I think about something that is both desirable and dangerous. So many examples of utopian thought are colonizing formations: Take the idea of building a new country in empty land, like the United States. One person’s utopia is often not only unpleasant but downright fatal to others. In this conversation and in the discourse of participation more generally, I think we are seeing a movement away from participation as utopian promise and toward the ways that using the term in utopian mode can get out of hand, as well as the ways in which even more modest utopianisms fail to describe many aspects of what is going on. It’s often in the ways that they fail that utopian ideas become most interesting.

My own ideas about participatory politics have circled around from utopia to its failures. I’ve been a part and a scholar of the participatory fan subcultures Henry has written about, entering them from an angle at which feminist and queer politics were always central. Because of that, I’ve often been suspicious of the temporal framework in which playful participation in creative cultures is seen as significant inasmuch as it leads into more obviously political participation in fan activism or in political institutions. So many complex and exciting things are happening on the level of representation and imagination within grassroots practices of cultural participation in various media contexts. Yet I’m acutely aware that there are limits to a focus on images and stories in a world where, as Mirko pointed out, implicit forms of participation and algorithmic shaping of content are so important in our everyday experience of digital life. And, as Moya highlighted, we can be so inundated with content that matters to us that we experience burnout in engaging with it.

In a 2013 conference paper, Maria Velazquez argues that connections among different groups online get hidden by a flattening tendency to read people of color’s participation only through their race, and that this obscures the scope and importance of knowledge that is being produced. Velazquez’s work is important to me, because we share many of the same reference points for political or social justice-minded participatory cultures: science fiction fan communities that are explicitly engaged with critical analyses of gender, race, class, and disability; networks that cohere around groups like the Carl Brandon Society (promoting people of color in science fiction); WisCon (a feminist science fiction convention that has been running for almost 40 years); and Dark Agenda (which intervenes into a large annual fan fiction festival to bring attention to non-Western texts and characters and creators of color whose stories are less often told and retold). There is much overlap between these organizations and the media fans who created the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), which has been working since 2007 to create an infrastructure for fan creators that will not be beholden to corporate interests.

On the level of both form and content, there are ways that these groups can demonstrate utopian aspects to the politics of participation. They are sites where a grassroots version of cultural and political theory is being created—where cultural production is made, shared, critiqued, and analyzed in ways that antagonize or completely sidestep most corporate media. All the same, there are plenty of failures. Antiracist fan



culture is a zone where the political analysis that operates in what people are saying and making is frequently limited to the politics of representation and inclusion. In contrast, OTW's rallying cry was a materialist one: "We want to own the servers." Now it does, in terms of hosting fan fiction; its utopia has in many ways been achieved. But, as it has come to fruition, many other problems have arisen; not just the internal issues that any grassroots organization is likely to face, but the fact that the fan-owned servers lack the widespread reach and appeal of the compromised, corporate spaces where we spend much of our digital lives.

***Danielle Allen:***

I believe we should shift focus away from spatial models of public spheres to models based instead on the dynamics of discursive flows. Theorists have been debating the definition of the public sphere since antiquity, and, in perhaps its most basic definition, the public sphere is taken to consist of a communicative universe that links private spaces and governmental institutions through conversations, discursive exchanges, and deliberations that both form public opinion and invoke it as the basis for legitimate public decision making. If we focus on circulating streams of discourse, we can make useful distinctions. Some discursive streams, such as influential discourse, influence the decision-making mechanisms that define the lives of entire polities; these whole polity-level decision-making mechanisms encompass political institutions, NGOs, corporations, social movement processes, and mass opinion. Other streams, such as expressive discourse, have a more limited impact on particular communities of expression, although as discourse circulates and recirculates, it can move from one domain to another. This model also allows us to see identity formation as the beginning and end of discourse, with particular discourse streams moving out of particular contexts of identity formation and either flowing through, or not, the decision-making levers because of the diverse potential mechanisms of uptake that affect the separation of influential from expressive discourse. But whichever way discourse flows, it helps constitute and reconstitute identities.

