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

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

### **Disciplines**

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### **Comments**

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

**PART I: CREATIVITY**

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***Henry Jenkins (Introduction):***

Several decades after the initial talk about “the digital revolution,” where do we stand in terms of understanding the relationship between dominant media institutions and emergent or grassroots media production? Might we agree, for example, that there has been some significant expansion in terms of who has access to the means of cultural production and circulation, even as that access is not universally shared and is in fact characterized by structural and systemic exclusions, even as that production does not necessarily represent a radical alternative to mainstream or corporate media offerings, and even as commercial interests have found some new ways to exploit those creative impulses? What do we see as

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the value of these new forms of participatory culture, and what do we see as the limits to the kinds of changes that have occurred as various groups have sought to tap into the affordances of networked communication? How have shifts in the mode of production impacted our understanding of who gets to be an author and what value we attach to the status of the author?

**Adrienne Shaw:**

Because of the way the production/consumption model has been reified, we sometimes set up a too-easy dichotomy between commercial and grassroots production. In any medium, from radio to game mods, we can see a push/pull between the two. There are many examples of the exploitation and reappropriation, of audience/fan labor and the farming out of production work to audiences via claims of making the experience more enjoyable. At the same time, there are countless cases of those on the margins of the media industry using these new tools to break into media professions (Issa Rae of *Awkward Black Girl* fame being but one example).

In her essay "No Hard Feelings," Katherine Sender (2012) proposes a concentric circle model of media production, which pushes past the insider/outsider dichotomy of the traditional model. She describes media production in terms of the center, margins, and periphery. Using this model, we see that we can't lump the kid in her basement making a web series for her friends with Felicia Day creating *The Guild*, nor can we equate production of *The Guild* with a major network series. More than that, as Sender discusses directly, increased diversity in representation from the center often requires pulling content from the margin and periphery. Today there is so much potential for marginalized groups to see their lives work their way from a grassroots to mainstream production. The key word there, though, is *potential*, and we must always be wary of the cleansing that takes place as marginalized groups are made ready for prime time.

Producing creative products requires access to the material means of production. Owning a computer and accessing the Internet, particularly for the amount of time required to create a media text, is not available to everyone. Time and skill to create and learn programs on one's own is also necessary, and not evenly distributed throughout society. Too often I have heard people who work in areas of digital production dismiss time as something everyone has—that's simply not true.

In addition, because there seems to be an expectation that everyone has access to these new tools, I think there is an unquestioned privileging of industry aesthetics, values, and techniques that we need to more directly critique. As an example, there are more and more freely accessible tools to make video games. Several game designers who exist on the margins and periphery of the industry use Twine and interactive narrative software to make games that they then distribute for free online (one of my favorite examples is *Misogyny Island* by Samantha Allen, Fred McCoy, and Kat Haché).<sup>1</sup> In turn, a debate swirls online and at game conferences as to whether these are really games, whether they should count. Indie and expressive games produced without a commercial goal are judged in relation to games that have wide appeal, or just as problematically are judged vis-à-vis art. Much of the general discourse surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> <http://misogynyisland.wordpress.com>

grassroots production seems to try to find ways to absorb it into the mainstream commercial industry and, if not, some notion of a mainstream art/museum complex. What if we imagine the digital revolution as a chance to share visions of a reimagined world without necessarily being a commercial or art world success?

More than that, though, I worry that the privileging of digital production limits our ability to imagine creative production that does not seek to be a part of the professionalized sphere. For one, I feel like this focus tends to obscure (perhaps even belittle) production that still occurs with X-Acto knives and glue sticks, knitting, LARPing in a local park, and so on. If anything, the digital revolution has given us access to an archive of production and distribution on a scale we simply did not have before. Material objects are fragile, but so are digital texts. It is difficult to track down objects of which there were only 300 copies total, but digital formats change rapidly. Digitally distributed texts move farther and faster than cassette tapes handed out at a concert or literary magazines made illicitly on someone's workplace copy machine. We have access to data production more readily, but are creativity and production only valuable via mass production and distribution (even if it's a relatively small mass)?

Finally, regardless of what production tools are available, the farther one moves from the media center the more difficult and precarious distribution becomes. Are we seeing a shift toward more media center control of the channels of distribution, or at least an attempt to consolidate them into curated channels? Similarly, are future professionals expected to train themselves on their own, develop skills and a fan base, before they can make it in the industry?

**David Gauntlett:**

I think we would share a lot of the same perspectives on this, Adrienne: a desire to include off-line as well as online creativity (and the connections between the two); an irritation at the privileging of mainstream media; and a resistance to the idea that human creativity has suddenly been invented by the Internet (although it certainly does offer unprecedented potential opportunities for distribution and conversation).

