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10th Anniversary of Essachess – Journal for Communication Studies

“Participation is a corrective of imbalances in power relations.”

An interview with Nico Carpentier¹

In the field of communication studies, debates on the experiences and participatory ethics of Internet users in civic and democratic issues stand out more and more. Sometimes limited in its conceptualization, the different approaches to the concept of participation lack theoretical elaboration, which reduces also its scope of interpretation in research related to participatory practices in the media. Nico Carpentier, professor and theorist of the concept of participation, has published numerous studies about the concept of participation, in many different social contexts, making it possible to better apprehend the differences between the concepts of access, interaction and participation. He presents the close relationship of participation with the notions of power (following a Foucauldian approach to the notion) and decision-making. Carpentier presents during this interview a summary of his analytical model for the study of media participatory processes, his conception about the use of the notion of power, and the different forms of participation.

Q: Can you talk about your analytical model for the study of media participatory processes?

A: This analytical model was published in an open access article in the journal *Javnost – The Public*. It is called “Beyond the Ladder of Participation”². What I tried to do with the model, and its 12 levels and four clusters, is to offer an analytical structure to study participatory processes, by distinguishing between fields, processes, actors, decisions, and eventually, power relations. Doing

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² <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13183222.2016.1149760>.

participatory research is not easy, and with this article I wanted to make things easier for researchers, or at least for those interested in my take on participation (smiles). The first set of levels, which are part of the field cluster, suggests the researcher to zoom in on a particular process, which is contextualized by an equally particular field, in which this participatory process is located. This is, of course, an analytical choice, which very much depends on what will be researched.

Then—because I define participation as the equalization of power relations in decision-making processes—the decisions in the participatory process are one of the focal points of the analysis. This model makes you sensitive towards all the decisions that are part of a participatory process, even if that's a complicated and difficult task, ... You need classic research methods—mostly qualitative research methods in most cases, I would say—enabling you to categorize the multitude of decisions by the different privileged and dis-privileged actors involved. It's not impossible, but it often is a considerable task, because there are so many micro-decisions, made by different actors. In this phase, it's unavoidable to cluster the decisions, after you have identified the different actor groups.

For instance, an analysis that I've recently been working on with a Turkish colleague, Derya Yüksek, and which soon will be published in the journal *Conjunctions*,³ is about the participation of youngsters in peace-building initiatives on Cyprus. Youngsters were defined as the prime actor group, as their participation interested us most. Other actor groups in our case study were project coordinators and parents. But, then, these groups were interacting, involved in all sorts of decisions, within a particular organizational context. That means that it was necessary to cluster these decisions, because, otherwise, we would have ended up with this endless list that can't be analyzed. That's what (qualitative) research methods do for you in this stage.

In the next phase, which is the fourth and last cluster, you need to start comparing which actor group has control in which decision groups, and to what degree. Is this sub-process participatory? Is there any power being shared, or are the relationships very hierarchical? Is it just one group that controls everything, and can the others only interact with that first actor group, without having any joint control? Or are the power relations in that particular decision group balanced? Is it maximalist participatory?

³ <https://www.conjunctions-tjep.com/>.

What this model actually tries to do is to communicate: You have different actor groups, and different decision groups, that are all part of a particular participatory process and that are embedded in a particular field. Identify them, and construct a matrix. And try then to figure out which actor groups have control in which decision groups. That's actually the method. Once you have mapped all actor groups and decisions, you need to say something about each of these cells of your matrix: Is this access? Is this interaction, or is this minimalist participation? Is it somewhere in between? Where? Is it maximalist participation? For each of these cells, you can reach a conclusion about the participatory intensities of that subprocess. That's where the difference between access, interaction and participation (AIP) is helpful, in trying to map this AIP dimension on the subprocess, allowing for its evaluation. Then, in the last step, you take a step back, you look at the entire matrix, and you say: Well, if I look at everything together, what can I conclude? Is this maximalist participatory? Is this maximalist participatory in a particular area of the process? Or is it absolutely not participatory? That's where the AIP comes in again, as a tool to evaluate the entire process.

Finally, and this is outside the analytical model, you can have the normative evaluation. I have called this the 13th step of the 12-level model. We can talk about this later, but that's where the analyst says: Well, this is what I found analytically. Is this situation now good or bad? Is this societally beneficial, or not? That is a very different question, but equally important.

Q: In what sense does participation in its maximalist form involve several dimensions?

A: There are many things to be said about this question. First, moving outside (maximalist) participation for a second, you need to consider is that there are always conditions of possibility for participation, which are not the same as participation. And then going back to what we were talking about before: Access and interaction are incredibly important social phenomena in their own right. But they are also conditions of possibility for participation, even if they're not the same as participation. It is quite easy to say that access is different from participation, sure. But you also need access to have participation. They are necessarily conditions, but they are not sufficient conditions.