This model also helps us see that it makes more sense to talk about public spheres (plural) than the public sphere, so that one then attends to how multiple public spheres (expressive communities) intersect, and to the distributional issues that affect the uptake mechanisms determining which expressive streams also become influential at the level of a whole polity. As I see it, the question of the efficacy of participation has a lot to do with the array of mechanisms affecting the uptake of discourse as influential at the level of the whole polity. Of course, discourse and participation can themselves change those uptake mechanisms, which are by no means static or ahistorical. Finally, this model effects an erasure of the boundary between the cultural and political by focusing first and foremost on how discourse affects decision making (at the level of the polity and the level of a particular expressive community) and identity formation simultaneously.

In the context of our work on platform design principles, my colleagues (Lissa Soep and Jennifer Earl) and I put this last idea this way: "Sixties activists insisted, the personal is political. Young change-makers in the digital age get that, and they one-up it with their own organizing principle: the political is social and cultural" (Allen, Soep, Earl, forthcoming, p. 1). We move from this view to the ideas that:

Platforms need to make that principle count in ways that engage youth in high-quality, equitable, and efficacious participation in digital-age civics, activism, and politics. We need to design digital environments that actively support the secure development of young people's identities as full participants in public spheres, on and off-line. (forthcoming, p. 1)

**Henry Jenkins:**

For the past few years, I have been part of a multidisciplinary MacArthur Foundation-funded research network that has been deploying a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand the political lives of U.S. youth. (Danielle is also part of this group.) Right now, young people are significantly more likely to participate in cultural activities than those tied to institutional politics, yet the first more and more bleeds into the second. Cathy Cohen, Joe Kahne, and our other colleagues (2012) found that youth who were highly involved in interest-driven activities online were five times as likely as those who weren't to engage in participatory politics, and nearly four times as likely to participate in forms of institutional politics. More and more, they are getting information they have about the world through their social interactions with each other—for better and for worse. Most youth do not translate these practices into political participation, but a growing number do, and there is surprisingly little difference across racial categories in terms of involvement in such practices.

My research group is exploring the "civic paths" that scaffold the movement of young people from participating in popular culture to participating in the political process. So far, we've interviewed more than 200 young activists. We are identifying "mechanisms of translation" (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013) that help young people gain entry into the political process: Activist groups often use references to popular culture and engagement with popular media platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook, as means of encouraging civic engagement. Most of these groups see the short-term attention-seeking campaigns Moya references as part of a larger, longer-term strategy for educating publics and promoting social change. These groups are not simply doing digital activism; they are seeking change through any media necessary, mixing new media tactics with more tried-and-true approaches. These groups are not simply the digital haves. We've seen innovative social media strategies emerging from youth who do not own their own computers or cameras, who depend on the limited access offered at libraries, schools, and community centers.

There's much about these emerging forms of participation that should give us hope, yet these groups are "precarious publics." What the DREAMers (Zimmerman, 2012) have done is nothing short of remarkable, but they have not yet succeeded in getting their legislative agenda through the current governmental impasse. What the American Muslim youth (Shresthova, 2013) are doing in terms of self-representation is inspiring, yet they face surveillance at all levels (from being racially profiled on Reddit in the wake of the Boston bombings to being spied upon by government agencies to being monitored by parents and religious leaders who don't approve of some of their life choices), and, as a result, they face constant intimidation. They can mobilize larger networks, but their supporters often seem ill prepared to engage with those who disagree with them. I find myself looking at Mary Gray's *Out in the Country* (2009), which discusses the precarious lives of GLBT youth in rural America, who are part of what she calls "border

publics," who sometimes gain ground and sometimes lose it in a day-to-day struggle in both physical and virtual worlds. The challenge here is to embrace the potentials for change, even celebrate partial victories, while not losing track of the challenges and setbacks these groups face in their ongoing struggles for democratic inclusion.

