

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

**INTRODUCTION**

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One of our goals in launching the *International Journal of Communication*, in addition to demonstrating the viability of non-commercial open access scholarly publication at the highest level, was to take full advantage of the capabilities of online publishing to serve as a forum for a variety of contributions and conversations. Thus, our Features category has included lectures, policy papers and debates, interviews, and other writings that are not traditional scholarly articles or book reviews. In this spirit, we are delighted to introduce a new dimension to our platform, one that will further extend the possibilities afforded by our non-commercial online format under a new category called “Forum.” In the new section that we are calling *Participations: Dialogues on the Participatory Promise of Contemporary Culture and Politics*, Editorial Board members Nick Couldry and Henry Jenkins engage scholars in informal discussions of contemporary culture and politics. The conversations presented are the result of a series of open-ended conversations that they initiated with colleagues and that seemed to them—and to us—to be worth pursuing in this more public and open-ended venue. Five key topics will be discussed: creativity, labor, politics, knowledge and education, and platforms. In the spirit of opening and continuing the conversation, we welcome comments and contributions from our readers. There is an “add comment” function available when you access each dialogue (including this introduction) to enter your feedback. We look forward to your responses.

**Larry Gross**

Editor, *International Journal of Communication*

**Nick Couldry:**

What is at stake in the notion of participation? Nico Carpentier (2012) has given us a wonderfully scholarly account of the wide range of literatures that converge around this term, not just theories of democracy and civil society, but art, theater studies, and urban and planning studies. But so intense are the disagreements about how to frame what is at stake in the term *participation* (for example, our basic conceptions of what democracy does and what it is for, of what media can be and to what end) that it quickly becomes clear that participation needs opening out into a dialogue between many scholars if its full richness is to be grasped—particularly at a time when, many argue, radically new possibilities of participation are in view. This, it is worth recalling, is a time when many of our concerns in communications research are the stuff also of leading novels (think of *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell or *The Circle* by Dave Eggers); they may even intersect with what government insiders worry about and advocates of radical political change rely upon.

Given the contested and overdetermined background to the term, it is vital, if the notion of participation is to be stretched and developed, that this occurs through an expanding exchange among a range of scholars with interests and values that do not necessarily converge but who share at least the common value of dialogue. That, as I think back, was why we decided to try to build on the spirit of Nico Carpentier's book and some recent (more or less formal) exchanges on related topics (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2012); compiled the 2011 *Cultural Studies* special issue that I co-edited with James Hay on "Rethinking Convergence/Culture"; and set up a series of online dialogues. These dialogues should, we thought, initially run in parallel tracks on some of the themes that seem to intersect in the word *participations*: creativity, labor, politics, knowledge and education, and platforms. Thanks to the commitment of the scholars who agreed to get involved, these dialogues will appear in *IJoC* over the coming months.

**Henry Jenkins:**

From where I sit, this kind of conversation is long overdue. We are some twenty-plus years past the origins of the rhetoric concerning the digital revolution. Shifts in the technological infrastructure and cultural practice have resulted in expanded communication capacities for some, but not for all. We are long past the point where we can get away with either fully celebratory or fully cynical accounts of the changes that have been set in motion by these shifts in who has access to the means of cultural production and circulation.

The concept of participation may or may not be adequate to account for what's taking place in, around, and through these new media platforms and practices. But if it is to be deployed, we need much more nuanced accounts of what's occurring at specific locations, what gets gained or lost around particular configurations. Chris Kelty sums up the problem:

"Participating" in Facebook is not the same thing as participating in a Free Software project, to say nothing of participating in the democratic governance of a state. If there are indeed different "participatory cultures" then the work of explaining their differences

must be done by thinking concretely about the practices, tools, ideologies, and technologies that make them up. Participation is about power, and, no matter how "open" a platform is, participation will reach a limit circumscribing power and its distribution. (2013, p. 29)

By the same token, it is no longer adequate to speak of these new configurations as if they were simply "capitalism as usual," since each represents a dynamic site of struggle where things are being gained and lost on the ground, as players at all levels are advocating for their own interests.

Cyberutopian and cyberdystopian rhetorics mapped too easily onto existing fault lines in critical and cultural studies. In reality, most of us have conflicting feelings about the directions things are heading. You would be hard pressed to find anyone in our related fields who does not have some reservations about Web 2.0, say, yet it is also hard to deny that at least some grassroots media producers, activist groups, and subcultural populations have found ways to extend their reach and influence through tapping into the affordances of networked computing. We too often act as if these differences in emphasis (which lead some writers to stress what we are fighting against and others to stress what we are fighting for) were rigid ideological divides that we can never talk past. We end up in different social networks, speaking at different conferences, not really engaging with others who come from different camps than we do. Some of this rigidity reflects the strange temporalities of academic publishing, where, absent such face-to-face exchanges, we end up throwing position papers over the fence and waiting two, three, four years for responses from the other side. One of my hopes is that these exchanges in *IJoC* have created a new kind of temporality, some back-to-back exchanges between diversely situated thinkers that tap into the affordances of participatory culture to see whether we can make collective headway toward arbitrating disputes and searching for common grounds.