Then you can go into the different forms of participation, and different, what I call, participatory intensities. This is a dimension, and not a dichotomy, where you have minimalist participation on the one end. On the other end, you have situations where in that particular process, the participatory intensities are very high, which means that the power relationships between the different actors have been equalized. Coming back to your question, yes, participation has different dimensions, or intensities. But it also involves a series of conditions of possibility. That, and I cannot stress this enough, is a very important distinction. Access and interaction are the two conditions of possibility that I've emphasized most, but we can start discussing which other conditions of possibility can be identified.

Moreover, I also deem the democratic context and the set of values in which a participatory process is embedded, also to be important. If you don't have a democratic culture articulated with the participatory process, then that process can hardly be considered participatory, I think. In other words, I don't think that participation is only procedural; it also has to be substantive. One could argue then, well, in a totalitarian regime, you can still have participation. And that's technically possible, but only in very small, isolated, protected environments. Pockets of participation can exist, under the most difficult circumstances, but then these pockets themselves still have to be democratic in order to be participatory. This democratic culture is an important dimension that makes it possible to have participation in the first place, whatever version, or whatever intensity, we are considering.

Moreover, there's a whole range of contexts that play a role, I think. Here, difference and heterogeneity are the starting point of my argument. Society is based on differences. That also means that there are different positions in power relations, even if we should not simplify power relations by reducing them to a dichotomy of have's and have not's. That is also relevant when we think about participation. If all power positions were the same—the impossible scenario of total equality—then there would be no participation. Because if we're all in the same power positions, if we are all equals—fully constituted subjects with the same levels of power—then participation, as a concept, wouldn't work anymore. The concept of participation is used to refer to situations where power imbalances are redressed. You must have a corrective moment to have a participatory process. Only when we have a dis-privileged group in society, and we have a process that empowers them, that makes them more powerful, then we have a participatory process.

But if everybody's equal, that mechanism doesn't exist. Obviously, this is rather unlikely to happen because our culture is based on difference. We will always be in different power positions. I believe that that is a pretty realistic starting point, or some would say, pessimistic ((smiles)). But the theoretical idea is that if you have difference, then participation becomes possible. Because if you don't have the differences in power relationships, if everybody is already empowered, then participation no longer works. Of course, social relations wouldn't cease to exist, but they would be something else, a different model. Marxist theory provides us with an example, when we look at the two stages of establishing communism. There is first a transitional stage, based on delegative democracy, and only after that stage the full communist utopia is to be realized. In this second stage, at least in the theory of communism, participation disappears. Because all have become equals. Of course, that was the theoretical imaginary. The communist practice in the past was slightly different ((grins)). And it's rather unlikely that the communist utopia will be realized, so I would like to argue that we will still be able to use the concept of participation for a very long time. ((smiles again)) Anyway, my point is: Difference is the key to this debate. Because if you have different positions of power, you can have participation, as an always imperfect corrective of these differences.

Allow me to take a step back now. If you focus on what is explaining difference, I would argue that the notion of identity is one of the key elements. Of course, there are many other discursive and material components that play a role in participatory processes, but identities are important as well. We have many different identities that circulate in society, and some are particularly relevant in participatory processes. I would argue that there are five: the citizen, the ordinary person, the owner, the leader and the expert. And we have different articulations of these subject positions. Moreover, people identify in different ways with particular (articulations of these) subject positions. And this matters to participatory processes. If you say something like: "I'm *just* an ordinary citizen. I have nothing to say, it's not up to me to have an opinion, or to do something about this ... I don't even have an interest in politics," then that's a very different thing than saying "I am a citizen, I may be an ordinary person, but I do matter, and I will do something about this problem."

These different identities and different identifications enter into participatory processes. Because, if you define yourself outside of the participatory process, why would you then participate? The way you define yourself as a citizen strongly matters. And that's just one identity that matters. Also, the way that

politicians define themselves, as a particular kind of leader, plays an important role. Let me give you an example: At some stage, several years ago, in Antwerp (Belgium), my hometown, there was this huge discussion about building a new bridge in the harbor area of town. To understand the example, you should know that most Antwerp people don't particularly like bridges. It's a 500-meter wide river, but it has no bridges whatsoever in the city area, only tunnels. And then the Antwerp city council decided to have a new bridge. Not even across the river, but somewhere in the harbor. That provoked enormous waves of protest. ((smiles)) The civil resistance against the bridge plan was impressive. And then there was this alderman, responsible for the port, and very much in favor of the bridge project. He was interviewed saying: "But I was elected. I mean, I'm elected, it is up to me to decide. It's not up to the Antwerp citizens to decide, because they elected me, for four years, to decide on their behalf." This is an articulation of the identity of the politician that privileges the delegation of power, with not much participation. The identity as a politician he identified with, was that of somebody that has high levels of control for four years. You can imagine a different kind of politician, namely one that says, "I want to listen to what people tell me, I want to be open to dialogue, with different groups in civil society, and let's decide together." Of course, the Antwerp activist groups used this second articulation of the politician, and it's a very different version. Eventually, the bridge plan had to be dropped, after an intensive political struggle, which also meant that the definition of the all-deciding politician could not be upheld.