***Nico Carpentier:***

I want to return to Moya's initial question ("Do you experience digital political participation as reactionary?"), because it brings several issues to the table. My answer to the question is twofold. First, there is an almost instinctive "no, it can't be reactionary." We tend to see participation as both a tool to further democratize our society and as the outcome of that democratization process. So, in this view, it has to be a progressive force that protects citizens from domination by privileged groups and empowers the citizenry to gain more control over their everyday lives. At the same time, we understand that full participation (see Pateman, 1970), where all power relationships are equalized, is a utopia (and a eutopia), a never-to-be place, a fantasy. But I use fantasy in a more Lacanian mode here (see Carpentier, 2014), because it allows me to emphasize that participation is a driving force for progressive social-democratic innovation. In other words, the discourse that we should move toward a full power equilibrium between all actors in society, in all locations and settings, at the micro, meso, and macro levels of society, is a powerful and necessary tool for the further democratization of society. As a fantasy, it motivates people to perform and organize the social in a way that is more egalitarian.

But there is a more qualified answer to Moya's question. If we accept that manipulative forms of participation are also participation, if we don't distinguish between the rhetoric of participation on the one hand and the equalization of power relations on the other, then participation can also incorporate reactionary projects. But, then, I would argue, we also lose the concept of participation itself, at least as a critical concept. But, disregarding the normative for a second, also participation's analytical value is lost if we use it to describe every process that includes human action. I would propose that, at some stage, participation stops being participation. In 1969, Sherry Arnstein published her ladder-of-participation article, and this was exactly her argument: At some point, participation is not participation, even if it is labeled so, but tokenism and nonparticipation. Although these ladder-based approaches toward participation sometimes simplify things too much, they are still extremely valuable in arguing for a more restrictive (political and critical) approach toward participation. Even when we bring in more complexity (I have tried to do this with arguing for a distinction between minimalist and maximalist forms of participation; see Carpentier, 2011), we need to acknowledge that participation sometimes isn't participation. And this returns us to the articulation of participation as progressive.

We need to link participation with democracy. We can have (wonderful irony) extreme-right-wing discussion forums that formally comply with many of the characteristics of participation. They exchange opinions about how they see the world and how they wish to improve it. Some of these forums are managed in collective (dare I say participatory?) ways. But at the same time, these forums are highly exclusionary at the level of rhetoric and access, which pushes them outside the realm of the democratic. To avoid aberrations when restricting democracy to its formal component, we need substantive

democracy, articulation democracy with human rights (and other values). I propose that we require—for participation to be participation—that participation combines a formal with a substantive dimension.

**Danielle Allen:**

Nico, I find it interesting that you picked up Moya's question about whether (digital) political participation can be reactionary or should be understood as reactionary. I took Moya to be asking an explicit and an implicit question. The explicit question was whether too much digital participation is merely reactive—that is, responsive to the onslaught of petitions and invitations—instead of proactive and strategic. The implicit question, because of the use of the term *reactionary*, was whether the routine positioning of agents as reactive also establishes an effectively reactionary political platform for all political agency. If agents/participants are only ever reacting, can a truly transformative movement away from the status quo ever be achieved? We know, however, from political science that a critical ingredient to engaging marginalized populations (as with nonmarginalized populations) is, simply, an invitation to participate. The emphasis of the digital environment on reactive participation needn't establish a reactionary framework for politics generally, but to avoid that, one would need, in effect, to find ways of scaffolding the transition from the initial reactive response to proactive, strategic agency. I take Henry's work on pathways and scaffolding to concern just this issue.

**Alexis Lothian:**

Shorn of the context of Moya's originating post, her question immediately raises another: participation in what? And I think that this is absolutely crucial. Although I share Nico's desire for a movement toward full power equilibrium, I am not so sure that we can say that participation is necessarily progressive if it's true participation. What about explicitly progressive movements that are unintentionally exclusionary in their desire to promote participation? And *progressive* itself is a term that might take some unpacking. How many different political projects can be gathered under that heading, and how might they contradict one another? Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community* (2002) is a text to turn to here, as are critiques of the ways in which progressive movements have perpetuated race, gender, and class oppression (Ferguson, 2004; Hanhardt, 2013). Participation might not always be enough; deep and sustained analysis of the uneven ground on which participation takes place is also necessary.

