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Participation Is Not Enough

The Conditions of Possibility of Mediated Participatory Practices

■ Nico Carpentier

ABSTRACT

■ The popularization of 'new' Internet-based media has generated much optimism about the social and participatory-democratic potentialities of these media, leading to predictions about the demise of the mass communication paradigm, and its replacement by a many-to-many communicative paradigm. But as happened before, the reappraisal of participation also produced a number of theoretical, conceptual and empirical problems. Participation became (at least partially) an object of celebration, trapped in a reductionist discourse of novelty, detached from the reception of its audiences and decontextualized from its political-ideological, communicative-cultural and communicative-structural contexts. These celebratory perspectives on participation cover how some of the basic concepts of the mass communication paradigm are still very much alive, providing the discursive frameworks for the reception of old and new media products. This article aims to show the persistence of (a number of components of) the mass communication paradigm through an analysis of the reception of two north Belgian participatory media products. One of these case studies is based on the 'new' world of a YouTube-like online platform called *16plus*; the second case study is based on the 'old' concept of access television in a 2002 TV programme called *Barometer*. Through an analysis of these multilayered audience receptions, this article shows that participatory practices are not unconditionally

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appreciated by audience members, but are subject to specific conditions of possibility that are still embedded within the mass communication paradigm. Albeit in different degrees, these case studies show the importance of two 'old' key concepts – professional quality and social relevance – for these audiences' evaluation of participatory practices. ■

Key Words democratization, mediated participation, participatory media theory, quality, reception, relevance

Introduction

With the advent of 'new' Internet-based media in particular, the discourses on the democratization of the media regained strength, claiming the birth of a new communicative paradigm that would replace the many-to-many communicative paradigm. While initially the concept of interactivity became one of the nodal points of the democratization discourse – pushing the 'old' concept of participation to the back¹ – the development of Web 2.0 again placed participation on centre stage. But as happened before, the reappraisal of participation also produced a number of theoretical, conceptual and empirical problems. Participation became (at least partially) an object of celebration, trapped in a reductionist discourse of novelty, and detached from the reception of its audiences and decontextualized from its political-ideological, communicative-cultural and communicative-structural contexts.

This article aims to show the persistence of (a number of components of) the mass communication paradigm through an analysis of the reception of two north Belgian participatory media products. One of these case studies is based on the 'new' world of a YouTube-like online platform called *16plus*; the second case study is based on the 'old' concept of access television in a 2002 TV programme called *Barometer*. In both cases, the reception study shows little enthusiasm or even downright rejection on the part of the audiences, although the focus group members still use a maximalist discourse of media democracy, and fiercely critique the mainstream media and their professionals, which contradicts their evaluations of the specific material they get to see. Through an analysis of these multilayered audience receptions, this article shows that participatory practices are not unconditionally appreciated by audience members, but are subject to specific conditions of possibility that are still embedded within the mass communication paradigm. Albeit in different degrees, these case studies show the importance of two 'old' key concepts – professional quality and social relevance – for these audiences' evaluation of participatory practices.

The debates on mediated participation

The key concept of participation has been used in a variety of ways and domains, and its success has not necessarily been to its advantage. Nearly four decades ago, Carole Pateman (1970: 1) wrote that 'the widespread use of the term . . . has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared'. From a constructivist perspective, the definition of participation is one of the many societal fields where a political struggle is waged between the minimalist and the maximalist variations of democracy and politics. It is a struggle between two political-ideological, archetypal-models, where on the one hand – in the minimalist model – democracy is confined to processes of representation, where participation is limited to elite selection through elections, and the political to the domain where political elites organize their decision-making processes. On the other hand, in the maximalist model, democracy is seen as a (more or less) balanced combination of representation and participation, and the political is articulated as a dimension of the social (Mouffe, 1997, 2000), which can play a role in the sphere of political decision-making, but also in other societal spheres (such as the economy, culture and media, to name but a few).