More in general, I would like to argue that there are a set of privileged identities that play a role in a participatory process. The citizen is one example. The identity of the leader is another. As my earlier example showed, how you define yourself as a leader, or how you define others as leader, matters. So, does the expert identity, how you define yourself, or others, as expert. For example, if you say, "oh, this is a professor, I don't know anything, s/he knows everything", then you position yourself differently than in the case where you say, "hey, I might be an ordinary person, but I do have knowledge, which is grounded in experience. That's a different kind of knowledge, but it is equally important." You position yourself differently, because you use different versions of the expert identity, with different epistemologies. Another relevant identity is the owner. If you are a rich banker, with access to considerable resources, your position in social processes might be different. If you are a mainstream media owner, you might engage differently in participatory processes than journalists working for your newspaper or television station. Even if you are the owner of a building in which

a community media organization is located, your power position is particular. But depending on your articulation of this owner identity, you make act differently.

These are identities that are very likely to be found in participatory processes, albeit in different ways. This is the reason why I call them privileged identities. But there is also an endless list of other identities, which can also gain prominence in participatory processes. For instance, if you do community radio in Bolivia, and you are a member of a miner's radio station, then your professional identity as a miner plays an important role. Class, gender, sexual, race, ethnic identities all can intervene in participatory processes, and they can play a structuring role in relation to participatory intensities.

Q: With the technological breakthrough and the growth of so-called participatory digital platforms, can the model of participation in its maximalist forms that you have developed be understood as one of the possible solutions to the crisis of representative democracy that our societies are going through?

A: I think the idea of representative democracy is important there. Let me start there. Obviously, not everybody agrees that there is a crisis of representative democracy. I do think that there is a crisis of representative democracy, but I also want to add a few qualifying thoughts to that statement. I would probably argue that representative democracy has always been in crisis because it has always been a very restrictive form of handling power imbalances in society. In particular, in Western contexts, what we find is a very strong emphasis on voting. And this emphasis has also been exported to many other countries outside the West.

There are theorists, like, for instance, Van Reybrouck in his book *Against Elections: The case for Democracy*, who have been arguing for a reconsideration of democracy and the role allocated to voting. Maybe voting is not the best possible mechanism, or maybe it should not receive this much weight, indeed. Maybe we should return more to what the ancient Athenian democratic model was using, namely the selection by chance, as a different way of creating political rotation. I'm not arguing that this is necessarily the best possible option, but what I'm saying is that we should dare to reconsider some of the things we have been taking for granted, as a part of the mechanics of representative democracy. Maybe we should be careful to argue that we're in a crisis of representative democracy

only now, maybe this crisis is much older. That's the one footnote I wanted to add. We might want to be a bit careful with placing this crisis too much in the present, but I also agree that the legitimacy of representative democracy is questioned more and more.

How to deal with that situation? The answer is already in your question. The way forward, I believe, is to increase the participatory dynamics. But that produces tremendous challenges. Before, I was talking about Marxist theory, and mentioned the two stages of the Marxist model of social change—revolution. The first stage is an interesting one, and there's a lot to learn from that model. It's developed in the writings of Marx and Engels about the Paris Commune⁴. These texts are referring to the 1871 uprising in Paris, against the French government, at the moment when the French army had been defeated by Prussia, and the German state had just been created. At that very moment, Paris experimented with radical democracy. In many cases, things went horribly wrong and the bloodshed was appalling. But the Paris Commune created, through the practice of self-organization, a democratic model which now is called delegative democracy. It is driven by the selection of delegates, but one important idea separates it from representative democracy: In delegative democracy, you can immediately withdraw a delegate. So, whenever you lose confidence in the delegate, the delegate loses the power to represent you. Marxist theory took that idea, and reformulated it, to think about what they called the transitional stage, the first stage of, or towards, the communist revolution.

That's an interesting and alternative way to think about how to organize your democracy. Because of course, we cannot go back to the Athenian democracy. Because we don't have structural slave labor, to name but one of the practical issues ((smiles)). Instead of placing an excessive and exclusive emphasis on unrealistically deepening democracy in the realm of institutional politics, there is an alternative strategy. That's what you find in the work of the participatory theorists of the New Left from the 1970s. Their idea was that maybe we should try to reconfigure representative democracy by spreading democracy into the different spheres of our societies. Macpherson⁵ was talking about democratizing political parties, Pateman⁶ was talking about increased participation in the labor

4 See in particular: Engels, Friedrich (1993), “‘Introduction’ [On the Twentieth Anniversary of the Paris Commune]”, in Karl Marx and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (eds.), *The Civil War in France. The Paris Commune*, New York: International Publishers, pp. 9–22.

5 Macpherson, C.B. 1977. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6 Pateman C., 1970, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

place. Instead of just intensifying the democratic relationships between citizens and the political system, maybe we should spread to logics of participation to other spheres: Family, work, but also political parties, to name but a few.

