

Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics

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Abstract

This conversation started in Prague, the Czech Republic, during a panel moderated by Irena Reifová at the symposium 'On Empowered and Impassioned Audiences in the Age of Media Convergence'. The event was organized by the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University. The text contains a series of discussions. First, there is a conversation about the nature of the participatory democratic utopia and participatory culture and how groups take (or do not take) advantage of the affordances of new and emerging media. It also emphasizes the political nature and potential of popular culture and touches upon its connection to institutionalized politics. Three other key areas are mentioned: the role of different cultures of leadership, the significance of organizations in structuring participatory processes, and the need to enhance civic learning, providing more support for participatory cultures. This is combined with an interlocking discussion about the definition of participation and how it is tied up with power. It covers the differences between participation and interaction, engagement, interpretation, production, curation, and circulation. Finally, there is an underlying strand of discussion about the role of academia, focusing on the relationship between critical theory and cultural studies, the need to deconstruct our own frameworks and the question of which language to use to communicate academic research to the public.

Keywords

Citizenship, convergence culture, critical theory, cultural studies, democracy, education, fandom, literacy, participation, participatory culture, participatory democratic utopia

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Nico Carpentier (NC): This conversation started in Prague, the Czech Republic, at the symposium 'On Empowered and Impassioned Audiences in the Age of Media Convergence' organized by the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University. After the event, Henry Jenkins and I agreed to continue this conversation as a written dialogue. The starting point of this dialogue was the following series of sentences from the debate that concluded the workshop: 'The title of one of the platforms of Document No. 11, the Kassel arts exhibition, was *Democracy Unrealized* (Enwezor et al., 2003). If we broaden this idea, it means that democracy and participatory culture will always be unrealized. There's no end point. It will never be achieved. We can come closer but we can never reach this end point. There will always be struggle, there will always be contestation. There will always be elitist forces trying to make things go back to the old ways.'

Henry Jenkins (HJ): I would agree. Participatory culture, in any absolute sense, may be a utopian goal, meaningful in the ways that it motivates our struggles to achieve it and provides yardsticks to measure what we've achieved. More and more, I am talking about 'a more participatory culture' precisely to acknowledge this key principle – that participatory culture is something we have struggled toward over the past 100 plus years; we've gained ground and lost ground in and around each new technology. Even if a growing number of people, at least in the developed world, have access to some expanded communication capacity, those opportunities are not evenly distributed. Such a perspective allows us to express our concerns, say, over the ways that Web 2.0 companies have sought to capture and commodify the public's participatory energies, even as they offer tools that may be used in support of democratizing and diversifying our culture.

My understanding of participatory culture has evolved dramatically. When I first used the phrase in *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992), I was contrasting participation and spectatorship, really only making descriptive claims about the cultural logic of fandom. As the digital era has expanded access to the practices of cultural production and circulation, I have gone through waves of giddy excitement and increasing uncertainty about the potentials of participatory culture. I have tried to identify the educational needs and pedagogical practices that might help people embrace a more participatory culture and, more recently, I am interested in 'participatory politics', I argued at the end of *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins, 2006a) that we were playing around with tools and practices in our recreational life, which might have more 'serious' uses in politics, education, religion, and so forth. I now see signs that these practices are being deployed effectively to link young people to political movements that are having some national and international impact.

At the same time, 'participatory culture' has become an empty signifier often used in very superficial ways by all kinds of groups that want to entice our participation but do not want to give up any real control. And I fear I have contributed to this phenomenon by moving between descriptive and normative definitions of participatory culture without always being as clear as I should be about the distinction between the two.

Over the past decade, critical theory has offered us the best tools for understanding those forces that might deflect a more participatory culture, whereas audience and fan studies have done the better job of identifying those sites where some aspects of a more participatory culture can or have been realized. To build effective theories, we need to understand both what we are fighting against and what we are fighting for. We need to avoid fatalism on both sides: the fatalism of critical studies is that nothing can or will ever change, while the fatalism of much digital theory is that progressive change is the inevitable consequence of new media systems rather than something we have to struggle toward every step along the way.

This is what I respect about the presentation you made in Prague. You were skeptical about some of the easy claims being made about participatory culture, but you were not cynical about the

importance of this struggle. You are agreeing here, as I read you, that we can ‘come closer’ to achieving these ideals. This framing gives us a starting point for a productive conversation. We are at a moment where we need to sharpen our vocabulary and develop some more precise categories for assessing competing claims regarding participation. We also need to go beyond theoretical paralysis – the same old debates with the same old people – to make concrete interventions on the level of policy and education that might move us a bit closer toward achieving our aspirations. Without such a hope, there is no motivation for struggle.

NC: I agree that it is high time to fine tune our theoretical concepts. Much of my work has been focused on the very definition of the concept of participation, where the struggle over the meaning of the concept is part of the political-democratic struggle itself. Although I have always been careful with Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of participation’ metaphor, I think it is still relevant because it introduces a normative-critical dimension to the debate of participation. Her work emphasizes that the signifier ‘participation’ hides many different meanings, which range from manipulation to full citizen control. What she brings to the debate is the idea that many different social practices (in her case related to urban planning) have been labeled participatory and that we need to look carefully and distinguish between different participatory intensities. And indeed, we need to admit that some practices are labeled ‘participatory’, while they simply are not, or where the level of participation is only minimal. That’s where we need to be critical.

But in order to be normative-critical, we need an anchoring point that allows us to establish what the level of participation within a specific social practice is. We need a horizon to help us evaluate social practices and participatory claims. My proposal has been to go back to political-democratic theory, to Pateman’s (1970) definition of full participation as the equal power position of all actors in a decision-making process. I don’t think this level of equality can ever be reached on a permanent basis; if it is reached, it will only be a temporary and unstable moment of radical equality. But the concept of full participation is important as an intellectual reference point that allows for a critical evaluation – and comparison – of different participatory social practices. At the same time, the notion of full participation, even if it is a never-to-be-reached ideal, functions as an important democratic utopia. It is my democratic utopia because I believe we need to strive for this radical equality. That’s also where my hope lies, because I think we can indeed move closer toward it. Here, I think I’m very close to your thinking when you’re referring to the need for ‘more participatory culture’.

There are arguments that substantiate this hope. But, at the same time, I think we also need to acknowledge the failures and setbacks and the impossibility of permanently attaining this participatory democratic utopia. Here, I always find myself quoting Beckett when he wrote: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better’. Maybe it is a postmodern way of dealing with the failure of utopia, while maintaining a structural belief in and deep commitment to the very same utopia. To put it differently, this implies that we cannot remain blind to the emptied rhetoric of participation and that we should analyze these failures and instrumentalizations. I would suggest that this requires the need to avoid broad sweeping statements – utopian or dystopian – as made by many authors, a tendency you have rightfully critiqued. More specifically, I think we need to revert to the microanalytics of power, looking at how specific participatory practices are characterized by specific power balances and struggles at different levels, moments, and locations. Participatory practices are surprisingly complex and hardly ever straightforward. Portraying that complexity – and the contradictions that trigger it – critically, but with respect and hope, is a very necessary intellectual strategy for the understanding of social realities and, in the long run, one that supports the participatory democratic utopia.