Each group ended up drilling down on some of the core concepts animating these debates, showing why existing frameworks may not account for the complexities of what we've called the "participatory turn" in our culture and raising some new questions that need to be addressed if we are going to make further progress. Sooner or later, in each of these exchanges, things come back to the core question—"participation in what?" And this question forces us to think about existing conditions, however compromised and imperfect they may be, but also our individual and collective sense of what a more participatory culture might look like, what it might achieve, and what current factors block its achievement. I would argue that we will need some new forms of theorization to be able to describe what we are participating in, forms that stress advocacy as much as critique, forms that are skeptical without being cynical.

**Nick Couldry:**

Temporality (the temporality of thought, debate, languages of change) offers an interesting sideways angle from which to think about what is under way in these dialogues. The temporality of thought, especially writing that reflects something close to a way of speaking, is always problematic, because there is never time to unfold in the direct sequence of speech all the connections and preconditions involved in

any statement or question. All sorts of academic phraseology tries to cover for this, but the problem is a basic one.

These partly improvised dialogues stand somewhere in between seminar and formal article: They introduce the shock of having one's thought immediately challenged from other perspectives, which sometimes blocks off ready-made thoughts but can also stimulate new ones. Although the process of bringing these dialogues together has probably seemed a relatively fast one for all involved because of the need to fit their rhythms into everyone's busy teaching and other schedules, the process overall represents a shared slowing down, an attempt to interrupt the arguments we are otherwise disposed to make quickly before moving on.

There are two particular reasons, I think, why this slowing down might be important for the topics under discussion. The first is that discourses of participation, like all claims of major transformation, are implicated in highly situated attempts to speak for the present and to claim a privileged hold on defining the past and its future. "Situated" not just in particular networks of institutions but geographically, as emerges in the comments in the "Knowledge" thread. Certain discourses of participatory inclusion are so loud and insistent when delivered from dominant locations that they literally *speak over* other ways of talking and thinking about the purposes of participation, and the convenient means. Somehow, amid all the urgency of trying to capture *the* direction of change from where we stand, one must acknowledge very different temporalities of change and conflict. The trick of relegating distant others to the (temporally distant) past is an old one, as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian (2002) pointed out, but it saturates so much talk today of what is changing and from where—a point made forcefully by Don Slater in the "Knowledge" thread. Slowing down our dialogues is one way, potentially, of disrupting this.

The second reason for slowing down is the suspicion that, in the early 21st century, major institutional structures (particularly of democracy) are facing contradictions that they have no means of answering: The fear that we may be living in a postdemocracy paradoxically crammed full with opportunities to participate meets the awareness that strikingly new forms of speaking and deciding together really are emerging around us, even if their significance is uncertain. Today's contradictory "crisis of voice," as I have suggested calling it (Couldry, 2010), simply can't be unpacked from just one position or by one person. It is an ongoing failure of our ways of thinking and acting to catch up with the implications of new forms of technological invention and systemic necessity, all built into the world's dominant capitalist mode of organization. Experiment is essential, within or outside the framing of existing institutions, but we should never forget the absolute tenacity of existing power interests. A collective rethinking of the institutions of democracy is probably needed, which requires acknowledging that one's own lines of thought may be, as Laurie Ouellette points out in the "Labor" thread, more closely implicated in one's own material position than one would like to admit.

**Henry Jenkins:**

Graham Turner (2011) accused some of us of writing "speculative fictions," because the changes envisioned in theory stretched far ahead of those that are being experienced on the ground by most users. I can't help but think about William Gibson's famous suggestion that the future is already here, but it has

been unevenly distributed. Elsewhere, we see an absolute refusal to acknowledge either the possibilities or the realities of change, a tendency to act as if the battles have already been lost, as if the possibilities of existing or resisting under neoliberalism have been predetermined long ago. Maybe we can call this paradigm “historical fiction” or perhaps “The Land Where Time Stood Still,” though in both cases, historical understanding is often the first thing that goes out the window when we try to speak about the concept of participation in a networked society. So what we need is a discourse that is historically grounded and takes a longer and wider viewpoint but that is also contingent in its understanding of the future; one that rejects all forms of predetermination; one that seeks to explain the complexity of a moment of rapid change that is still shaped by old institutional logics and where multiple and often contradictory things are happening at once.

To achieve that kind of framing, we do need multiple vantage points, each particular and precise on its own terms, but brushing up against one another in ways that are unsettling and destabilizing. Above all, what we need to disrupt is the idea of closure. The great thing about a conversation is that it doesn’t have to end. As we have worked on these threads, we often ran out of time and space just as the discussions really started to find their stride. Don’t expect resolution here. These exchanges stop abruptly. They open more questions than they resolve. We all have so much more we want to say. And we can picture so many others who would have ideas to contribute. We hope that others will be inspired by this process to add their own thoughts either through *IJoC* or elsewhere, that perhaps other dialogues and exchanges can emerge in response to what we’ve started here, and that we can keep talking—together—about some of the issues that surround participation as it relates to the various strands we’ve explored here. Nick, you call in *Why Voice Matters* (Couldry, 2010) for “new intensities of listening,” and my hope is that we can use the mechanisms of academic publishing to continue to experiment with what it would look like to foster a world where more people have voice and more people are actively listening to a diversity of perspectives.

***Nick Couldry and Henry Jenkins:***

Sincere thanks to all our participants for their efforts and time in helping us start that process!



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