Given the ubiquity of contemporary (mass) media and their societal roles, media organizations also become relevant in this discussion about participation. Of course, media organizations' discourses and practices (and their evaluations) are also structured by the aforementioned minimalist–maximalist debate on democracy and participation. From a minimalist perspective, more emphasis is placed on the ritual and symbolic forms of participation, where the media are seen to be contributing to communality. Citizens frequently participate in (semi-)collective mediated rituals and surround themselves with (carriers of) meaning which construct their imagined communities. In most cases, the participatory nature of these receptions (however active they may be) is relatively limited, and one may wonder whether the term (mediated or symbolic) interaction, or even mediated quasi-interaction (Thompson, 1995) is not more appropriate. From a more maximalist perspective, the attention is focused on the more intense forms of media participation, where non-professionals are effectively involved in the mediated production of meaning (content-related participation) or even in the management and policy development of content-producing organizations (structural participation).

In the history of mediated communication we can find many variations of participatory practices. For instance, the initial phase of radio knew many examples of non-professional broadcasters. Not surprisingly, it was Bertolt

Brecht's radio theory (see Marc Silberman's collection of Brecht's essays [Brecht, 2001]) that provided us with the foundations of the dream of the transformation of radio as a tool of distribution into a tool of communication. But especially from the 1990s – and in some cases earlier, like for instance in the case of Hakim Bey's (1985) *TAZ* – the focus of participatory theoreticians shifted towards the so-called 'new' media. The development of the Internet, and especially the web, would not only render all information available to all, but would also create a new communicative paradigm, with, in its slipstream, the promise of a structural increase of the level of (media) participation. In the meantime, this dream seems to have come true, at least at first sight: while at first people still had to make the effort of constructing their own web pages, the Web 2.0 technologies now provide popular and accessible ways to publish texts, images, and audio and video material. But the discourse of novelty that accompanies these evolutions brings with it a number of substantial problems. Our attention has become focused on the participatory potential of 'new' media, which allows us to ignore the participatory capacities of 'old' media, and to underestimate their cultural importance and their institutional embeddedness in a capitalist economy. The discourse of novelty also feeds into the technological-determinist model, assuming that specific media technologies are by definition more participatory than others. The caution expressed here of course should not be blind to the participatory potential of both old and new media (technologies), nor to the increased diversity and intensity of these participatory practices. But, at the same time, the discourse of novelty tends to privilege new media, introducing a bias into the theories and analysis of participatory media.

The discourse of novelty, and the privileging of new media, is not the only key problem in contemporary participatory media theory. The second problem is the importance attached to the more radical-maximalist practices and their rarity in social praxis, even in the realm of the new media where the balance between interactive media and participatory media often tilts towards a stronger presence of interactive media (like, for instance, social networking sites). In his analysis of participatory development theory, Sparks (2007: 59) points to this dilemma (albeit in a specific theoretical context) by stating, rather harshly, that participatory development theory is based on 'very contentious claims', because of the following paradox: 'the dominant paradigm passed in theory, but retained a very extensive appeal in practice; the participatory paradigm, on the other hand, triumphed in development theory, but has failed to command any substantial support in practice'. Although Sparks' focus on social systems leads him to ignore the perspectives of a (rather crucial) actor, namely the

people-to-be-developed – a reduction which also limits the transposition of this critique to the broad field of participatory media theory – his argument does indicate that the reluctance of specific social systems (like the mainstream media system) to engage in the more radical-maximalist versions of participation is limiting the actual appearance of these versions in social praxis. Because of this structural absence (or limited presence), one cannot but continuously question the relevance of these (radical) participatory models especially but not exclusively for the world of ‘old’ media, and point to the need to legitimize the (academic) attention for the exceptional.

At the same time Sparks’ omission of the people (or the public) as a relevant actor raises questions about their perspectives on these participatory practices, including mediated participatory practices, when the peoples or publics are confronted with these practices. This brings us to a third core problem: within the field of mediated participation, the perspectives and receptions of audiences in mainstream media have only rarely been researched (see Huesca [2008] and Livingstone and Lunt [1994] for exceptions in the respective fields of audience discussion programmes and youth-produced radio), which paradoxically renders their voices relatively absent in the theories that aim to increase their voices in society.² In the case of new media, ‘regular’ audiences have also remained underresearched because of the emphasis on active use. Here, it is important to stress that the conflation of producer and audience is not total, and that participatory media products still have audiences that are not involved in the participatory process. We can here refer to alternative media studies, where a similar problem has been established: ‘It is a paradox, however, that so little attention has been dedicated to the user dimension, given that alternative-media activists represent in a sense the most active segment of the so-called “active audience”’ (Downing, 2003: 625). This argument legitimizes the need for introducing more reception studies (see, for example, Staiger, 2005) into the area of participatory (online) media, focusing on how audiences interpret and evaluate the outcomes of other people’s participatory activities, at the level of content and process.