So let me summarize: What you have is the *deepening* of representative democracy, and the development of other models as a way out. Participatory democracy is part of that logics. But participatory democracy also has the dimension of the *expansion*. Its aim is the deepening and widening of democracy at the same time, and that's what these models are trying to come up with: Answers to the questions triggered by representative democracy.

Q: For deliberative democratic theory, the decision-making process must be through the deliberation of rational individuals in broad forms of debate and negotiation. Are the civic media responding to this challenge?

A: They're two questions in your question. The first one is the Habermas-question. Let me start there. We should always be careful not to make a caricature out of Habermas. This is a very rich author, who spends a lot of attention on complexity. We often summarize Habermas as saying: The public sphere is important, but his perspective on it is too rational and consensus-based, and that's wrong. I believe we should be a bit careful there, not to simplify his work too much. That's my disclaimer ((smiles)). But of course, there is a debate between the authors that use a more consensus-driven logic, and the ones that use a more conflict-driven. And I'm very much part of the conflict-driven tradition. I would argue that ultimately, consensus is not possible. At the end, what we achieve are negotiated agreements that create particular sedimentations, namely decisions. But that doesn't mean that they're grounded in a full consensus. A full consensus actually hides exclusion.

If you say, "We've achieved full consensus," you use a post-political position, to hide a political victory. While others have lost, because this victorious way of thinking has been hegemonized at the expense of other possible ways of thinking. That's the problem with consensus. At the same time, if we would only have conflict, if we only have incessant differences of opinion, and then go into endless loops of negotiations, we don't have the logics of the decision. Because the decision is the moment when you cut through the chaos, and sediment and

fixate social reality. This is the way we think, this is the way we act. These are decisions, and I use the notion of the decision in a very broad meaning, with both discursive and material dimensions. I argue that we need to pay attention to the context of struggle and conflict, but I also understand that there are moments of fixation, where decisions make this endless chaos rest, at least for a while.

And that's where consensus does play a role, in making the flow rest. But it's of course not a consensus in the way that we often understand it, as the ultimate agreement. It's the fixation of reality. It's the fixation, the decision, the sedimentation, whatever you want to call it. But trust me, I am going to answer your question at some point ((grins)). I think there are two ways of looking at social reality, one starting from conflict and one starting from consensus. But we should not forget the other side. After all, it's a matter of emphasis and starting points. And in that sense, Habermas matters tremendously, although he has a different starting point than the tradition of authors that I belong to. One of the problems, though—and Habermas himself has very clearly explicated the need to be careful here—one of the problems is the privileging of rationality, which implies the underestimation of the role of affect, the role of the emotional dimension. This neglect is part of a very long tradition of distrust towards emotions, and we need to move away from this tradition, and acknowledge and validate the democratic role of affect. I would like to argue that, for instance, ideology is necessarily affectious. If you see injustice, you feel it through the logics of empathy, and you might respond to that in an evenly affective way. And that affect-driven response is something that you can't replace by rational argumentation.

In the end, the exclusive focus on rationality positions you in an ideological confrontation that you can never win. In the last instance, to use a famous expression, ideological struggles cannot be concluded on the basis of rational argument. Ideology uses rationality and merges it with affect, but one ideology is not more rational and another. You feel justice or injustice, you feel a set of core values, while you also think them. But it is important to stress that the affect-side of ideology here. And then, going back to participation, of course, maximalist participation, in itself, is an ideological project, just like minimalist participatory models, and just like elitist (quasi-)non-participatory models are. Defending a particular articulation of participation is an ideological intervention in the struggle over participatory intensities, where some would say that we shouldn't have participation, or limit it, because it is a nuisance. If you go back into the history, feminist history more in particular, the 19th century political struggle for

women's vote in the West, waged by the suffragettes, was aimed at a patriarchal order that was saying, to put it a bit crudely: "Women are too stupid to vote." Of course, opponents of the women's vote used a slightly more polite formulation, at least in some cases ((smiles)). But this example shows the workings of a non-participatory discourse embodied voting practices: "You cannot participate, because you lack intelligence." What the suffragettes did was to counter this non-participatory discourse with a participatory ideology, grounded in the idea that "we need the right to vote". So, the point here also is that we can have political struggles over participation itself.

This idea of struggle also matters when analyzing participatory practices. If you use the analytical model of participation that we discussed before, you end up by saying: These are the power relations, and these are the participatory intensities. In my analytical model, there are the 12 levels, and these are the analytical dimensions of that model. But, as I also mentioned before, there is that level number 13. Number 13 is the normative evaluation of the analytical outcomes. Where do you position yourself? If you conclude, this is a maximalist participatory process, what do you say next? To put it in simple terms: Do you say, "Wow!" or you say, "Hmmm..."? That's the normative evaluation, the 13th level, which is different from the analytical components. And that positions the analyst of participation firmly in the political struggle over the participation. Participation remains an ideological concept, which means that it can be yours and something that you want to defend, but you can also disagree with its importance, and defend a non-participatory ideology instead. That also produces a question for every analyst of participation: In your work on participation, what do you do with the normative?