The relationship between cultural and political participation

HJ: I am part of a new research network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP), created and funded by the MacArthur Foundation, which is combining quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand how American youths are engaging with opportunities for political participation. We are trying especially to understand the relationships between cultural participation and political participation. YPP supports a range of different projects, including my own Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) initiative. The MAPP team, based at University of Southern California, uses interviews, fieldwork, and content analysis to map innovative groups, organizations, and networks that have been successful at recruiting, training, and mobilizing young people to take political action (Jenkins, 2012a).

Many of these groups tap the affordances of new media – from social networking software to video sharing sites – to get their message out or to maintain strong links between geographically dispersed participants. Within the YPP network, a more quantitative survey also seeks to capture a baseline of more typical youth, their new media experiences and their degrees of engagement with institutional politics (Cohen and Kahne, 2012). This process explores what cultural/media studies and political science might learn from each other.

I was drawn into this project by my dissatisfaction with the loose ways previous generations of cultural scholars described the links between cultural politics and ‘real’ politics. Textual interpretation often substitutes in those accounts for political mobilization in ways that have been widely critiqued. Yet, I think critics miss something important if they do not acknowledge that our cultural experiences (our fantasies and our desires) often motivate our choices as citizens – a point Steven Duncombe (2007), Sonia Livingstone (2005) and Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) have made especially powerfully – or the ways that young citizens appropriate and remix popular culture to express their political visions. So, we want to understand how these groups do things that most of us would agree are political, such as registering voters, signing petitions, raising funds, and shaping public opinion around specific policy debates, even as we also broaden our understanding of politics to incorporate new models of identity, affiliation, and change.

To some degree, this work is descriptive – trying to understand what constitutes participation in these various contexts and what makes participation more or less meaningful to those involved. At the same time, we are seeking a more refined vocabulary for identifying and evaluating the ‘terms of our participation’. Some of these organizations maintain strong centralized leadership with tight control over messaging despite an explicit appeal to supporters to help circulate and frame their messages. Others have embraced a more bottom-up approach, where local chapters may propose specific issues and tactics to pursue, create their own media, which expresses their own visions for change, and frame the issues for different constituencies. Young people have gained greater equality in these groups’ decision-making processes than within adult-run nonprofit organizations. But, they are also taking advantage of the affordances of Web 2.0 platforms, such as YouTube, which expand their communication capacities, even if doing so means that they accept terms of service more limiting than you or I would see as ideal. In this process, the conceptual frameworks you or Chris Kely’s team at University of California, Los Angeles (Fish et al., 2011) are developing, which draw explicitly on the literature of participatory democracy, are enormously helpful.

I very much like your phrase here, ‘critically but with respect and hope,’ since to do qualitative work well, you have to start with a respect for the people you are studying. Above all, what I take from our discussion so far is a need to value process – the movement toward or away from abstract ideals, partial victories, and partial failures. The groups we study model ways that we might use our

emerging communicative capacity to make a difference in the world. Yet, there is no clear and simple path forward.

NC: Obviously, it is crucial to see how the political plays out in different spheres, including the spheres of (institutionalized) politics, activism, entertainment, and (new) media. There is still a need for more research into the multiple intersections of these different spheres, and the Youth and Participatory Politics network looks highly promising for that reason. But your comments also raise a conceptual issue, as I've always been a bit uncomfortable with the concept of political participation, which is widely used and accepted to describe the participation within institutionalized politics. My work has been focused on the conceptualization of participation, which for me is a floating signifier, taking on different meanings in different discursive contexts, ranging from more minimalist to more maximalist variations (Carpentier, 2011a). Distinguishing between these different participatory intensities seems crucial to me if we want to say anything about the multitude of participatory practices. But let's bracket that issue for a moment because I want to focus here on the 'political' in 'political participation'. I have always liked the difference that Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005) has introduced between politics and the political. For her, politics refers to 'the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order' (Mouffe, 2000: 101) (which includes institutionalized politics), while the political is a dimension of the social that refers to the context of conflictuality. The political, in this meaning, is unavoidably much broader than politics, as it spans all spheres of the social. It also avoids privileging specific sites, such as institutionalized politics, as the preferential site of the political. I would argue that the political is a dimension of all spheres and realities, and that we shouldn't hierarchize its occurrences. For that reason, I try to avoid 'political participation' and prefer 'participation in institutionalized politics'. The problem becomes, for me at least, clear when the distinction is made between political participation and cultural participation, which seems to suggest that cultural participation has no political dimension. I'm not claiming that the political saturates cultural participation and that everything is 'the political', but I would still like to emphasize that every social process (including cultural participation or participation in the cultural sphere) has a political dimension as it – albeit in varying degrees – is invested with power and conflict.

This also brings in the democratic, because there are many different ways that societies and their constitutive parts deal with power and conflict. To put it differently, there are many different 'political's. As we are committed to the democratic project, it then becomes a matter of taming conflict so that difference is not leading to inequality, or worse, to oppression. This also impacts participation itself because we cannot disconnect participation from its embeddedness in democracy. That's why I'm referring to the 'participatory-democratic', with its explicit reference to the democratic. It is a permanent reminder that the participatory can also be undemocratic and utterly destructive, at least when we use a substantive democratic approach and don't limit ourselves to a formal or procedural democratic approach. For participation to contribute to the democratization of democracy (Giddens, 2002: 93), it needs explicit articulation with the democratic. In other words, a participatory culture needs a democratic culture.

HJ: I certainly do not believe institutional politics is the only sphere where politics matters. On the contrary, I started my work primarily interested in the space of cultural politics, whether the politics that operate within fan communities (in *Textual Poachers*) or the politics that operate within the family sphere (Jenkins, 1998, 2003). And within the larger multidisciplinary conversations around the Youth and Participatory Politics project, one of my primary contributions is to continue to push the social scientists to broaden their understanding of the political to deal with the ever more complex sets of intersections between politics and everyday life.

At the same time, though I work hard to translate my ideas into a language that makes sense to the communities we are addressing, in this case, the primary audience for this research is within the policy sphere, where the term ‘political participation’ is widely understood. Here, the idea that a group like the Harry Potter Alliance (Jenkins, 2012b) might represent meaningful political engagement is almost incomprehensible. The political scientists are themselves pushing against their fields when they expand the definition of the political, for example, to include practices not directed toward governmental entities. For example, Cathy J. Cohen’s *Democracy Remixed* (2010) finds that more African American youth have participated in boycotts (directing their consumption power to reward companies for responsible actions) than boycotts (the weapon of choice for the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s). More and more, US struggles over the digital infrastructure get directed against companies (not through governments) because the corporations are, through terms of service, establishing the terms of our participation.

