Book Review

Review of Barney, Darin, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, and Tamar Tembeck (eds). 2016. *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 352 pp, 33 B&W photos. Paperback. US\$27.00. ISBN 978-0-8166-9771-7.

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Whether discussing so-called smart cities, smart devices, or user-led practices through digital media, the sustained participation of individuals is always a concern. One might question the extent to which citizens can wilfully effect social change, in contrast to situations where their input is collected or even co-opted for unanticipated ends. Consider the proliferation of neighbourhood watch (*buurtpreventie*) groups in the Netherlands where citizens use WhatsApp to monitor strangers, sharing details and coordinating with fellow neighbours. This stands in contrast to initiatives that seek to direct this information exclusively to the state, as well as instances where states may simply intercept digital media communications. While users find novel ways to engage through digital media, it remains that ‘holders of economic and political power ... have adapted very well to the participatory condition and actually thrive under it’ (pg. xxxi). States, multinationals, and other organisations can anticipate and exploit mediated forms of participation. Even when focusing exclusively on user-led initiatives, one must question the extent to which citizen participation contributes to social harm and furthers categories of suspicion, to the extent that scholars may frame them as inherently ambivalent (c.f. Phillips and Milner 2017). Barney et al.’s edited collection is a welcome addition to conversations on the notion of citizen-led participation. Its fifteen chapters cover diverging topics that together advance a multi-perspective account that includes a stated emphasis on contemporary surveillance practices. In recognition that participation has ‘now been generalized across multiple social domains’ (pg. ix), the editors consider the participatory condition for scholars as well as readers with artistic and activist-based commitments. This is accomplished by attempting to ‘disentangle the tensions, contradictions and potentialities of new media participation’, as well as assessing ‘the role of new media in the development of a relational possibility’ (ibid.) while maintaining an eye on the history of participation. The collection proposes a critical interrogation of practices as well as vocabularies that render them meaningful, notably due to concerns about exclusion of social sectors and categories of individuals from participation as well as the impact participatory schemes may have on democratic life. Chapters are organised according to four fields: politics, openness, aesthetics/aisthesis and surveillance.

Politics are understood in the context of attempts to depoliticise the production and exploitation of user-generated content, and how these attempts make use of notions of participation. This is conceptually interrogated in Carpentier’s chapter, which distinguishes between understanding participation in terms of authentic versus inauthentic forms, or alternatively in terms of minimalist versus maximalist initiatives

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that either preserve or resolve asymmetrical power relations within a social order. In contrast, Sorochan's chapter addresses how participation as a term is employed to shape public acceptance of practices through a contradiction of promising 'collective emancipation and individual self-empowerment' while reproducing 'existing institutions and power structures' (pg. 21). Focusing on Occupy Wall Street, she reports that participation as ideology served to undermine the broader goal of the movement by treating such 'structures and processes as goals in themselves' (pg. 31). These chapters are attuned to the political contexts in which their works are being read, with authors like Scholtz walking the reader through possibilities of praxis and intervention in the case of labour disputes stemming from the contemporary sharing economy. Writing about the intersection of media and politics in the Arab world, York contends that political mobilisations require sufficient impetus in terms of shared beliefs, and are not simply a matter of actionable information being made accessible to a public. This is a point that resonates with recent developments, for example when considering the dearth of public mobilisation in response to circulated imagery of police violence (Brucato 2015).