Fourth, participatory media theory has the tendency to isolate the concept of participation, and to ignore the conditions of possibility of its relevance, appreciation and significance. The often-made (implicit) assumption is that participation is necessarily beneficial and that, if it is only enabled, it will also be appreciated by all those involved, who will do nothing but gain from it. This assumption is problematic because it decontextualizes the participatory practices, and disconnects them from a very necessary articulation with democracy, empowerment, equality and a number of other crucial concepts. This decontextualization also leads to the belief that

the societal appreciation for and impact of participatory practices will not be affected by the political-ideological, communicative-cultural and communicative-structural context. As participatory media practices are not situated in a vacuum, one can for instance safely assume that these practices will be interpreted (and gain signification) through already circulating discourses on the societal roles of media organizations, their media professionals and their audiences; similarly, the expectations of what is to be considered personal, private, public and political, and of who has the right to express what under which conditions, affect these interpretations and evaluations. More specifically in the context of this article, the discourses that structure the mass communication paradigm have a long history and are deeply embedded in the cultures in which they have operated. Although these discourses are not necessarily stable and rigid, they cannot be considered hyper-fluid, as they have a certain degree of inertia. Moreover, however heterogeneously articulated these discourses on the media may sometimes be, they are often rooted in hegemonic processes that again fixate them.

Two case studies on the reception of participatory media products

Given the importance of the audiences' reception and the discursive (and other) contexts in which participatory processes are situated, there is a strong need to incorporate both components in the study of participatory media. In this article, two case studies are developed, both related to the north Belgian public broadcaster VRT, which allows me to incorporate an institutional angle, focusing on the role of media professionals within these participatory processes. The case studies differ in the type of technology they use: one of them is using an 'old' technology and the other is using a 'new' technology to facilitate participation. At the same time, both case studies are similar, as they both generate (reasonably) intense forms of participation, where the power relationships between the media professionals and the participants are (or seem to be) fairly balanced, allowing the participants to produce audiovisual material themselves, and to enter into a production process which is more than 'mere' access or interaction.

The first case study deals with the online video-sharing platform *16plus*. Given the abundant choice of available material and the perspective of this article, the case study was developed based on material that was produced by clearly inexperienced non-professionals, who for the very first time were experimenting with the participatory opportunities offered to them. Nine films were selected, based on the work of nine groups of youngsters, who received video-making training at the Seventh Flemish Science Week³

(which took place from 23 to 27 October 2006) as a small project of the Institute for Broadband Technology (IBBT), in collaboration with *16plus*, one of the north Belgian public broadcaster's (VRT) online platforms. The format used in these films is fairly similar and based on a collage of interviews on the street and in shops with a diversity of people. It diverged from mainstream media conventions in a variety of ways (rendering its reception again unpredictable.). The soundtrack of the films is, in many cases, rather difficult to understand, and in at least one of the films the raindrops on the camera lens are clearly visible. The films do not always have an introduction, or a clear storyline, and the relationships between the different parts are not always explained. The films allow the viewer to look at the 'normal' scenes of everyday life, without adding a layer of aestheticization or narrative structure, which is more typical of professionally produced media products. Instead, we get to see the raw data of the everyday, without much decoration.

The case study analysis is based on a combination of interviews with media professionals⁴ and a qualitative content analysis of the nine films and 15 focus group discussions. These 15 focus group discussions⁵ were organized at the end of 2007 and analysed using discourse-theoretical analysis.⁶ In each of the focus groups, two or three of the nine films were screened, and then discussed by a total of 131 respondents. Internal homogeneity was based on educational level and age, while an equal distribution (across the focus groups) on the basis of sex and region was implemented.