For instance, some authors working in the realm of political participation, would argue that relationships between politicians and citizens should be more equal. But that's a normative position, and we should acknowledge that. Others would say: "Of course not, politicians are the experts, and we should let them decide." Again, that's a normative position. Of course, there are also other versions that circulate in society: Some people would actually say, "We need to get rid of all these politicians. They're corrupt bastards. Let's put them against the wall and shoot them." It's not exactly my position ((grins)), but we should acknowledge that it exists, and show that there are very different ways of engaging with these power relationships between political systems and citizens. They are deeply ideological positions, and they are deeply affective. It's how you feel in relation to the political system. Do you trust politicians? Do you like or admire them? Do

you think that they are a bunch of criminals? That's an affective relationship, not just a rational one. And that's where conflict plays a key role, also as the conflict over participation itself.

One quick addition about community media, or what some call civic or participatory media. I argue that there are struggles over participation, but I should add that these struggles are not only located in the political system. The relationships between politicians and citizens definitely matter, but they are not the only ones that matter from a participatory perspective. These struggles about participation are also waged in relation to the media. It is a struggle over who controls media organizations, and their practices. In this discussion, we should not forget that there are alternatives with a long history, for instance, with community media organizations. All over the world, you have mass media organizations that are organized in very top-down ways. To put it in too simple terms, they are channeling information to people. And, of course, this is important for democracy, on a number of conditions, for instance, the reliability of this information. But in this media field, still dominated by mainstream media, you will also find diversity, struggle, and the ideology of (maximalist) participation. If you go and talk with community media producers, and I am fortunate to often do that, they are actually the defendants of the maximalist participatory model, and they often do that using the most beautiful and engaging words. They would say, "I have the right to speak, and I have the right to be broadcasted. My voice, together with many other voices, matters, and we're going to work together to make this happen." It's a very committed, a very engaged language that they use, but it's highly effective. And it's highly ideological.

Q: You affirm in your book *Media and Participation*⁷ that media technologies can be used for various purposes, also for maximalist participation. Do you have some typical examples where this maximalist participatory intensity could be realized?

A: You are referring to a particular part of the *Media and Participation* book. Writing this part posed an interesting challenge. I have been struggling with these pages, because it was very hard to get it formulated in a satisfactory way. It's a tricky argument to construct because it's prone to being misunderstood rather

⁷ Carpentier, N. 2011. *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle*. Bristol: Intellect. See <https://oapen.org/search?identifier=606390>.

easily. Talking a bit about that struggle will allow me to produce an answer to your question, at least partially ((smiles)). On the one hand, technology is not neutral. If you create a technology, it does things, it allows you to do things, and it disallows you to do things. That's one idea. And then you have a contradiction: Technology can also be used for very different things, which, in a way, neutralizes technology, making it possible to be inscribed and encoded in different ways. And these are two ideas that need to be reconciled. On the one hand, there is the lack of neutrality, and on the other hand, there the neutrality of technology.

Technology has particular affordances, which are not neutral. Take, for instance, portable technologies, the development of video cameras, hand-held cameras, mobile phones with the incorporation of the most wonderful recording technologies. In photography, you had the development of the Kodak, the camera that you could move, and the Polaroid, which produced instant results. All these evolutions actually allowed people to do things and not to do things. But you can still use a very robust, gigantic machine in a very participatory way, and you can use it in a very non-participatory, even authoritarian way. You can do both with it, even if things might not always be easy. Yes, technology has affordances, but yes, it also has the idea that it matters what humans do with it, and they can do different things with it, that are, for instance, participatory or non-participatory. In *Media and Participation*, you'll find examples of maximalist participation, linked to different technologies, showing that every technology can be used in a participatory way. Of course, some technologies are easier than others to use in these more decentralized ways. Yes, a very big camera is clumsy. But people have been using it in many different ways. My point here is that it's about what humans do. It's about what people do with it, and that's embedded in a particular ideology of participation, because that makes them want to do it. And fight for it. One example consists of the pirate radio stations. In Europe, in the 1970s, with some earlier examples in the 1960s, there were ordinary people struggling to gain control over the airwaves; to start their own radio stations. Most likely, the first community radio station in Europe was Radio *Študent*, a community radio station in Ljubljana, Slovenia. It actually still exists, together with so many other examples. And to say something about the Internet as well: It's not because a process is situated on the Internet that it's necessarily participatory. You can have dictatorial behavior on the Internet. Some of the research I've been doing on online communities, together with Nick Patyn, showed how some of these communities were not democratic or participatory, but authoritarian. These online

communities were very much centralized, very much about a small group of people that controlled and policed the community⁸.