Ethan Zuckerman (forthcoming), another YPP member, has proposed the ‘cute cat picture theory of revolution’: young people around the world have developed ‘latent capacities’ (in terms of their access and understanding of technologies for working around hierarchical control, of their ability to form and navigate through social networks, to create and circulate images), which may be deployed toward more explicitly political ends under the right circumstances. So, it is not simply that the cultural constitutes a distinctive sphere or register of politics, but that what happens in the realm of cultural politics may have a direct impact on institutional politics. The key phrase here may be ‘under the right circumstances’, since there is still a lot we do not know about which circumstances foster a ‘participatory democratic’ culture. As you note, not all forms of participation are conducive to democracy, not all forms of fandom give rise to activists.

NC: Your comments about language bring us to the politics of the concept. I, of course, have no ambition to impose the use of specific concepts on anybody. After all, coming from a discourse-theoretical background I take the structural instability of meaning, combined with continued attempts for its stabilization, as a key starting point (see Carpentier and Spinoy, 2008). That social ontology would rest rather uneasily with a belief that anybody could fixate the meaning of academic concepts like politics, the political, and participation. And some concepts (like political participation) have become accepted in and beyond academia (or, at least, in a series of academic subfields). For communicational purposes, it makes sense to keep these concepts alive within academia. Moreover, I strongly acknowledge the need to translate our work into languages that can make it circulate more broadly, and to use language in a more tactical way, although I think that academic jargon also merits its place in the sun, and not every academic should *necessarily* be involved all the time with generating translations.

We, as an academic field, should clearly do more to have our ideas circulate (and leave the ivory towers, to use the horrible metaphor), but at the same time, we should protect the need for specialized and jargon-driven debates (keeping a few rooms in the attic of the ivory tower). In this sense, I mind neither the tactical nor academic (or both) use of ‘political participation,’ but I do think we should also remain aware that every concept brings in specific meanings because it is embedded in a specific academic, paradigmatic, theoretical, methodological, and empirical context. Every concept comes with a price – sometimes unacceptably high, sometimes tolerable. Making this price visible is, for me, crucial to any academic endeavor. For this reason, we need to permanently deconstruct our conceptual frameworks without becoming immobilized and embarking on a naive quest for new concepts. We can also attempt to rearticulate concepts, resisting their old meanings. Somehow, one of Haraway’s sentences from the *Cyborg Manifesto* comes here to mind, when she’s talking about the dubious origins of the cyborg concept (militarism, patriarchal

capitalism and state socialism): ‘But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential’ (Haraway, 1991: 151).

I don’t think that I’ve mentioned anything so far that you would disagree with. My point here is that this conceptual deconstruction, showing the complexities behind, for instance, the concept of political participation, is very necessary and has brought me to stop using it. The price this concept brings is that it separates political participation from other forms of participation, including what is labeled cultural participation. At the same time, it almost automatically connects political participation and institutionalized politics, disconnecting the political from these other realms, suggesting – for instance – that cultural participation is not political. I would, instead, argue for a conceptual model where the political is always a dimension of all social processes. This would mean that participation in both institutionalized politics and cultural participation is always political. At the same time, the political is only one dimension of our worlds and participatory processes also have cultural and social dimensions. For instance, the cultural plays a key role in these participatory processes through the logics of identity and the ways in which we define ourselves (or how we are being defined) as professionals, audience members or members of an elite, and so on (for an illustration that deals with media professional identities, see Carpentier, 2005).

Another language game I have been playing in relation to participation is the distinction between participation and interaction. When I started working for a Belgian academic centre of expertise focusing on cultural participation, I was confronted with a lot of sociological literature (see for instance Paul DiMaggio’s work – one example is DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004) dealing with what was termed cultural participation. However, to me, it seemed much more about access to the arts or about interaction. I couldn’t help but feel that all these concepts became parts of an unproductive mix-up, which was hiding more than it was uncovering, and that there was a need to start untangling access, interaction, and participation. That project started from a simple, linguistically driven idea that interaction simply did not mean the same thing as participation. This idea was combined with the sense that the more radical (maximalist) meanings of participation were being annihilated when a simple museum visit (and gazing at a painting) was labeled participation. For that reason, I started distinguishing between interaction and participation (an early version can be found in Carpentier, 2007; the more developed version in Carpentier, 2011a). If we look at the work of Argentinian philosopher Mario Bunge (1977: 259), we find a treacherously simple 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’. As I see it, that is structurally different from participation. For me, participation is – again, following Carole Pateman’s work – much more about equal power relations in decision-making processes. If we keep confusing interaction and participation, we leave out the power dynamics, and we leave out differences in participatory intensity caused by the differences in the levels of equality reached in specific processes. Obviously, this is a conceptual language game I like to play and that I gladly offer to the (academic) world. The uptake is, luckily, not mine to decide.

But the distinction between interaction and participation does produce an answer to your crucial remark about ‘the right circumstances’. I would argue that these circumstances for a participatory democratic culture are driven by the equality of power relations in all decision-making processes in society. This implies that a participatory democratic culture is strengthened when we manage to construct more equal power relations in a variety of societal fields, ranging from the family to the media. That is why we need to find ways to connect the different struggles of social movements and participatory organizations. Finding ways to connect organizations that try to establish the participatory museum (see Simon, 2010) with old and new media activists,

with artists working on interactive (and participatory) art (see Bishop, 2006), with radical democratic political movements, and with many others seems to me the very necessary political requirement to create and strengthen a new participatory imaginary and to build a democratic – participatory rhizome.

Participation, but in what?

HJ: Again, we come at this question from different starting points, but arrive at more or less the same conclusions, though there may be some potential confusion between our different vocabularies. I spent the first 20 years of my professional career at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where new media discourses were dominant and often framed within a design/engineering vocabulary. I was frustrated by how people talked about ‘interactive new media’ and ‘passive old media’ as if our relationship with television was passive simply because the technology offered fewer overt affordances for directly interacting with its contents. I worried that several decades of insights into ‘active audiences’ would be abandoned in order to celebrate a technologically deterministic conception of interactivity.

Over time, I developed what for me has been a productive distinction, seeing interactivity as emerging from the design of technologies, while participation emerges from social and cultural processes and practices. My goal was to be able to explore interactivity as a core feature of certain kinds of new media, while recognizing that people had all kinds of meaningful interactions around and through other kinds of media. So, to use some examples from your own writing, ‘watching television, surfing on the web, visiting a museum, talking to a neighbor, pressing the red button to initiate the interactive functions of digital television’ (Carpentier, 2011b: 27) would, by and large, describe issues of access (the first four) and interactivity (the last). I would see ‘talking to a neighbor’ as being of a different order, because it has more to do with the social and cultural dimensions than your other examples and because this exchange has the potential to constitute some form of participation. I would describe attendance at a cultural event or a visit to the museum as mechanisms for cultural engagement, but not yet forms of cultural participation (see Jenkins and Bertozzi, 2007, for an essay specifically about the relationship between participatory culture and the art world).