The second case study is based on the access TV programme *Barometer*, which was broadcast in 2002 on VRT's TV1. *Barometer* was inspired by the BBC's *Video Nation*,⁷ and produced by Kanakna. There were only two series of the programme as VRT decided to discontinue the programme at the end of 2002, because of an insufficient market share (interview, Wendel Goossens, VRT's *Barometer* producer). The first series of five episodes was broadcast between 30 April 2002 and 28 May 2002, and the second series of eight episodes between 5 September 2002 and 22 October 2002. Each 20-minute episode of *Barometer* was based on six two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half minute 'video letters', produced by 'ordinary' viewers, but edited by the members of the production team. The programme and the films are introduced by Michiel Hendryckx, a (press) photographer. The topics of these films varied widely, but the programme remained focused on human interest stories. These videos might consist of a report of an event, a statement or a call for action. Some of the stories used an emotional approach, while others were based on pranks. Quite often the films showed the representation of the self, sometimes in relation to other societal groups and to society.

Again, a combination of interviews with media professionals⁸ and a qualitative content analysis of *Barometer* episodes and focus group discussions

was used. For the focus groups, a selection (based on thematic diversity) of four episodes from the first series was made. These four episodes were broadcast on 30 April, 7 May, 14 May and 28 May 2002. There were 14 focus group discussions organized, with 122 respondents in total. Similarly, as in the *16plus* case study, internal homogeneity was based on educational level and age, in combination with an equal distribution (across the focus groups) on the basis of sex and region. Again a discourse-theoretical analysis was used as a methodological tool.

Focus group critiques on *16plus*

The *16plus* focus group respondents argue extensively and continuously why they dislike the nine films. This negative evaluation of the focus group respondents focuses on three components of the films: the level of the content, the reasons for making the films and (especially) the formal qualities of the nine films.

At the level of the content of the films, the respondents point to the lack of relevance and usefulness. Shari (F, 17, H, *16plus*FG2)⁹ for instance says: 'yeah, I really don't understand what the use is'. The respondents explain this lack of relevance by referring to the low educational and informational level of the films. The second component of their critique is based on the (perceived) motives attributed to the producers. Here the films are criticized because the producers were seen as being bored and having nothing else to do, or as wanting to merely get themselves noticed.

The formal quality of the film is the third component of critique. The respondents formulate a lethal avalanche of critiques in this area: the films are described as poorly filmed (with the raindrops on the lens mentioned frequently), the framing and editing are seen as problematic and the sound quality is poor. In general, there is a lack of aesthetic quality. The respondents also refer to the lack of narrative structure and focus, and to the poor preparation and research by the producers. On many occasions, the perceived lack of aesthetic, narrative and technical quality is juxtaposed with the quality of professional media productions. Here, the skilful media professionals act as a constitutive outside which provides the discursive framework to criticize the amateur productions.

Focus group discourses that legitimize *16plus*

Despite the unanimous critiques on the formal and content-related qualities of the nine films, a number of discourses emerge that legitimize the existence

of the films. First, discourses of pedagogics and pleasure are used. On the one hand, the respondents refer to the learning process and the ability of the producers to improve their skills (as part of a learning-by-doing process, or through the feedback they receive). On the other hand, the respondents point to the pleasure that the producers derive from making these films, and the ability of the producers to be creative. Another element of this discourse is the pleasure generated by showing these films to their own social networks.

The respondents also refer to a discourse of democracy, freedom and empowerment to legitimize the existence of these films. The producers are deemed to be free to exert their democratic right to publish the material, and an infringement on that right is often immediately depicted as censorship and rejected. The democratic rights discourse is combined with an emphasis on ordinary people, as these films are seen as ways to provide media access to ordinary people for both the youngsters who produced the films and for the people who featured in them. Despite the debates caused by the complexities of the concept 'ordinary people', the respondents point to the authenticity and spontaneity of the films, which in turn are seen as a way to 'really' represent reality.