Not coming from a political science background, I am less familiar than most people on this thread with the literature on how people come to engage with political structures and institutions. But I am thinking about the technological infrastructures, the platforms, that we use to engage. If the platform that invites participation is predetermined—a petition to sign, even a format specifically organized for a particular group—there is clearly a reactionary element. I like Danielle's unpacking very much: "If agents/participants are only ever reacting, then there is a real question about whether a truly transformative movement away from the status quo can be achieved." Yet that limited and limiting participation may nevertheless open up thoughts and ideas, send people looking for more information, and thereby connect to more potentially transformative possibilities. All the same, we ought to think as carefully about the different ways in which the term *transformative* can be mobilized as we should about the term *progressive*. In looking for my own answer to Moya's question, I'm inclined to seek different

ways of engaging in digital political participation that color outside the most obvious lines. What kinds of digital activity might contain challenges to the status quo, yet not look obviously like the political or even like participation at all?

**Ramesh Srinivasan:**

Just as terms like *community* and *progressive* are appropriately critiqued, I think it's important that we start to work on critically grounded notions of participation, perhaps even choosing to leave the term behind if appropriate. Speaking from the past three years of fieldwork I have conducted in revolutionary Egypt, I find that uncritically accepted notions of participation actually work to cement a discourse that is directly opposed to those activated by protesters, bloggers, and advocates for social justice. For example, participation simply accepted in terms of the notion of social media revolution in practice tends to reinforce an externally authored narrative that standard uses of social media platforms (creating groups, tweeting, sharing links) were and continue to be integral to powering ongoing social movements. In my experience, little could be further from the truth. Instead, subversion, dynamic appropriation, and thinking past the limitations of these technologies reveal some powerful insights. For example, I see Twitter being used in group meeting settings, resisting the notion of one user/account. In these settings, activists share with one another voices they have gathered from the street, engage in dialogues that are in person, and share selective insights with those who follow them in that performative moment on Twitter. Three publics are being merged in one space, one of which relates to Twitter (Srinivasan, 2013). Another example relates to misinformation and secret groups, both of which are actively part of the propaganda and misinformation strategies. In these cases, it is the direct authorship of false positives that is the key to the use of social media, belying the idea that participation online is somehow authentic or genuine. We commonly describe these as e-militia (Herrera & Lotfy, 2013). I'm still struggling with a strong conceptual approach toward describing these acts, but I sense that *participation* as it stands as a term needs to be fleshed out or perhaps supplanted by something more in line with subversion or strategic appropriation, borrowing from Faye Ginsburg's (2005) descriptions of indigenous media as a form of "strategic traditionalism." Because we are the participatory politics group, we have a great opportunity to push our notions further, moving past simply valorizing decentralized uses of new media technologies to focus in on the moments of engagement and interaction—fleshing them out to think about situatedness, context/environment, intention, and, ultimately, the production of power and discourse. My fieldwork in Egypt reminds me how important it is to critically ground the media studies vocabulary to which I am so used.

**Mirko Tobias Schäfer:**

Moya's question touches upon several issues. Participation carried a positive connotation. Digital technologies have been framed as enabling technologies, and simply using them was framed as participatory culture. Now, participation seems to have lost its antihegemonial tune. We see that participation is something that can be engineered or designed as "implicit participation" (Schäfer, 2011). The notion of community also became disputed since corporate companies Astroturf them, and since repressive regimes groom their own communities to counter the activists online. Ramesh's examples speak volumes about the ambiguity of participation.

The critique of participation sounds a bit like disappointment about its unfulfilled promises, but those were flawed from the beginning. I tried to develop a pragmatic understanding of participation. The scholar's personal hopes for democratic progress or power balance should not be a part of it. I treat participation more as a technical term, a *modus operandus*, free of political connotation. Participation simply describes how users in one way or another contribute to or participate in using a service or a platform. I refuse any normative connotation of participation.

Treating participation—or, for that matter, the public sphere—as a promise for social progress/political change and providing scholarly work that nourishes this connotation will render these terms useless. This is why I made an effort to accentuate the different qualities in relations between users, design, and platforms. It is necessary to point out the context of user activities, their agency, the role of design, and the objectives and influence of the platform providers. Then we can be more specific about the quality of participation and can develop criteria for measuring its impact.

To answer Moya's question, we have to focus on context. Social media can be easily used for reactionary objectives. They are well suited for creating the notions of legitimacy and user participation or civic participation while actually intensifying power structures; however, they can also be used for drawing attention to marginalized topics, exposing bad policy and corrupt politicians, and spreading information that would otherwise be suppressed. However, in general, they are used for personal communication about private things that matter to very few people and to share things that many people will find cute, funny, disturbing, or sensational—for as long as it takes to hit "like" or to retweet.