The more I push down on the concept of participation, the more I return to the issue ‘participation in what?’ This is where the overreach in our current terminology causes problems for all of the reasons you identify here. My initial use of ‘participatory culture’ to refer to fandom (Jenkins, 1992) relied on a not fully conscious blurring between forms of cultural production and forms of social exchange; fans understood fandom to be an informal ‘community’ defined around notions of equality, reciprocity, sociality, and diversity. The fans had a clear and (largely) shared understanding of what they were participating within and how their production and circulation of media content contributed to their shared well-being. And there was a clear tension between their culture and that of the commercial industries from which they took their raw materials. In this context, there are strong links between interpretation, production, curation, and circulation as potentially meaningful forms of participation. *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins et al., 2013b) explores how the public helps to shape the cultural and political agenda through curation and circulation.

With the rise of Web 2.0 business models, things have gotten more and more muddy. For starters, many platforms that describe themselves as participatory do not encourage the development of any collective understanding of cultural production: the emphasis is on individual self-expression. Sites like YouTube can be meeting grounds where multiple subcultures intersect, each bringing pre-

existing media-making practices with them (Burgess and Green, 2009), each learning from each other, but YouTube itself generates no shared identities or values, as is witnessed by the ruthless comments around YouTube posts. There is no investment in building long-term relationships between participants. There's some argument to be made that video blogging has started to emerge as a participatory community with strong social ties and collective interests (Lange, 2007), but it is not clear that this community is bound to, or originates from, YouTube as a platform, and its practices have been strongly informed by grassroots, alternative media production traditions of all kinds. What kinds of social – political structure are we joining when we share content on YouTube?

Web 2.0 sites assert ownership over what participants produce and set constraints on how this content can circulate, transforming participation into 'exploited labor' (Terranova, 2000). As this happens, the fan community's ethical norms break down as media produced as 'gifts' shared between participants becomes 'user-generated content' exploited for the profit of the platform owners (Jenkins et al., 2013b). Participants have no direct voice in governance and do not benefit from the site's success except in intangible ways. Ultimately, they have limited power, collectively or individually, even if management moves counter to their collective interests. Such sites fall far short of both my original sense of a participatory culture and your notion of participation as depending on equality between participants. This is one of many reasons I am drawn toward your effort to make sharper distinctions between different contexts and practices of participation. I am frankly attracted to the 'access, interaction, participation' framework you are proposing here.

But, given what you said in the opening about participation as always something to strive toward, perhaps there is some value in using the term to refer not to actual practices but to expectations about what kinds of social, cultural, economic, or political relationships might emerge within a more participatory culture. I have written about the ongoing struggles around terms of participation, debates concerning data surveillance, advertising, privacy, censorship, and so forth (Jenkins et al., 2013b). Here, the public expect a 'participatory' platform to be accountable and responsive to its members.

Such debates can extend into the public sphere around issues such as copyright and fair use, as people embrace the ideals of more diverse and democratic participation in and through media, seeking to act, collectively, to achieve a reality closer to their participatory utopia. It's a truism that revolutions occur not when inequalities are at their worst but rather when conditions start to improve. Media companies have had to cede some power to their audiences in order to hold onto their loyalty, and as they do so, networked audiences are increasingly identifying and acting on collective interests. That Web 2.0 platforms over-promise and under-deliver in terms of their promises of participation may set the preconditions for these struggles. This would argue for keeping a somewhat broader understanding of the promises of participation even if we sharpen our definition of what constitutes full or equal participation.

NC: I think that the question about 'participation in what' is absolutely a key to this debate. Earlier in our exchange, I referred to Pateman's (1970: 71) notion of full participation, and I think her definition includes an element, which is particularly relevant and helpful here. She restricts participation to equal(ized) relations in decision-making processes, which is obviously an approach embedded in political studies and democratic theory. But I would support this restriction to decision-making processes in the definition of participation – as long as we define decision-making processes in a broad way – because this offers us an opportunity to introduce a much clearer focus when studying (and defending) participation. Formal and informal decision-making processes can be relatively easily identified, although there are many in the field of media production or distribution. Then, the power dynamics within these processes can be scrutinized.

Your analysis of YouTube, which I welcome and share, is for me a perfect example of such an approach, as it carefully compares the power positions of different actors.

The distinction between participation *in* and *through* the media, that I often use, is only a translation of this need to locate participatory processes in actual decision-making processes. Participation in the media allows us to zoom in on decision-making processes within media organizations themselves and analyze how equal or unequal the power relations in these settings are. The YouTube case you mention makes it clear that participation in YouTube is minimalist, and that there is little reason to celebrate YouTube as an example of participatory, or democratic, culture. On the other hand, participation through the media opens up another field of participatory processes, in other areas of decision making, which have more to do with how people can enter public spaces and use media to enter into societal (or more localized) debates, dialogues, and deliberations. Here again, we need to look at what decision-making processes there are and what kind of power positions people hold. I think that especially at this level, there is still quite a lot of empirical work to be done, so we can learn more about the (constantly appearing, fluctuating and evaporating) power positions of participants. Too often, we get stuck in microapproaches that show the importance of a particular media statement or in macroapproaches that don't allow us to see how exactly the power dynamics work. Obviously, this just means that the old sociological micro/macro tension is still playing tricks on us.

My plea for a more reductive approach toward participation, focusing on decision-making processes and power relations, also allows strengthening the distinction between participation and interaction. Both are 'emerging from social and cultural processes and practices', to quote from your last response, but for me, interaction covers the field of sociocommunicative relationships, while participation covers the field of decision-making processes and power relations. That allows me to return to your list of potentially meaningful forms of participation, where you included interpretation, production, curation, and circulation. I would argue that for production, curation, and circulation, I can clearly see decision-making processes and power relations, and I would firmly agree that these are fields in which participatory processes can be located. The easiest example is media production, where we've had participatory forms of media production for decades and, arguably, centuries. But I'm not sure whether interpretation should feature in that list. For me, interpretation belongs to the field of interaction. I naturally acknowledge the importance of interpretation as a concept that plays a key role in understanding the interaction between audiences and (media) texts, and as a concept that is a condition of possibility for participation, but not as a form of participation as such – at least not in my vocabulary. In this sense, my example of 'talking to a neighbor' still shares something crucially important with the other instances I mentioned (watching television, surfing on the web, visiting a museum, pressing the red button to initiate the interactive functions of digital television). All are forms of interaction and all can be seen as conditions of possibility for participation. Of course, they are different forms of interaction; some are people-to-people interactions, others are people-to-media technology interactions (which is, as you so rightfully point out, connected to interactivity), while another is a people-to-institution interaction. But I would locate all of them at the level of interaction, which I see as a condition of possibility for participation.

