



CONJUNCTIONS: TRANSDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

INTRODUCTION

PARTICIPATION ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL AND DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

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The concept of participation has become increasingly important in a range of institutions (e.g. in education, healthcare, culture, political administration, NGOs) and disciplinary contexts (e.g. aesthetics, cultural studies, media studies, political science, development studies, anthropology, architecture, urban design, interaction design). As Nico Carpentier demonstrates in his article in the present journal, ideals and practices of participation are integrated and constitutive parts of political struggles around how our political realities are to be defined and organized (Carpentier, present volume).

The different institutional and disciplinary fields often interact indirectly by building on the same or interconnected ideals, logics and discourses or by using the same or similar theories – for example, Sherry Arnstein’s famous ‘ladder of citizen participation’, which seems to have become a ‘travelling model’ deployed, used and criticized in a range of contexts far away from its academic starting point. But it is quite rare that spaces enabling interaction and learning about cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary participation are created. This special issue is an attempt to do just that, and thus also to stress the importance of such transdisciplinary ‘spaces’ of learning and knowledge. In doing this we emphasise one of the key reasons behind launching *Conjunctions* in the first place: when participation becomes culturally ubiquitous – an ideal or practice developed and used in many different institutional and cultural contexts – we also need to critically and exploratively investigate participation across and beyond disciplines in order to understand the broader implications, similarities and differences that characterise the contemporary turn towards participation. The reasons for doing this are manifold: to show how various disciplines understand, use and design ‘participation’; to learn from already established insights and faults; to potentially develop common understandings of what participation is; to understand how ideal and processes of participation are linked to structures of power; and to create better tools or models to explore, evaluate and create participatory values, qualities and effects among researchers and practitioners.

The thematic section of the issue consists of seven research articles dealing with participatory processes in healthcare, political NGOs online, the cultural sector, education, employment and urban design. Some articles analyse participation involving two or more – for instance, mediating – institutions (Mobley and Jenisch; Stage and Ingerslev). Others focus on how the ideal of participation becomes a (challenging) part/ideal of more specific institutional practices (Ledderer and Nissen; Schou, Farkas and Hjelholt; Eriksson and Stephensen). Some focus more on the need for interdisciplinary approaches when conceptualizing and analysing participation (Carpentier; Eriksson and Stephensen), embark on interdisciplinary collaborations in the investigation of participation in and across institutions (Ledderer and Nissen; Stage and Ingerslev) or reflect on practices that challenge and develop academic disciplines and education from within (Aaen and Nørgaard; Mobley and Jenisch). In this way the special issue covers a range of perspectives on and approaches to cross-institutional and transdisciplinary analyses of participation.

In his opening article, “Differentiating between access, interaction and participation”, Nico Carpentier argues in favour of a more interdisciplinary ‘rereading’ of the concept of participation in media and communication studies by taking into account the concept’s relation to democratic and political academic traditions. Carpentier thus takes issue with the inadequate interdisciplinarity – and the conceptual and analytical ‘vagueness’ this creates – in contemporary uses of participation, which address all sorts of collaborative and interactive practices as ‘participatory’ instead of distinguishing more systematically between *participation* as shared decision-making, communicative *interaction*, and *access* to knowledge or technologies. A range of articles in the issue directly engage with, use and discuss Carpentier’s power-oriented conceptualization of participation.

The second article of the issue, “The Double Conditioning of Political Participation: Grassroots Politics on Facebook”, authored by Jannick Schou, Johan Farkas and Morten Hjelholt, is an example of media and communication scholars taking Carpentier’s criticism seriously. In their article they offer an analysis of the Facebook page of a specific political grassroots organization (“Fight for the Future”) and develop a framework for understanding the specificity of social media participation in light of the actual (rather limited or conditioned) democratic and decision-making potentials of the platform. In this sense, the organization is less participatory than one might perhaps think – a deficiency partly caused by the materiality and restrictions of the Facebook platform itself. In this way the article participates in an ongoing academic questioning of the participatory ‘aura’ of social media.

In the third article, by Birgit Eriksson and Jan Løhmann Stephensen, entitled “Rethinking Participation and Re-enacting its Dilemmas? – Aarhus 2017 and “The Playful Society””, this more critical approach to practices branded or labelled as participatory is continued, but also taken into a different field, the cultural sector, and evaluated along new theoretical lines. Using Sarah White’s model of nominal, instrumental, representative and transformative participation, Eriksson and Stephensen investigate “The Playful Society”, a micro grant project initiated by the *Rethink* organization engaged in turning the city of Aarhus, Denmark into European Capital of Culture in 2017. The aim of this micro grant project was to enable young people to create cultural projects and participate in the overall Rethink project. The article examines how the Rethink agenda of social transformation through art, culture and enhanced civic participation is realised in the micro-projects, and how these meet and clash with the ambitions and expectations of the young cultural entrepreneurs.