**Moya Bailey:**

Your questions have me thinking about digital literacy and the assumptions people make about who has access to the Internet and what kinds of access they have. A lot more people of color access the Internet through their cell phones, which can limit the types of digital platforms that are available to them. It impacts both people's ability to participate at all and the types of digital participation that are possible. To echo Alexis, "deep and sustained analysis of the uneven ground on which participation takes place is also necessary." I think part of this work is taking place on this thread.

I wonder if it might be helpful to think of examples of the nonreactionary participation we see online? I really appreciate Natalia Cecire's piece (2014) that discusses the continued relevance of the humanities. She gives the example of fan fiction as humanities theorizing. I liked her argument, because fan fiction could be read as reactionary in that it is a response to the cannon of a particular fandom, but the folks who participate in those subcultures are creating their own worlds that subvert traditional narratives. This line of thinking also goes to Danielle's point about invitation being an integral part of participation.

I have a colleague whose work is about women in the U.S. civil rights movement, and they tell her that their activism was something they "had to do." The compulsion to act wasn't the result of a direct invitation particularly because they were women. When I think of my own activism, it has often been the lack of invitation that has moved me, which again may circle back to the question of reaction. I wonder how the digital can facilitate more feelings among people of being compelled to act. Ramesh and Mirko

make me think about the utility of social media beyond its intended purpose, its “strategic appropriation” by different groups to enact change. In addition to petition fatigue, are there positives to seeing friends engaged in certain participatory actions? Isn’t that the whole premise of spybot adware technologies that tell you who is using and purchasing what products? If that is effective, isn’t it also a problem?

I am still interested in the intentional barriers that prevent people from participating more fully in our world. Unlike most other nations, the United States does not have a national holiday for Election Day. I wonder if part of social media’s appeal is the illusion of a commons where we all can theoretically share our thoughts despite all the limitations everyone has named.

***Jack Linchuan Qiu:***

Moya, your words make a lot of sense to me, sitting in Hong Kong, where we have one of the world’s highest Internet and mobile penetration rates, yet no universal suffrage. Most of those who govern our city-state are either handpicked or elected through “small circle elections” with minimal citizen participation. On New Year’s Day, to pressure the government for a more genuine election with broader citizen participation, some of my colleagues conducted a civil referendum project (<https://www.popvote.hk/english/>) asking citizens to participate, mostly through the website or a smart-phone app, and express their views. (There was a physical place for people to vote as well, but most chose to use a computer or mobile phone.)

I participated, like more than 60,000 of my fellow citizens. And the smart-phone app went smoothly. Yet, the very next day, on January 2, the government said our voices were not worthy of serious consideration.

More than 10,000 of us marched in the streets, including members of independent media organizations, labor NGOs, women’s groups, minority rights groups, and the environmental movement. No one really “invited” us. It’s something we just “had to do”—more for future generations than for ourselves, because most of us know it’s an uphill battle to challenge the top-down bureaucracy, which uses participation and invitations to participate as building blocks of a rhetorical facade for fundamentally nondemocratic practices. Although new communication technology cannot guarantee democracy, it’s a sphere for new participatory models to be tested, and old models contested, in what Stuart Hall would call politics “without guarantees” (1996, p. 24), now extending decisively into cyberspace, whose consequences are no longer virtual. It’s for real.

Hong Kong is not alone in this participatory crisis. We see it in many Asian societies, where rapid digital developments coexist with political conservatism. It’s true in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and similar countries as well as some more mature democracies.

So here is my working hypothesis: Cyberspace is becoming a new lab for bottom-up participatory experiments, and each movement in each society is merely a test tube. Although from the very beginning IT evangelists and hackers have experimented with the Internet in all kinds of interesting ways, this new lab is qualitatively different due to its seamless fusion with old politics. Most experiments fail. That’s what

experiments do. But that's okay, because you only need one test tube to host the experiment that changes the world. I label this test tube "digitally networked action" or DNA, after reading Bennett and Segerberg's award-winning article (2012). This DNA is all about participation, too.