There is one more conceptual comment that I'd like to make, and that has to do with your remark that we might consider moving away from seeing participation exclusively as an actual practice, but instead see it (also) as 'a set of expectations about what kinds of social, cultural, economic, or political relationships might emerge within a more participatory culture'.

For this set of expectations, combined with the effects that accompany them, I would propose the concept of engagement. Here, I would suggest using Peter Dahlgren's (2009) approach to

engagement, developed in the book *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication and Democracy*. Dahlgren sees engagement as a prerequisite or precondition for participation. As he wrote in the introduction to the special issue of *Communication Management*, entitled 'Interrogating audiences: theoretical horizons of participation': 'One has to feel invited, committed and/or empowered to enter into a participatory process' (Dahlgren, 2011: 8). I think this set of expectations and effects is extremely significant, but at the same time, I would see participation as different from engagement. To use more of Dahlgren's words: 'Participation has a clear material and actionist dimension, and cannot be reduced to how we think or feel about participation. To put it into simple grammatical terms, to participate is a verb' (Dahlgren, 2011: 8).

HJ: Your distinction between participating *in* media and participating *through* media may be helpful for exploring how YouTube fits within a participatory culture. My comments above were intended to suggest limits to our ability to participate *in* YouTube – the degree to which participants lack any direct say in the platform's governance. This is very different from discussing how participatory communities might use YouTube as a distribution channel. In my essay 'What Happened Before YouTube?', I asked about what was excluded from or who opts out of YouTube (Jenkins, 2009). Often, a sense of plentitude masks silences and absences. I discussed two examples – the fan-vidding community that fears what happens when their work is left 'too exposed' to the copyright police and the human rights group, Witness, which worries that their videos might be decontextualized and used in exploitative ways. Both, however, have been drawn toward YouTube as a distribution hub since I wrote the essay: while they lack control over what happens to their work there, they also see YouTube as a low-cost, low-effort way to expand their publics.

As we think about how groups use the platform for participatory politics, we might think about the DREAMers, a group of mostly undocumented youth who have been fighting for education and citizenship rights. As Arely Zimmerman (2012) has found, the DREAMers relied heavily on YouTube to circulate messages within – and beyond – their own community. Sharing their stories on YouTube, often in the form of confessional straight-to-camera 'coming out' stories, helped DREAMers to identify and forge common bonds with others who shared similar backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Relatively small-scale circulations of media may nevertheless provide the social and cultural preconditions for meaningful participation. Yet the porous nature of YouTube also meant these videos circulated beyond the specific community of their origins, also functioning as an important means of outreach to other groups. Most Americans have never knowingly interacted with someone who is undocumented; so watching these videos often had the effect of forcing them to confront the human realities of the immigration debate for the first time. These videos' circulation via YouTube did contribute to their democratic struggles, even if the DREAMers lost some control over what happened to their work.

Similarly, other researchers in our team (Thorson et al., 2013) have been studying the ways YouTube and Twitter were employed by the Occupy Wall Street movement, mapping thousands of videos accompanying Occupy-related tweets. In some cases, Occupy protesters used YouTube as an archive where they could share footage of local events, while in other cases, they used Twitter to call attention to videos they felt might be relevant at other locations, and in still other cases, they reframed existing YouTube videos to speak to their specific concerns. Occupy's use of YouTube suggests the platform's difference from, say, a television network like Fox News. YouTube sets relatively few limits on what content travels through its system – yes, it's too narrow in its interpretation of fair use; yes, it also polices obscenity – but as we saw in the case of *Innocence of Muslims*, it can resist pretty strong pressure to censor controversial political

content. As a result, this commercial platform became a key conduit for anticorporate messages from the Occupy movement, whereas Fox News exerts a tight control over content and was overtly hostile to the Occupy movement.

I think we are making ground here toward a shared vocabulary, even as we approach the questions from different directions. As should be clear by now, you work through abstract definitions which then may or may not be applied to specific examples, whereas I tend to work outward from specific case studies, looking for conceptual tools to explain what we are observing. Your categories may very well work as a starting point for discussing various dimensions of the struggles to achieve a more participatory culture, though the reality is apt to be much messier than abstract categories would suggest. If, as you argued earlier, there is no clear line between culture and politics, then we need a relatively loose definition of what constitutes the exercise of power or the process of collective decision making.

So, for me, it is not hard to imagine how a conversation between neighbors over the back fence may move closer and closer to participation – if, for example, they are seeking to influence each other's votes, if they are inviting someone to attend a political gathering, if they are rallying in opposition to a new neighbor who is integrating their neighborhood (just to add a less pro-social purpose) or if they are participating in feminist consciousness-raising. I would not say that interpretation in and of itself necessarily constitutes participation, but in studying fandom, I am interested in forms of interpretation, which are dialogic and collaborative, involve the formation of collective opinion, motivate cultural production, and can encourage lobbying producers. In such cases, we can make a theoretical distinction between, say, engagement and participation, but both might well be occurring at the same moment for the same people.

As we look at these examples, we would likely see that these cultural and political interactions (many of which are closely linked to participation in core decision-making activities) are less hierarchical than those found in more traditional kinds of organizations, but they are not in any sense flat. Some voices get heard more loudly than others, because they exercise persuasive authority, are willing to work harder and contribute more, and are closer to dominant opinion or any number of other reasons. Do such situations necessarily invalidate claims of participation, given what we both agreed early on – that participation in an absolute sense is an unattainable goal? A lot rests here on how we deal with imperfect or contradictory examples.

Participation, organizations, and leadership

NC: I do think that social processes like interpretation, interaction, and engagement are extremely relevant for democracies. I think we, again, are in agreement. Some of these processes, in specific practices, embedded in specific contexts, may also be participatory. Interaction (of which for me interpretation is a subcategory) and engagement are relevant as such, but they are also conditions of possibility for participation. There are also grey areas, where – slowly but surely – forms of interaction turn into (minimalist) forms of participation. One example is the first interactive film, the Czechoslovak *Kinoautomat. A Man and His House* (1967), where audience members could decide on which preproduced segments would be screened (Carpentier, 2011a). Interactive or participatory? That is not an easy discussion. Labeling this interaction or minimalist participation becomes, then, an analytical decision that needs to be argued from the specificity of the case. But there are many clear cases where there is access and interaction but (from my perspective) no participation. These cases are particularly the evidence for the difference between access and interaction on the one hand and participation on the other. This line of argument also implies that I

believe we have to get our feet wet. You might be right when saying that we get our feet wet in different ways. Most of the theoretical arguments I have developed are grounded in actual research, as the *Media and Participation* book hopefully makes clear, and they have been developed using fairly traditional qualitative methodological procedures, not that far removed from more contemporary versions of grounded theory. In practice, this means that the theoretical conceptions have been structurally affected by these specific research projects, which are both strength and weakness. But my research interest is mainly conceptually oriented, looking at specific social practices, and looking at how concepts are defined through these practices, and at the same time – through a series of iterations – confronting these practices with mediasociological and political categories. Behind all this is a theoretical interest for discourse in how we define our social reality, and more specifically, the ideology (or I would say: the discourse) of participation.