The discourses of pedagogics, pleasure and democracy are complemented by a fourth discourse that legitimizes the existence of these films by reverting to the outside identity of media professionals and mainstream media organizations. In contrast to the professional quality argument discussed earlier (which discredits amateur producers), the discourse of professionalization is a critique launched at media professionals and mainstream media organizations, through which the nine films gain importance and legitimacy. The nine films are not only deemed different but also more real and authentic because they are subjective (while professionals are seen as having to be neutral), because the ordinary people featured in the films gain unmediated access, and because they are not part of a commercialized media system focused on the spectacular, which is incessantly critiqued in the focus groups.

Focus group critiques on *Barometer*

In contrast to the reception focus groups of *16plus*, the critiques of the *Barometer* respondents place less emphasis on the quality problems and on the problems related to the motives of the makers. In the *Barometer* focus groups the participants are repeatedly positioned as amateurs, but at the same time the respondents explain that they do not mind that much,

because the (limited) technical problems – like an unstable camera – are not considered dominant and are not deemed to structurally affect the content.

But there is still little enthusiasm to be found for *Barometer*, as the relevance of the programme is repeatedly questioned. Respondents either take a neutral or indifferent stance towards *Barometer*, or claim that it is a useless, silly, lightweight and insignificant programme. Again, the lack of informational and educational value is used as an argument to question the relevance of the programmes. In their evaluation of *Barometer*, the focus group respondents often refer to the human interest genre. Although the authenticity of the ordinary participants is seen as the main strength of the programme, the critique of a lack of relevance in *Barometer* becomes intertwined with the similar but more general critique on human interest. Ria (F, 55, H, BaroFG10) for instance remarks: ‘But if they are going to film somebody of us [ordinary people], then nobody is going to watch it. That is too boring, that is too monotonous.’ Another respondent, Monique (F, 52, H, BaroFG10), continues: ‘That is something we’re experiencing on a daily basis, we don’t need to get to see that on television.’ The critique on the lack of relevance of the mediated representation of everyday life is again strengthened by the perceived need to have a stronger professional intervention, in order to contextualize the personal experiences and narrations provided by the *Barometer* participants.

Focus group discourses that legitimize *Barometer*

In the case of the reception of *Barometer*, the programme becomes mainly legitimized through its capacity to offer a forum or a podium to ordinary people to narrate and represent their personal stories, opinions and experiences. This discourse is combined with a (communication) rights discourse that emphasizes the right of ordinary people to communicate and represent themselves on television, and which values their presence in one of the key public spaces. The respondents also recognize the communicational needs that motivated the makers to participate in the production of *Barometer*, the authenticity it generates and the pleasure that arises from being part of these participatory practices. Despite some remarks about their nervousness and over-preparation, the respondents consider the participants to be natural, spontaneous, real and honest.

Yet again, the media professionals and the mainstream media system become (as in *16plus*) a constitutive outside. The work of the participants can be defined as authentic and spontaneous because the intervention of media professionals remains limited. Moreover, media professionals are

articulated as restrictive towards the democratic capacity of the media, partially because of their media-centredness. This generates an interesting paradox, where the mainstream media are seen to offer a poor perspective on reality and are deemed manipulative, but they are accepted because they master the aesthetic and narrative professional standards. On the other hand, the 'amateur' films have only limited aesthetic and narrative qualities, but offer a more realist and authentic perspective on everyday life.

At the same time, the respondents do recognize the limits of the participatory practices, especially when referring to the media professionals' interventions at the level of selection and editing. As the host of *Barometer* explicitly mentions in his introduction, he has selected the contributions that were actually broadcast in the programme, the respondents (not surprisingly) identify this as one of the major interventions of the production team. The second professional intervention that is discussed is the editing. Here things are much less clear, as the respondents have little factual information about the production practices of the production team. This results in much speculation, where some respondents express their belief that it is '100 percent uncut' (Jan, M, 24, L, BaroFG7), others talk about 'minimal editing' (Hugo, M, 24, L, BaroFG5) and yet others frame it as manipulation. In some cases the respondents distrust the (professional) production team and speculate about its assistance during the filming or the active recruitment of participants. Regretfully, the interviews with some of the *Barometer* media professionals showed that these critical voices were quite accurate. The media professionals intervened in order to plan and structure the actual filming, to select and edit the 'raw' material (excluding the host from playing a role in this [part of the] process), but also to scout for participants,¹⁰ even if the host would explicitly say in his introductions to the programmes that *he* selected the films, and that the participants had reacted to *his* call to send their material to VRT.