The chapters under the heading of openness explore a range of contexts in which individuals can be understood as participating, with an emphasis on the possibility of the appropriation of data as well as the pervasive exclusion of those most dependent on these schemes. The chosen cases address struggles and barriers between users and platforms, but also a myriad of axes upon which it is possible to distinguish participatory initiatives. Following Cammaerts, this includes sharing material and immaterial goods, alongside other distinctions such as profit/non-profit, individual/collectivist, top-down/bottom-up, weak-tie/strong-tie, and internet-supported/internet-based. Following other contributions in this volume, we may also add the axis of expert versus lay user. Such a typology provides nuance in order to situate the various practices in which individuals are mobilised. Contributing authors are also attuned to the multiplicity of asymmetrical power relations that pervade civil life, including in the context of activist-led interventions. These include instances of a potential 'nonmarket and nonproprietary collaborative practice' (pg. 94) in the case of a skill-sharing initiative whose stated goals clash with a more pragmatic attempt at repairing disused electronics. Here attention is conferred to the 'interplay between technical expertise and an activist politics of technology devoted to "participation"' (ibid.). Expertise is also considered in an oncological context (Delfanti and Iaconesi), in which notions of visibility and data traces are especially acute following diagnosis. Here the individual is said to 'disappear, only to be replaced by something else: a patient' who amounts to little more than "data and images" (pgs. 126-7). This speaks to the pervasiveness of datafication, visibility and the risk of exclusion from participation in the most crucial stages of one's own existence. A recurrent theme in these chapters is the notion that participatory projects entail a 'wide variety of actors with very different intentions' (pg. 162) especially during formative stages. This tone speaks to the contested dimensions of participation, with the implication that such arrangements can be configured otherwise. This is also evident in the aisthesis section, which explores participation in the context of art installations (Frieling, Lorenzo-Hemmer), but also engagements with academia (Stiegler) and online platforms (Lewis). These contributions seek to not only recognise but also encourage and nourish the 'expansive, emancipatory visions' (pg. 241) that render formative technologically mediated practices meaningful.

Contributions from Cohen, Crawford and Andrejevic explore the link between surveillance practices and the participatory condition. Participation is understood as enabling surveillance, which in turn facilitates control over and governance of participants. This is summarised in the collection's introduction through the paradox that 'the more we participate, the more data is gathered about us, and ... the less participatory participation becomes' (pg. xxviii). Not only do user-led initiatives generate actionable information (that may only be accessible to platform owners), but such information may also support later iterations of platforms and devices that can co-opt, automate or otherwise pacify such initiatives. This interest in the passive turn allows readers to reconcile empowering accounts of digital media users that direct public attention to the individual generating information about themselves with the longer-term consequences of these initiatives. Participation through platforms and devices inevitably entails participation with

platforms and devices, generating meta-data and other digital traces that may evade critical scrutiny. In this sense, wilful contributions from users are always closely tied to infrastructures and other social actors listening in. In these chapters listening emerges as a conceptually fruitful subject position that is too often overlooked in design and discourse. The development of smart habitats embedded with sensing devices reconfigure participation as a default setting, while the actual terms of participation are obscured and broader societal outcomes depoliticised. Listening is understood as a persistent and increasingly default process with minimal legal commitments. In terms of human agency, lurking may be derided in terms of a conceivable hierarchy of participation, which in turn ignores the 'agentic power of listening and the way it contributes to social intimacy and connectedness' (pg. 179). The edited volume effectively addresses such ambivalences, for example in the context of legal statuses of platforms and what users consider acceptable (Crawford on pg. 179; Cohen on pg. 207). Recent exemplars like Foursquare's gamification settings (pg. 208) and Google Glass stand as instances of user-centred (self-)surveillance that generated controversy and were shelved, and will undoubtedly shape subsequent initiatives. Cohen's contribution is especially attentive to the role of discourse and framing as shaping information processing to be a predominant form of 'innovation and expression' (pg. 218), and thus a self-governing set of practices for which 'regulatory oversight is systematically marginalised' (ibid.). Throughout these developments, mental models and imaginaries for understanding mediated (surveillant) relations warrant critical scrutiny. Consider the anthropomorphisation of a surveillant data gaze, which enables individuals to begin to come to terms with passive and pervasive data collection. Following Andrejevic: 'what needs to be fostered is a database imaginary adequate to the capabilities and uses of the machinic 'gaze'' (pg. 202).

Contributions to *The Participatory Condition* reflect a sense of history in addressing relations between users, devices and institutions, such that they enable readers to anticipate subsequent socio-political and mediated developments. But the authors also use current examples and cases to illustrate their claims. It is a thoughtfully curated effort that is handled in a multi-perspective manner, with an emphasis on the tensions and contradictions that problematise the aforementioned fields of study. Although it does not provide an authoritative account of any specific form of participation (such as the sharing economy or digital activism), the collection can at least speak tentatively about participation in a broader sense. Readers who struggle to reconcile emancipatory potentials of technological arrangements with current and persistent political-economic conditions will find the book especially helpful.

References

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