But I want to come back to your description of the Youth and Participatory Politics project. There, you mention what is for me one of the key complexities of the participatory democratic culture: leadership. In our Western cultures, we seem to have developed a very strong desire for leadership, even to the degree that it has become difficult to imagine social entities that don't have some form of formal or informal leadership. I do not want to claim that leadership is necessarily problematic, and that we should try to erase it from the social landscape, but we should recognize that specific ways of organizing leadership can structurally impede participatory democratic processes. Here, again, there is a need to embed leadership in a democratic logic, which I think is captured well in the concept of democratic leadership, a concept already developed in the first part of the 20th century by Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1950; see also Carpentier, forthcoming). This concept captures quite well the need to rearticulate leadership definitions and practices into more horizontal forms that maintain a sense of initiative and coordination.

The other element I very much appreciate in the Youth and Participatory Politics project (and your Media, Activism and Participatory Politics subproject) is the focus on the organization. Especially in new media studies, we have been confronted with a strong focus on the community as the societal structure that beheld the promise of the protective and facilitating site of participation. Although I think that the community (including the virtual or online community) can play this role effectively – at least under specific conditions – this focus shifted some attention away from the organization. By the way, that's one of the aspects I like more in your *Textual Poachers* in comparison with *Convergence Culture*: the organization is more present there, while *Convergence Culture* shifts a bit restlessly between community and organization. I think we need to come to the rescue of the organization and especially the participatory organization (see Carpentier, 2011c).

The existence of a formal organizational structure allows an explicit definition of participation as (one of) the objective(s) of the organization, which commits the people involved and embeds the notion of participation in the material practices of the organization, at the levels of decision-making procedures and production practices. The formalization of participation as an objective, and the explicit commitment and responsibility of its members to protect it, offers an organizational shelter and, often, a material space for (maximalist) participatory practices, in a societal context that is still not always appreciative of the more maximalist forms of participation and democratic leadership. Moreover, participatory media organizations are nodal points in rhizomes of participatory and civil society organizations. Their presence in these rhizomes often plays a strengthening role, as they are instrumental in the articulation of these networks. The rhizomes also have a protective role in making the incorporation by market and state actors more difficult. At a more discursive level, participatory organizations are locations where participatory discourses and subject positions can circulate, also because there is an ongoing need for these organizations to democratize their own

structures and to create and protect internal power balances. This, in turn, makes them centers of expertise based on the considerable amount of knowledge about the practical organization of participatory processes and how to overcome the many problems these processes encompass. Care should, of course, be taken not to romanticize them; they often fail because of their tendencies toward lethargy, isolationism, conflict, and even self-destruction, but they still remain – in my view – one of the structural backbones of a more participatory democratic society.

HJ: The roles of leadership and organization in fostering a more democratic and participatory culture are issues I am still working through on this current project (so anything I say here needs to be understood as highly provisional). Networked communications support much more fluid and decentralized forms of social structure, having more to do with shared interests rather than geographic constraints, often emerging on an ad hoc basis around a specific question or topic and then dissolving when they no longer seem relevant to their participants. Fandoms are classic examples of these kinds of relatively unstructured communities of interest. Few American fans belong to formal organizations; they move fluidly based on shared interests and a strong sense of social affiliation. Yet, fans are surprisingly organized, having developed an informal infrastructure that has supported communications between viewers and producers, has allowed for the rapid growth of new fan interests, has allowed for many conventions each year, has supported the widespread circulation of fan produced media, and has allowed them to mobilize quickly in response to threats and emergencies. Fandom, broadly defined, has operated according to such principles for more than 100 years, but fandom's ability to transmit its own cultural norms and values was disrupted by the explosion of new web participants. Old informal mechanisms of socializing people into the 'community' could not deal with the more dispersed nature of networked participation and, as a consequence, some of the group's social ties frayed as fan practices diversified and participation broadened.

So, the community I discussed in *Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992) had become a much more dispersed phenomenon by the time I wrote *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins, 2006a). I was very interested in how temporary, tactical 'communities' functioned to create culture and knowledge in *Convergence Culture* or to shape the appraisal and circulation of content in *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins et al., 2013b). With my new work on youth and participatory politics, you are right to say that more traditionally structured organizations are playing a more central role, though these groups remain more fluid and less permanent than the organizational structures associated with institutionalized politics.

Let's take, for example, Invisible Children (IC), the group that produced and circulated *Kony 2012* (Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova, 2012). IC has a fairly rigidly structured organization; authorized leaders make many key decisions that define IC's vision and its core tactics. IC actively recruits new members, who often form into local chapters that maintain some autonomy from the parent organization. IC actively trains youth leadership to support their activities through summer camps, internships, and local events. And many of these local chapters are affiliated with schools and universities, on the one hand, or churches, on the other (Brough, 2012). IC's media production remains tightly controlled though there is a limited (but growing) interest in encouraging do it yourself video-making practices. IC is thus a very limited example of what we are calling participatory politics, but it has much stronger emphasis on the cultural and social dimensions of politics than a traditional nonprofit might have. *Kony 2012* spread first through existing members, and then, with others affiliated with the institutions where these members are based, and then, outward through progressively more informal sets of social ties. The video could not have reached the visibility it achieved purely within the IC organization, but it also could not have reached its velocity of circulation without established support.

But, IC also demonstrates some of the challenges of maintaining a networked organization. As the organization received push back from more traditional human rights groups, they faced a crisis of leadership. *Kony 2012*'s spokesperson, Jason Russell, had a highly publicized breakdown and the other national leaders, his long-time friends, circled the wagons. A new generation of leaders, behind the scenes, stepped up, began producing videos and shaping IC's response, but it took them a few days to regroup. This delayed response left the more loosely affiliated network members exposed. The individuals who passed along the video often lacked the ability to meaningfully respond to criticisms. *Kony 2012* achieved spreadability but lacked drillability: IC had asked their members to help circulate its message but did not provide the depth of information participants needed to rebut counter arguments. IC was too centralized, not sufficiently participatory, and knowledge was not adequately dispersed across the network.