Yet another way to talk about the dynamics of technological neutrality, is to refer to the work of Raymond Williams. He used technological determinism, a well-known concept to capture the idea that technology determines the social. Williams countered that idea, with the suggestion that technology is always contextualized. But he also rejected the idea that we have total control over technology. Williams called that idea "determined technologies," and rejected that as well. We have to acknowledge that all these different spheres of our social realities, including our technologies, engage in interactions. Technology matters, but it is only one of the spheres that constitutes the social. Anthropologists have been arguing, over and over again, that technology is what makes us human. But, as humans, we still produce technology. It's both.

Q: According to Colin Crouch⁹, a political scientist who coined the post-democracy term, it is important to remain alert to the potential of social networks, which, while complex and difficult to understand, can be the driving force behind the reconstruction of democracy, with more active participation of citizens. What do you think of this assertion?

A: So again, we find a plea for the more active participation of citizens in the media field. How could I disagree? ((smiles)) Even if we should remain critical towards the many limitations of social networks, they have the potential to deepen and widen democracy. That's where I would argue we should go. There's one more general footnote I would like to add, though. There's a horrible risk involved. Once you start changing a democratic system that is so deeply embedded in our societies—after all, it has more than 200 years of history—you don't know where it will end up. There is a risk involved in altering core elements of how democracy is organized or conceived, for instance, the principle of voting, which almost everybody takes for granted. You might lose the principle of voting, and eventually end up living in an authoritarian model. Or you might end up with a populist model that becomes authoritarian. The same risk occurs when communicative practices become structurally altered: You don't know where

⁸ Carpentier, N., Patyn, N. 2007. *MUDs and power. Reducing the democratic imaginary?* Studies in Communication / Estudos em Comunicação, (2): 1-45.

⁹ Crouch, C. (2013) *Post-démocratie*. Diaphanes, coll. « Transpositions » 140 p., trad. Yves Coleman, Zürich.

you're going to land. And that's a risk which some argue might not be worth taking. Others would argue that we can't afford not to improve the mechanics and/or articulations of democracy. And others will argue that we won't have control over these societal debates anyhow.

Q: One of the points of disagreement between Henry Jenkins and you is based on his idea that the traditional models of media corporations are occupied and dismantled by a participatory culture that is ubiquitous and celebrated as a boom of democracy. Can you tell us more about this disagreement?

A: On 26 January 2018, Henry Jenkins received an honorary PhD in Uppsala University, and I was the promotor (or “promotionvård” in Swedish) of this honorary PhD. I think that signifies that I have the deepest respect for his work. I also like him as a person, to be honest, but that's beside the point. He's done a lot of precious work in developing participatory theory, particularly in relationship to popular culture. A student of John Fiske¹⁰, his first key publication, *Textual Poachers*¹¹, was very much about fan cultures, and later work focused more on online practices and participatory culture more in general.

I'm sensitive to his core argumentation about participation, and I don't want our exchanges framed as a disagreement. What we both start from is what Mouffe¹² has called the democratic revolution. In the past centuries, we've seen the establishment and the intensification of democratic processes. People have become more empowered. If you compare the situation before the 1789 French Revolution, and the current position of citizens in many states, then we need to acknowledge the tremendous changes in the power positions of citizens after the moment of rupture that 1789 was, when the French political elite was destroyed, quite literally. So, if we take what historians call a *longue durée*¹³ approach, then

¹⁰ John Fiske is one of the key cultural studies theorists. Jenkins himself refers to Fiske's influence, when he, rather explicitly, wrote: “John Fiske has been and continues to be one of the most important intellectual influences on my work.” See http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2010/06/john_fiske_now_and_the_future.html.

¹¹ Jenkins, H. 1992. *Textual Poachers. Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

¹² Mouffe, C. 2000. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.

¹³ Fernand Braudel's concept of the *Longue Durée* refers to the strategy of historians of science to take extended periods of time into consideration. It's a perspective on history that extends deep into the past, focusing on the long-standing and imperceptibly slowly changing relationships between

we need to acknowledge that things have changed, and that citizens have become more empowered. In other words, Jenkins has a point here, and I agree with him.

It's a bit of a detour, but one of the critiques on Foucault's early work was that he was creating periods, *episthèmes*, where particular ways of thinking existed. This way of thinking about culture had a problematic dimension, because of its in-built homogenization. Of course, there were, and are, dominant ways of thinking, but there were also many variations and alternatives. There were so many struggles, so many small histories that we have forgotten. Of course, Foucault later very much focused on this diversity. When we talk about participation we should not only use a *longue durée* approach, but also look inside the black box of the *episthèmes*, and see the contradictions and the set-backs, and the anti-participatory voices. History is not linear, and there is no end point. If you go back to the Terror after the French Revolution, or to the World Wars, we should acknowledge that these were not very enlightened, democratic or participatory periods. People killing each other is not a very participatory principle, I would say. In other words, if you zoom in, historically, then things do get more complicated. Or, if you contextualize more, it gets more complicated, also when we are talking about participation.