On the other hand, I was not sure who exactly you were being cross with—naming names would be helpful. If media scholars (or anyone else) were only excited about grassroots media production because it offers the possibility that their producers will enter the world of mainstream media and commercial success, then that would be deeply disappointing. I'm not sure if that's a very common view, though. Of course, TV shows about amateur production are likely to take this narrow view, but that is perhaps not surprising.

I do see media scholars dismissing amateur producers wholesale because they do not work the same way as traditional producers. In an article I'm writing for a forthcoming book, I observe:

One of the errors made by critics such as Natalie Fenton (2012) is to look at online media through a traditional media lens, where size of audience is a key measure of significance. Comparing the online presence of established media brands, such as CNN and the BBC, with homemade sites made by amateur enthusiasts in their spare time,

Fenton unsurprisingly finds that the former have much bigger audiences (pp. 134–135). Rather more surprisingly, she concludes from this that self-made media is a waste of time, made by deluded narcissists (I paraphrase, but that is what she says; see Fenton, 2012, p. 135). (Zagalo & Branco, 2014, in press)

You may have choked on your coffee there, but that's really what she says! I don't disagree that bizarre judgments based on old-media models remain somewhat common and apparently popular among media and communications scholars (based, at least, on the praise heaped upon *Misunderstanding the Internet* on its back cover).

Sender's "concentric circle model of media production," which talks in terms of the center, margins, and periphery, may be an attempt to escape from the insider/outsider notions, but it does not seem to be trying very hard to evade such a hierarchy. Although it may not be the intention, the center would seem to be in a superior position to the periphery; I don't think periphery is ever seen as a winning standpoint. This model still looks at media production as something done by unknowable others whose success can be ranked in conventional ways, by assessing the size of their audience or their apparent influence.

I would prefer to see media production as participation in a conversation, and consider its value in terms of the change it makes for the producers themselves (and, by extension, those around them). The people who are getting the least personal value from their own production work could well be professional producers, who are more likely to be making their media contributions because it is part of their job—someone (more or less) told them to. Amateur producers, regardless of their audience size or skill level, are much more likely to be making stuff just because they want to, because it's their interest or passion, and because they want to connect with people, exchange ideas, and build on the inspiration of others. (I gathered examples and references to support this claim in Gauntlett, 2011; see also Kuznetsov & Paulos, 2010).

**Francesca Coppa:**

The Organization for Transformative Works was founded six years ago, because fans realized that owning the means of circulating and distributing fanworks—the servers, the interface, the code, the terms of service—would be essential to the long-term health of fan creativity, and so we created the nonprofit, donor-supported Archive of Our Own. Today, when I talk about the importance of fan writing, I don't just mean fiction and nonfiction: I mean contracts and code. In the old days, fans self-published their fiction (and put it under copyright, asserting their ownership in their words), they distributed their own VHS cassettes and digital downloads, and they coded and built their own websites and created their own terms of service. Today, enormous commercial entities—YouTube, Amazon, LiveJournal, Wattpad, Tumblr—own much of this infrastructure.

This is a very mixed bag. On the one hand, these companies' products and interfaces have made it infinitely easier for the average fan to connect with other fans and distribute fanworks. Now you only need a username and a password to get started, where before you needed access to server space, a knowledge of HTML, how to use FTP, and so on. However, there are also various dangers, including not only

capricious or exploitative terms of service but simple market failure. None of the companies I just listed has anything like the track record of the average fandom or fanish institution; consider how much younger they are than Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Who, or even Supernatural fandom. In the best case, these companies may fail and become a disruptive force in relatively stable and long-term communities; in the worst case, they may exploit and betray their users.

In the past few years, the nature of the arguments I have been having as a fandom advocate has changed: In the past, I found myself arguing for the legitimacy of our works; now, I find myself arguing against their exploitation. The commercial ownership of the infrastructure means that money has now complicated fandom's gift culture, and, like it or not, we now have to think about who should benefit. Here, too, there is a spectrum: Some grassroots creators don't want to engage with the commercial world on any terms (and they should have the right not to); others feel that if someone is profiting from their works, it should be them, and it should be a fair compensation. If the relationship between fans and the commercial world is being renegotiated, we're going to have to apply some of our creative energies to writing contracts as well as fanfiction, rather than let unfavorable or disrespectful terms of authorship be handed down to us by corporate owners.

***Sarah Banet-Weiser:***

I think it is clear that we agree on the importance of displacing a market/nonmarket dichotomy as a frame for understanding participatory culture. As Adrienne says, this dichotomy is too easy. Aside from being too easy, invoking this kind of binary actually works quite effectively to shut down productive conversation. Importantly, the market needs certain sites to be designated as noncommercial so as to better mine them and harness them for authenticity and genuine consumer engagement.