**Danielle Allen:**

Thanks, Jack. Super interesting example. I like the idea of test tubes of digitally networked action. On the subject of invitations, that idea doesn't necessarily refer to invitations made by the state. The invitations of social actors to one another, in the civil society space, make a huge difference. That's really what I had in mind. I was thinking of the work of Lisa Garcia Bedolla and Melissa R. Michelson (2012).

That said, it's also clearly the case that the issue of participation looks very different in polities where there are historically well-developed public spheres connected to (relatively speaking) successful institutions of representation and in polities without such fully developed public spheres. There's a great recent article by Archon Fung (2013) and some collaborators on that difference.

**Natalie Fenton:**

Thank you all for a great discussion here, and I am sorry my own participation in this debate has been stymied partly by my own involvement in political activism within media reform in the context of the hacking scandal in the United Kingdom and partly by the demands of institutional life. Of course, this is not irrelevant and has set me thinking about the terms of my own political participation.

I come to my activism as an individual heavily invested in a politics of egalitarianism from a working-class background with a personal history of trade unionism trying to manage this within the academy that is deeply unequal and in which the demands enforced upon academics, partly as a result of the speed of technology, feel more like a tyranny than a participatory nirvana. To understand my own participatory practices, let alone those of others, I need to know, almost above all else: What I am trying to achieve and why?

The theory I use to interrogate my practice needs to be *explanatory*, *pragmatic*, and, perhaps more contentiously but crucially, *normative*. I need to be able to provide an explanation for what I perceive to be wrong with the society I am seeking to change and identify how to change it with feasible and practical goals for social transformation that come with identifiable norms for measuring criticism. The explanatory goal is enormously complex and needs to address psychological, social, cultural, political, economic, and, yes, technological life as well as institutional and corporate forms of domination. Crucially, this needs to account for different contexts, whether between nation-states or between political issues.

The pragmatic goal introduces the strategic and tactical dimensions of political participation, which may be nonhierarchical and openly participatory but also may be organized in a different way for particular political purposes that seek to take advantage of a particular political moment. Having identifiable norms will enable me to interpret and understand the direction of travel. One normative framework would be for real democracy.



If, as a very simplistic (and some have said utopian) democratic aim, we seek rule of the people, by the people, for the people—in other words, to create the conditions in which people can become self-creators of their own history—then we need to measure the multiple ways in which our societies fall short and then to set about identifying what these conditions are and how they can be achieved. Inequality, in its many forms, has been identified as a barrier to human emancipation (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010) (leaving aside for the moment how emancipation is defined) and is one terrifyingly difficult yet vitally important condition for democracy to flourish. This approach enables us, then, to evaluate when participation is not participation. In other words, this is not just about decentering the media, or even about providing a situated, thick, and deeply textural analysis of power in any given context. It is about understanding the politics—where politics is social, cultural, and technological.

**Henry Jenkins:**

Alexis posed a question that has surfaced in pretty much every one of the exchanges we've been hosting—"participation in what?" When we frame critical theory in a language of resistance, we all pretty much know what it is we are resisting—neoliberalism, racism, homophobia, patriarchy, militarism, and so on. When we start to think about participation, we are forced to think about what we are trying to build, what a more ideal society might look like. I have problems with Mirko's discussion of "implicit participation" for this reason. The phenomenon he is describing has to be part of any conversation about participation, but I object to calling it participation if the people involved have no sense of themselves as belonging to something bigger than the individual. For me, participation starts at that moment when we see ourselves as part of a group that is seeking to achieve some shared goals through collective effort.

Our research suggests that these moments when something blows up—say, Kony 2012—often depend on a large, existing network of people who have been working for the cause over an extended period and who have built a communication system that allows them to reach a critical mass. If that content is spreadable and if the organization has the latent capacity to expand its circles, then their message can spread outward to other networks with speed and scope. At this point, the content does provoke reactions, as the group is able to rally an expanded network around their cause, and then, logically, those less closely affiliated people go back to their everyday business. There are different mechanisms in place that ensure the sustainability of their efforts as opposed to those that are designed to attract and mobilize attention in the short term.