I don't think there is disagreement between Jenkins and myself on this matter. When we started playing with these different perspectives, which resulted in a discussion article published a few years ago¹⁴, we quickly reached the conclusion that we should be careful with saying that we now have "a participatory culture". It's probably wiser to say that there is "a more participatory culture". One should avoid the idea that we've reached the end point. Because we haven't. What he wanted to do, being a bit of an optimist ((smiles)), is to emphasize the increase, and he's right in doing so. What I was saying is, when you only use this overarching view, then you lose too much detail, and you won't see enough of the political struggle over participatory culture. You also lose the possibility of acknowledging the possibility of participatory regressions. At some point in time, the participatory intensities that are dominant in a particular society might decrease, temporarily or permanently. Also, the idea of diversity and struggle, the idea that different and contradictory things can happen at the same time, that is quite precious to me. Jenkins is brilliant at the in-depth analysis of maximalist

people and the world which constitute the most fundamental aspects of social life, and incorporating findings from disciplines such as climatology, demography, and physical geography.

¹⁴ Jenkins, H., Carpentier, N. 2013. *Theorizing participatory intensities: A conversation about participation and politics*, *Convergence*, 19(3): 265-286.

participatory practices. I don't disagree with his analysis of these practices. But what I'm saying is: Let's also look at locations where we can still find very strong power inequalities, and bring these into our reflections about how participatory our societies are.

Q: Can you explain to us why, in your opinion, the notion of power remains central in the quest for theorizing the concept of participation, and why you make a choice for the strategic model of power developed by Foucault?

A: You know that I define participation through power, which is, for me, obvious ((smiles)) But a lot of authors don't do this, or not in the same degree. They would argue that there is a link to power, but that this link is much less direct and outspoken. There are two main traditions in participatory theory: Those who look at participation as taking part, and those who look at participation as sharing power. One of the examples that I use to illustrate the difference is shopping. In the taking-part approach, shopping can be seen as participating in consumption culture. This is a broad definition of participation, where everything risks becoming labeled participation. I tend to use a much more restrictive approach towards participation, looking at the equalization of power relationships. The notion of power features prominently here. But, if you use the power concept, you can't keep it locked in a black box. You have to open up this black box, and answer the question what is meant with power, if you say that participation is about the equalization of power relations.

It is actually a definitional problem, where a concept (participation) is defined through another concept (power). There is an endless chain of new definitions lurking behind the horizon, which is a bit of a challenge ((shrugs)). But power merits to be unpacked in the definition of participation. Now, I come from a post-structuralist tradition, which brings about an emphasis on conflict, struggle and contingency. This is also how I see participation, so, quite naturally, I revert to a Foucauldian definition of power, where it is emphasized that power is not something one *has*, but a characteristic of relationships. Actually, what participation tries to do, is to change these power relationships. Foucault's analytics of power allows being attentive towards the different power strategies that people deploy, acknowledging that people can resist unequal power relations, and try to re-balance them. That makes his approach to power quite useful.

Of course, one could use another, more causal model of power. I'm not that comfortable with using that model to define participation, but technically one could do that. Still, as using the causal model would be at the expense of more emphasis on struggle, strategies and counter-strategies, fluidity and diversity, which are important for me in thinking about participation, my preference lies with the Foucauldian definition of power.

Q: How can political participation be reconfigured in a constantly changing media environment, with its many reconstructions?

A: That is a very difficult and broad question, and I can only offer you some snippets, bits and pieces of answers. About these reconfigurations, well, we have been talking about them before. A reconfiguration means change, but there is not guarantee that change will bring what we would call improvement. Change means the reordering of discursive-material structures, and that can be done in very, very different ways, some of them beneficial, others destructive.

Of course, improvement is a normative concept and different people will have different definitions of improvement. In that sense, it's not helping us that much ((smiles)). What I call improvement, which is the intensification of democracy, others will define as a problem. What others will define as a new utopia (not to mention Donald Trump¹⁵ and the many European politicians that use similar ideologies here), and what they would call an improvement, sounds to me more like a nightmare scenario. In the West, nationalist identities have become popular again, in rather radical and proto-antagonist ways. I wouldn't call that an improvement, but deeply troubling. My point is here that the signifier of improvement is anchored in ideology. And these different ideologies, with their different utopias, are engaged in struggles for hegemony.

Still, the reconfiguration that I would argue for is, indeed, a structural rethinking of representative democracy and the slow intensification of democratic values and practices. It means going back to my earlier references to the widening and the deepening of democracy. We need to have more moments where citizens are involved and can share power in relationship to the political system. But I would argue just as much and maybe even more that we need to expand. We need to intensify democratic practices at school, in the family, at work, ... We need to

¹⁵ Carpentier refers here to the 45th President of the United States of America.

implement these democratic principles in all spheres of society which also includes institutional politics.