Conclusion

Participation is a concept which is often deemed socially and politically beneficial, although we often see a more gentle, minimalist approach to interactive/participatory practices, which do not touch the core of the power relations of the social systems that might be organizing or facilitating these practices. So it might come as a bit of a surprise to see how negatively the focus group respondents react to the two case studies, which do offer (at least at first sight) more intense and maximalist forms of participation.

There is one complication: at the theoretical level, the respondents strongly feel that 'ordinary people' have the right to perform online and on television, and that the access to these realms of representation should not be reserved for media professionals and members of the elite, which they fiercely criticize.

The participatory nature of the production process (and its outcomes) may be theoretically applauded in the focus groups, but the actual materializations are met with fierce critiques or with indifference. In the case of *16plus*, the use of the 'new' online technology does not protect the films from being severely criticized. In particular, the perceived lack of aesthetic, narrative and technical quality forms the basis of a series of harsh critiques that almost completely discredit the films. In the case of *Barometer*, the televised programme, the respondents are less harsh in their criticism, but they still fail to see the social relevance of what is being screened for them, and remain indifferent and disconnected.

The reactions of the focus group respondents show that mediated participation is not enough for a programme to be valued positively. In order to be appreciated, there are a number of conditions that have to be met. The (rather extreme) case of *16plus* shows that the basic conventions about aesthetic, narrative and technical quality, as defined by the professionalized mainstream media system, are deeply rooted within the taste cultures of these (north Belgian) audience members. The *Barometer* case exemplifies at the same time that these conventions with regard to quality are not that rigid, and that there is some space for 'amateurs' to diverge from these conventions. But more importantly, the *Barometer* case also shows us (as does the *16plus* study) that the respondents use social relevance as a key principle for evaluating media output. They critique *Barometer* for falling into the human interest trap of privileging the private and the personal without transcending it. Both case studies show that the respondents perceive a strong need for media to use (aesthetic, narrative and technical) languages that are exceptional, and to narrate stories which are socially relevant. Just showing everyday life, or just organizing participation, is simply not enough. The images they want to see, still have to be magical as well.

Notes

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1. The main exception was to be found in political studies, where 'new' media were seen as potential sites for direct democracy and strong forms of participation.
2. Again, there are exceptions. See for instance Mody's (1991) work on participatory research methodologies.

3. See: www.vlaamsewetenschapsweek.be/
4. These interviews were with Filip Fastenaekels (new media team for VRT and *16plus*), Lode Nachtergaele (IBBT collaborator *16plus*) and Tine Deboosere (VRT moderator *16plus*). All interview and programme quotations are translations from Dutch by the author.
5. A 16th focus group discussion was not used in the analysis because of quality problems.
6. Discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA – see Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007) builds on a combination of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory and critical discourse analysis. Methodologically speaking, it is based on the general principles and methods of qualitative research (Wester, 1987), but uses the discourse-theoretical and critical discourse analytical instruments as sensitizing concepts.
7. See: www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/history/. See also Carpentier (2003).
8. Interviews were held with Michiel Hendryckx (*Barometer* presenter), Isabel Dierckx (Kanakna producer of *Barometer*), Wendel Goossens (VRT producer of *Barometer*), Noel Swinnen (manager Kanakna), Frank Symoens (production manager TV1 VRT), Jean-Philip De Tender (channel adviser TV1 VRT), Eva Willems and Joke Blommaert (*Barometer* researchers).
9. The first three codes refer to the sex (female/male), age and educational level (high/low) of the focus group respondents. The *16plus*FG or *Barometer*FG code refers to the number of the focus group.
10. Not only did the host of the programme during the interview express uneasiness with the situation he was (unknowingly) placed in, but in a 2008 Facebook exchange, Isabel Dierckx (Kanakna's *Barometer* producer) also confirmed that there were four researchers involved. In subsequent interviews, Joke Blommaert and Eva Willems then confirmed the role they played in scouting for potential participants.

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