Mirko reminds us that the new channels of collective expression generally "are used for personal communication about private things that matter to very few people." I suspect most of what got discussed in Habermas' coffee houses (1962/1990) or Robert Putnam's bowling allies (2000) were topics of the same order; that a sense of collective interests emerges through localized exchanges, and much of that is focused on rather routine matters of no great public interest. For too long, politics has had the same qualities of high mass or high culture, has been removed from the vernacular, and, as such, many people did not feel empowered or, in Danielle's terms, invited to participate. Ethan Zuckerman (2012) has argued that the most powerful tools for political change are those that achieve wide adoption and are integrated into everyday practices. They are less likely to be shut down by governments because they are valued by the widest array of people; the messages are often not contained in closed political circles but rather

spread outward through the population. Raymond Williams (1958/2001) told us that culture is ordinary; perhaps the lesson here is that politics is also (or should be) ordinary, even if it is also often mobilized at moments of crisis or transformation.

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### Biographical Notes

**Danielle Allen** is UPS Foundation Professor of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study. She is the author of several books, among them *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* and *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*. Most recently, she has co-edited (with Jennifer Light) *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in the Digital Age*.

**Moya Bailey** is a postdoctoral scholar of African American Studies and Digital Humanities at Pennsylvania State University. Her work focuses on marginalized groups' use of digital media to promote social justice as acts of self-affirmation and health promotion. She is interested in how race, gender, and sexuality are represented in media and medicine. She currently curates the #transformDH Tumblr initiative in Digital Humanities.

**Nico Carpentier** is an associate professor at the Media and Communication Studies Department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels) and lecturer at Charles University in Prague. He is a research fellow at Loughborough University and the Cyprus University of Technology. He is also an executive board member of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, and he was vice president of the European Communication Research and Education Association from 2008 to 2012.

**Natalie Fenton** is a professor and joint head of the Department of Media and Communication, Goldsmiths, University of London. She is co-director of the Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre and co-director of Goldsmiths Centre for the Study of Global Media and Democracy. She has published widely on issues relating to news, journalism, civil society, radical politics, and new media and is particularly interested in rethinking understandings of public culture, the public sphere, and democracy. Her most recent books are *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age* and *Misunderstanding the Internet* (with James Curran and Des Freedman). Her next book is titled *New Media and Radical Politics*.

**Henry Jenkins** is currently the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California and formerly the codirector of the comparative media studies master's program at MIT. His recent works include *Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture* (with Sam Ford and Joshua Green) and *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick for the Literature Classroom* (with Katie Clinton, Jenna McWilliams, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, and Erin Reilly). His first book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, was recently released in a 20th-anniversary edition.

**Alexis Lothian** is an assistant professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on speculative fiction's engagements with race, gender, and sexuality, and she also works on digital artistic forms that are emerging from science fiction fan communities, especially as these forms engage critical readings of media texts and are used to participate in social justice activism. Her work has been published in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Cinema Journal*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Journal of Digital Humanities*.

**Jack Linchuan Qiu** is an associate professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He conducts research on information and communication technologies, class, globalization, and social change. His publications include *World's Factory in the Information Age*, *Working-Class Network Society*, and *Mobile Communication and Society*. He serves on nine international journal boards and is associate editor for the *Journal of Communication*.

**Mirko Tobias Schäfer** is an assistant professor for new media and digital culture at the University of Utrecht and director of the Utrecht Data School. Schäfer studied theater, film, and media studies and communication studies at Vienna University and digital culture at Utrecht University. He holds a magister (master's degree) in theater, film, and media studies from the University of Vienna, and a PhD in media and culture studies from Utrecht University. In 2012 and 2013, he was appointed Research Fellow at Vienna University of Applied Arts. He is author of *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*.

**Ramesh Srinivasan** is an associate professor at UCLA in information studies and design-media arts. He is a scholar of media and culture studying the modes by which new media technologies are shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics. He has worked with communities ranging from activist bloggers to rural Indian communities to indigenous peoples worldwide. Srinivasan's studies of bloggers and activists have focused on participants in recent revolutions in Egypt and Kyrgyzstan. His work in India has involved collaborations with rural and urban disenfranchised populations in India to study how media literacy may shape collective action.

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