For me, the concept of the democratic revolution covers all these different fields in society. There is an interesting argument here: If you only focus on democratizing institutionalized politics, you'll have to do that in a political context which is not very welcoming. So, if you don't attempt to change the context itself; if you don't create trajectories of change to intervene in all different spheres of society, the chances of having a more maximalist participatory culture, or having an institutionalized political system that allows for more participation, are slim. Of course, what really interests me, is sustainable social change, a more intense democratization process that is anchored not only in politics, but in society as a whole.

And this brings us to the contemporary media environment. There is a democratic utopia circulating about the media landscape, where many people believe that the online world beholds the promise of decentralized power relations. These utopias are important, because they have a mobilizing capacity. But let's not conflate the symbolic and the real, utopia and social practice ... Instead, let's carefully analyze social reality. Maybe we should not conclude that this democratic utopia has been realized, but we should not ignore the changes in participatory levels that have taken place either. People have become more empowered, also through media. They're offered more communicative opportunities, but let's be careful not to overestimate this. We have not reached the end of participatory history. Maybe we need to conclude that we are living in a world of minimalist participation.

That would be my thesis, and it needs to be validated with more research, but I don't think that we currently live in a maximalist participatory culture. I think that, at least in the West, we are living in a world driven by minimalist participatory logics. We do have enclaves that are more maximalist-participatory, that is true. Bey¹⁶ would call them temporary autonomous zones, or TAZ. These enclaves of maximalist participation do exist, and authors like Jenkins are great in making them visible. But, if you take society as a whole, I would argue that they are still the exceptions, and that we find ourselves living in a world of minimalist participation. In some cases, we are actually living more in a world of interaction, than in a world of minimalist participation.

¹⁶ Bey, H. (2003 [1985]) *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone*. New York: Autonomedia.

I would argue that this not enough. Of course, this doesn't mean that every social process needs to become maximalist participatory. But we could have a bit more. And even more than a bit more ((smiles)).

Q: How can online and social media be used to reinforce political engagement? How should they be used?

A: I would argue, in going back to what we were talking about before, that participation matters, but let's not reduce the social to participatory processes only. There are many, many other things that matter in the world. Moreover, there is one very basic idea, that I would like to mention here and defend: People should also have the right *not* to participate. I think that's a human right, the idea to not get involved, because if you force people to be involved, these processes stop being participatory. It actually destroys participation. For me, participation is necessarily invitational, because if participation becomes enforced, it becomes deeply problematic. Force destroys participation. But there is more: We shouldn't fetishize participation as the ultimate way of reinforcing political engagement, for instance. There are many other dimensions that play a relevant role there. To give you one example: Trust is crucial. How can one have engagement with a political system, if you can't trust it?

Trust and participation are very different concepts, but they both matter in supporting political engagement. If you want to have citizens who feel attached to particular social structures, namely political institutions, then trust is important. Respect, or relations characterized by fair exchanges that recognize the other as other, is just as important. Well-being is another crucial element. If everybody is miserable, political engagement (and participation) become very difficult. If you're being exploited, or if you are one of the 99, there is a structural problem with being engaged, because you know that your position in the world is weak, and you're vulnerable. If you have a few luxurious yachts floating around somewhere, it might be easier to be engaged. In other words, there are a series of conditions of possibility that are very materialist. There is a bit of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in this type of argument. If you don't have food, participation might not be on the top of your agenda. Political engagement is often harmed by poverty, although we should not forget that poverty might be a driving force for resistance and social change, bringing about engagements with counter-movements. Again, we need to take the context of contingency in consideration.

One must keep in mind that the ideology of (maximalist) participation is not shared by everybody. Some would say: "I don't want to be actively involved, but it's still important to feel engaged." The word "feel" is important here; and this brings us to the work of Peter Dahlgren on engagement¹⁷. In one text we both worked on¹⁸, we were trying to flesh out the differences between participation and engagement. Our argument here was engagement is very much a subjective, affectious relationship with a particular system, such as, for instance, a political system. That actually makes engagement a concept with a very different meaning than participation. But that doesn't mean that engagement is not relevant, on the contrary. And it doesn't mean that both concepts aren't related. Participatory processes feed on engagement, but they also create it. Still, the relationship is not to be taken for granted and linear. You can get frustrated while being part of a participatory process. Participation is not an easy process, and requires considerable investments, for instance in relation to time. If you are part of these often slow decision-making processes, and the lack of efficiency is frustrating, even if your power position is equal, your engagement might eventually decrease, which in turn might work against continued participation. They are still different concepts, and all of these concepts, and the practices they aim to capture, matter in a democratic polis. But then again: My work aims to show that participation deserves its place in this line-up of democratic concepts, and, might even deserve some special attention.

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¹⁷ Dahlgren, P. 2009. *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ Carpentier, N., Dahlgren, P., Pasquali, F. 2014. *The democratic (media) revolution: A parallel history of political and media participation*, in Nico Carpentier, Kim Schröder and Lawrie Hallett (eds.) *Audience transformations. Shifting audience positions in late modernity*, London: Routledge, pp. 123-141.