The next two articles of this issue investigate participatory processes initiated by the authors themselves. In article four, “Participatory Academic Communities – a transdisciplinary perspective on participation in education beyond the institution”, Janus Holst Aaen and Rikke Toft Nørgaard analyse the planning, execution and evaluation of two online university courses. The courses engaged the students in new ways in order to transgress the traditional spaces and roles involved in higher education in favour of the creation

of ‘participatory academic communities’ and ‘academic citizenship’. Here the university as institution is challenged: firstly, education is based partly on moving activities outside the institution (into, for example, a conference and a public festival) and on making educatees more active and co-deciding than is normally the case. Secondly, education cannot – in making this move outside itself – become entirely ‘de-institutionalised’ in order to secure some level of knowledge and guidance. The article argues in favour of the relevance and impact of participatory academic communities, but also stresses the shadowy sides of this development by acknowledging the many frustrations and insecurities produced in the process.

Article five also reflects on the authors’ own practices and their engagement with practice-based education and research. As a text, it bridges the formats of the research article and practitioner report and is thus a type of text that we find it important to include in the special issue in order to present cutting-edge interdisciplinary work and experimentation being carried out in the intersection between research and community-based activities. The article “Recovery to Resilience: Finding a Transdisciplinary Approach to Community-Based Design”, co-authored by Susanne Mobley, Community Engagement Manager, and Nick Jenisch, Project Manager, presents the role and work of the Tulane City Center (<http://www.tulaneccitycenter.org>), community design center of the Tulane University School of Architecture in New Orleans, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In a period of ten years, the center has designed and experimented with community-based design collaborations across disciplines and organizations to rebuild major parts of the city and urban life after the hurricane. The article describes how New Orleans has transformed from a devastated city into a creative hub for community-based design and urban development. The center has played an important role in this transformation, for instance, by offering students and researchers the opportunity to engage directly with the communities of New Orleans and thus to bridge higher education and communities through the development of partnerships around urgent challenges.

The two final articles share an interest in participation related to the health sector and in combining separate disciplines in the actual research process. In “Participation as assemblage – Introducing assemblage as a framework for analysing participatory processes and outcomes”, Carsten Stage and Karen Ingerslev investigate a collaboration between a socio-economic institution, “Sager der Samler”, Central Region Denmark and local citizens focused on solving the challenge of making employment and healthcare institutions collaborate in better ways. The article furthermore discusses and questions the tendency in contemporary participation theories to focus on power transfer as the key output and legitimization of participation. This is done by arguing that participatory processes should be analysed as processes of assembling parts and of creating new capacities in the creation of assemblages, and that such an assemblage can create multiple effects or benefits beyond power or decision-making (e.g. learning, relations, affect and continuous interaction between public administration and citizens).

In the final article, “Translating Patient Experiences into Clinical Practice: An Example of ‘Patient involvement’ from Psychosocial Cancer Rehabilitation in Denmark”, Loni Ledderer and Nina Nissen investigate a concrete process of trying to intensify patient involvement in cancer rehabilitation in Denmark. Here the authors follow how patient involvement is constituted and (re)translated by moving through four different institutional contexts: a report revealing a desire among cancer patients to be engaged and acknowledged more in cancer treatment and care; a responding call for research by the Danish Cancer Society aimed at involving patients and relatives in treatment; a concrete research project engaged in solving this task; and the process of implementing patient involvement through ‘supportive talks’ as a participatory genre. The main point of the article is that patient involvement and activity is translated into various contexts, and thus transformed through this concrete process of identifying, calling for, designing and implementing patient involvement. In the process, patient involvement changes from signifying patients wanting to engage in treatment on their own terms to being an expectation of patients becoming ‘active’ in very specific ways (by engaging in supportive talks) that fit into the organisational logics of the health institution.

Besides the seven articles, the special issue includes a review essay, “Towards a Digital Materialism: Review Essay of Christian Fuchs (2015), *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*”, by Jan Løhmann Stephensen. In this essay Stephensen presents the key aspects of Fuch’s recent book at length and particularly discusses Fuch’s use of ‘creativity’ as an ideal (cf. ‘creativity for all’) or solution when wanting to avoid social media exploitation of users. One of Stephensen’s objections is that “if there is one thing the last decades’ discourse on creativity has given us, it is a full-blown fetishism of work as a (possibly) creative practice”.

We wish you all a thoughtful, dialogical and inspiring read and hope that the interconnections, correspondences and potential clashes between different institutional and disciplinary ideas and practices in the present volume will bring you new insights and new questions to explore.