Compare IC with the DREAMer movement. The immigrant rights movement in the United States has historically been highly organized and fairly hierarchical. The movement tends to break down according to ethnic or national boundaries, to be geographically localized, to maintain tight control over its messaging, and to rely on the ethnic media – radio personalities in the case of the Spanish-language communities in Los Angeles, as Sasha Costanza-Chock (2010) has documented. With the DREAM movement, we saw a shift away from many of these formalized structures. It is a youth-driven movement; youths are connecting across nationality and across geographic location through their capacity to mobilize via social media. DREAMers have a dispersed capacity for media production, any participant can create and share videos, and, as a consequence, there is much less control over messaging.

These less hierarchical structures allow the DREAMer network enormous flexibility to respond to changing conditions (Zimmerman, 2012), especially when the struggle shifted from passing a Federal law to a series of local and state initiatives. The DREAMers' network allowed them to spread knowledge from any point to any other point. Leaders emerged organically but there was not a fixed or hierarchical structure that might overrule local experimentation and innovation. At the same time, Zimmerman notes that the DREAMers benefited from training and support from more institutionalized immigrant rights and labor organizations (2012). Again, we need a richer theoretical vocabulary to describe different structures within participatory organizations and how they respond to the challenges of networked communication.

NC: The *Kony* example is pretty strong, because it shows the dangers of traditional charismatic leadership. I, as you argue, wouldn't see this as a good example of democratic leadership. Although charismatic leadership has proven its strength in the (relative) short-term, it certainly poses a risk to more participatory democratic culture, as different 20th century totalitarian regimes have painfully shown. But, of course, democratic leadership, with its strong commitment to internal democracy and its horizontal hierarchies, does not offer a guarantee of organizational stability and efficiency either, as the history of new social movements has shown. But participatory organizations, characterized by democratic leadership, at least contribute to strengthening a more participatory democratic culture. I do agree with you that the forms available for structuring human activity have increased, and that we can now find many options for organizing ourselves, also within participatory democratic cultures. In *Convergence Culture*, for instance, you mention the adhocatic organization, which goes back to the writings of Alvin Toffler (1970) and Robert Waterman (1990). I wouldn't say that these organizations are characterized by a lack of hierarchy, but their organizational structures are more horizontal than those found in traditional organizations.

I think that one of the problems in this debate is that we need to put leadership back on the agenda. Too often, a dichotomy is created between traditional organizations with evenly traditional

leadership (within vertical power hierarchies) and participatory organizations with no leadership (and no power hierarchies). I would argue that leadership is a very necessary condition for participatory organizations to function, but that the notion of leadership has to be articulated within the participatory democratic. Interestingly, we can find some traces of this early type of democratic leadership in Marx and Engels, when they were writing about the Paris Commune and its exemplary role for the dictatorship of the proletariat (Engels, 1993; Marx, 1993), later perverted by Lenin into the dictatorship of the vanguard of proletariat. In their model, leadership should be elective, responsible, and immediately revocable. Although it's only a starting point, delegative democracy, as embryonically developed by Marx and Engels, does provide us with some good insights into how democratic leadership should be articulated and practiced. But the main point is that we need to think through the role of leadership much more and not discard it.

The same type of argument applies to organizations themselves. One of the interesting things we have seen in the past years is the shift away from traditional organizational structure and many more experiments with other ways of structuring the social. The (virtual) community received a lot of attention – and rightfully so – but we should not enter into a dichotomy where there is, on the one hand, a set of traditional organizations and, on the other hand, the multitude without any organizational structure. Shirky's (2008) book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* is a good example of this line of reasoning. I do think we need to acknowledge the importance of participatory organizations – with a firm and formalized commitment to the participatory process – that can act as nodal points of a participatory democratic culture. I don't think we should ignore the role of the multitude or the role of communities with weak (or strong) ties, but participatory organizations remain an important backbone of the civil society rhizomes that support a participatory democratic culture.

HJ: As we've started to work through our case studies, my team has begun to identify some core functions participatory organizations play in fostering greater civic and political participation. As we do so, I keep bringing our discussion back to your notions of democratic leadership. By now, we've conducted several hundred interviews with adolescents and young adults who are participating in these new style political organizations. The YPP network as a whole has found many examples of how young people are using new media platforms and processes for finding and deploying their political voice, and they are tracing the trajectories of young people who get involved in more traditional kinds of political structures. We would argue that there are some qualitative differences in the kinds of experiences which surface when we talk to youth involved in organizations that embrace some core aspects of participatory culture.

Such groups invite participation. They have strong incentives to recruit new members and to maintain the continued involvement of the existing members. These groups encourage ongoing participation as part of their members' lifestyles rather than as a once every few years practice (i.e. voting). Members 'care' about the issues, they 'care' about their communities, and they 'care' about their own identities as citizens. They often intensify the members' individual desires to make a difference (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2012).

These groups offer what we are calling mobilizing structures (Kligler-Vilenchik, unpublished manuscript in preparation). They map ways in which individual participation can add upto something larger. Following a logic of monitorial citizenship (Hurwitz, 2004; Schudson, 1999), they direct attention onto specific issues and propose ways that people can work together to bring about change. They train members to produce their own media and tell their own stories. They offer networks through which this media can circulate and reach an engaged and appreciative audience.

These groups are sites of civic learning, helping members develop a deeper understanding of the issues and debates and to acquire the skills needed to act meaningfully in response to these concerns. Some of this mentorship is top-down; some more lateral, as peers learn from each other's experiences. Some of this mentorship is built into the group's formal activities, while other forms emerge organically as participants learn through practice.

Ethan Zuckerman (2012) wrote recently that online activism is informed by different models of what levers can bring about meaningful change – from working through representative organizations to directing pressure on elites to seeking to shift public opinion. These groups work on multiple levels at once, but their success often rests on being taken seriously by people who have direct decision-making power (often by mobilizing large groups of participants in order to focus attention on specific concerns). These groups work collectively to ensure that their voices are heard.

I do not mean to offer too utopian an analysis here. In some cases, these groups still rely too much on coercive and charismatic models of leadership, as my discussion of IC above suggests; many would fall short of your notion of participation as defined through equality of power, some struggle with issues of diversity and inclusion – but these are groups which take seriously the challenges of building more participatory structures that can support struggles for change.

Large-scale societal change of core institutions and infrastructures is going to be hard to achieve. We are more likely to achieve greater opportunities for meaningful participation at subcultural, local, or even microlevels. We need to experiment with participation within the decision-making processes of families, communities, interest groups, arts institutions, and political organizations, before we can bring about a radical redistribution of power at much larger scales. For that reason, a key aspect of my interest in participatory culture now rests in educational reform (Jenkins, 2006b). I want to ensure that as many young people as possible have access to the skills and knowledge necessary to meaningfully participate in the core decisions that impact their lives. I want to help teachers adopt more participatory structures in the classroom, so young people can get a taste of what participation and collaboration feels like (Reilly and Literat, 2012). And I want to stress how activist groups might foster a more participatory ethos in their internal practices (Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova, 2012).

Learning participation by participating

NC: I'm in full agreement here. When reading these last parts, I was reminded of the old civil society argument, stressing the democratic importance of civil society as a learning environment. This very developmental approach to participation, inspired by Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's positions, where people learn participation by participating, and where through the process of participation citizens become better citizens, is absolutely crucial. Participation allows for the performance of democracy, which is deemed an important component of the social in itself. These participatory processes take advantage of the existing civil reservoirs of, for instance, citizens' knowledge and praxis, in turn activating and validating the citizens that are part of these civil reservoirs. Because of the multitude of these voices, a greater diversity is taken into account, which is (together with the increased levels of self-control) deemed to result in more societal happiness and is seen as a better guarantee of good decision making. Simultaneously, performing democracy through participation generates learning processes that strengthen civic identities, and participation can then be seen as a pedagogical instrument to generate better citizens and increase societal happiness.

The matter that remains is of a strategic nature. How to generate these processes of social change? How to hegemonize maximalist participation and a participatory democratic culture? How to avoid getting stuck in only very minimalist versions of participation? But also, how to avoid the use of participatory technologies in antidemocratic projects? The extreme-right wing Stormfront web site hosted 'interesting' forum discussions (<http://www.stormfront.org/forum/>), which illustrate that participation can be used outside a democratic culture. Here, I agree with you that we need to focus on working with social fields where there is interest in the more maximalist versions of participation, which might often be situated at the 'subcultural, local, or even micro levels', as you say. Sometimes, these participatory experiments will only produce temporary autonomous zones (to import Hakim Bey's, 1991, concept), but what is also very necessary is the articulation of these participatory zones into networks (or rhizomes) that share more or less the same maximalist democratic participatory culture and that can support each other in the use of participatory technologies and techniques. What I would also argue for is an intellectual framework that provides discursive support for the already existing multitude of maximalist participatory practices, articulated in rhizomatic networks. To use an old term, and without the illusion that this can be created by a small group of individuals, I would say that we need an ideology of maximalist participation.

HJ: My interest in learning to participate through participation has been a key reason why I have become so involved in the field of digital media and learning. For me, such policy work is a logical extension of my core political and theoretical commitments. Minimally, we need to recognize that opportunities for participation are unequally distributed across the culture due to inequalities of access to technological infrastructure (the digital divide) and inequalities in terms of access to opportunities, skills, knowledge, mentorship, and experiences, which make it easier for some groups to participate than others (the participation gap).

Thinking about schools as sites of participation is contradictory at best. On the one hand, public education represents an institution that comes in contact with young people across many different class and racial backgrounds; there is in the American public school tradition a commitment, honored often in the breach, toward fostering greater civic participation. Yet, at the same time, the schools are an agent of the state. They are often highly bureaucratic and hierarchical in their structures. Teachers have less and less freedom to set their own pedagogical agendas, held in check by both parental pressure and national curricular standards. Few of the core decisions rest in the hands of those closest to the students. If teachers often feel powerless in this process, students feel even more so (Losh and Jenkins, 2012).

We can, thus, reform some of the pedagogical processes occurring in individual classrooms; we can promote notions of coteaching or peer-to-peer learning, which takes seriously what young people have to contribute (Jenkins et al., 2013a). We can try to expand the learning ecology to connect what happens in the classroom with larger communities so that young people find their way into spaces where they may enjoy greater communicative and decision-making capacity. Many teachers experience these more participatory approaches as 'letting go of control' and many students experience them as being taken 'more seriously' by adults.

The more we move beyond the formal curriculum, the greater the opportunity for meaningful participation. Libraries may well function as temporary autonomous zones (Bey, 1991), especially in their after-school functions as spaces of more open-ended inquiry and exploration. They may bridge between formal instruction and various opportunities for grassroots participation. And we can point to informal learning structures that operate fully outside the state, which allow even more meaningful participation, including structures of governance. Some of these might

include the kinds of participatory politics groups we've been discussing. Read in this way, IC might seem relatively rigid as an activist organization, yet still almost certainly more participatory than most schools.

All of these stop short of what Paolo Freire (1972) would describe as critical participation. I have found myself drawn lately to a passage in Richard Shaull's foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, often mistakenly ascribed to Freire himself: 'Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world' (Shaull, 1972: 13). Here, we see participation surface yet again as a concept closely linked to the notions of democracy and citizenship. Freire links participation with critical inquiry, encouraging people to investigate the conditions of their own oppression and marginalization and produce shared representations of what better social conditions might look like.

While Freire's concepts have informed pedagogy across many parts of Latin America, they have proven harder to integrate into the US educational system: teachers feel at risk already at a time when schools are cutting back positions and where anything can be used as grounds for culling employees. Before we can achieve the kind of critical inquiry Freire is advocating, we need to fight even more basic battles to establish schools as places where young people can play around with the possibilities of meaningful participation, however, limited these may be by the requirements of standardized curriculum and standardized testing. On a day-to-day basis, the schools and libraries feel like the spaces where we can most directly intervene to foster a more participatory culture, but the process can be full of heartbreaking setbacks.

To very briefly touch on your Stormfront example, I would argue that the struggle toward a more participatory culture is a struggle over infrastructure and norms. The goal is to provide a space where core societal debates can be conducted under terms which ensure that a diversity of voices and perspectives are heard. Having established such an infrastructure, the people involved may nevertheless move in a more reactionary rather than progressive direction. There's nothing about participation that guarantees a progressive outcome. Rather, we will need to use the more participatory infrastructure to struggle over the direction our society takes. I personally give priority to the struggles over participation in terms of framing my own work, but I try hard not to romanticize the outcomes of participation.

NC: What is always striking to me is that these discussions of participation in schools and libraries only show how pervasive the debates about participation are within society. In almost every social field, whether it concerns the medical field with its doctor – patient relations (see Guadagnoli and Ward, 1998) or whether it is the arts with its artist – spectator relations (see Bishop, 2006), there is a debate about participation. Whenever a structural power imbalance occurs, attempts are organized to redress this imbalance by increasing the level of participation of the disadvantaged actors. This is, for me, one of the most hopeful conclusions so far. Obviously, we should not fetishize participation, as participation in itself has little value if it does not remain firmly embedded within substantive democracy (and not only formal democracy). And sometimes claims of participation can hardly be substantiated, or participation is simply absent and we enter into very authoritarian logics. But seeing how people always return to this need to participate, at least attempting to take control over what affects their everyday lives (and beyond) and sometimes succeeding in doing so, despite the many thresholds, feeds into the hope that we can still get a lot closer to the participatory utopia we both cherish.

HJ: What he said.

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