So I'm all for breaking down this dichotomy, especially in terms of real politics versus commercial politics, or authenticity versus commercialism. But we need to be cautious about how we go about challenging these binaries. Surely there has been increasing access to cultural production and circulation. This increasing access potentially disrupts power relations, and in that potential disruption, more people will have more access to how representations are made and circulated.

However, the idea that dominant power can be challenged within participatory cultures is too often mobilized as a response to strong critiques of the commercialization of participatory culture. For example, when I've presented work that critiques the way participation in social media sites often reproduces dominant gender arrangements, some scholars and media practitioners have interpreted it as being too pessimistic. The market matters, I'm reassured, but it is not all that matters. This is surely true, but this point seems to acknowledge the market constraints of participatory media, only to then drop these constraints as constitutive of participation and/or power relations.

The question for me is how to account for the power of commercial markets in a way that isn't superficial but also is not dismissive of noncommercial participation. The market creates vast imbalances in terms of both production and use, but it also creates economic peripheries. I think that José Van Dijck's (2013) insistence on the "ecosystem" of online production and use, where we attend to the ways in which

platforms and applications are mutually constitutive and embedded within history, is very instructive in this regard, because it encourages us to think about different forms of user connection and what they might mean in a broader context.

I like David's idea of thinking about participation as not about periphery or center, but rather like people participating in a conversation. This, he rightly says, challenges the one-way emphasis that *producer* suggests. I agree, but power relations structure the context in which the conversation takes place, and this always then shapes the direction and goal of the conversation. Here, Sender's concentric circles are useful, as the model certainly gestures to a matrix of relations that is more complicated than producer/consumer, and acknowledges the coexistence of various production/consumption sites.

I'm not sure that participatory culture has a great deal of efficacy in the current moment, or at least not the same kind of efficacy as it did several years ago. It now seems to be applied almost exclusively to digital culture (which was not always its original intent; I appreciate both Adrienne and David insisting on off-line participation being a part of participatory culture). Without being specific about the nature of the participation, or what folks are participating in, it lends itself to the false dichotomy of commercial versus noncommercial. This especially resonated with me in Francesca's discussion of the way she has changed the nature of the arguments she makes as a fandom advocate.

Recently, I've been thinking about the way participatory culture is invoked more along the lines of how I think of postfeminist culture, where, in Angela McRobbie's (2008) formulation, feminism is acknowledged only to say that it is no longer needed as an analytic or a practice. In this way, postfeminist culture performs a double movement—acknowledgement and repudiation. Similarly, "participation" in participatory culture is often defanged or diluted through its commercial articulation. When deployed for marketing purposes, participation is acknowledged, but it is used for ways that secure profit and capital rather than creativity and innovation.

Both postfeminism and participatory culture insist on an investment in "voice," whether that be the voice of a producer, consumer, or both—and Nick Couldry (2010) has written about this extensively in his *Why Voice Matters*. Yet, as Couldry argues, this investment in voice is often steeped in liberal individualism. We might think about shifting our site of analysis a bit, and attending to what Kate Crawford (2009) calls "practices of listening" online. She argues that listening might allow us to "analyse the various affordances of online attention, and to assess the ways in which we listen also shape us as late modern subjects" (p. 525). Attending to how we listen, as well as how we speak, online might give us a way to think about what we are participating in and for whom.

**Francesca Coppa:**

Sarah, I found it particularly useful to think about the connections between this new participatory culture and postfeminist culture—that really resonates with me. It made me try to think of different models for participatory culture that might show some kind of genuine structural difference in the market. One of



them that strikes me is the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*, which is a fictional community radio station.<sup>2</sup> Offered for free, it looks to me like something that could have been invented by an artist trying to imagine Henry's definition of transmedia's best self: radio, so giving fans an opportunity to imagine the visuals individually and collectively, which they have done with gusto; central characters who are queer and of color; an open invitation to make other things for and in the world (I wouldn't even say "an invitation to fans," because, in a way, we're not fans; we're explicitly framed as citizens of Night Vale); and an (apparently so far genuine) willingness to integrate these other artistic engagements into the broader world of Night Vale. Community radio is kind of an interesting way to think of voice, especially when the job of that voice is to reflect and inform the citizens. (In that way it also reminds me of the best of punk culture in the twenty minutes before it was commercialized.)

But the other thing is, right now this top-rated podcast doesn't look the same to me, commercially, as other things in the market. They're making some money from some live shows and selling shirts, but primarily there's a donation button—preserving at least some gift culture, not only in terms of giving money but giving art, translations, and so on. The commerciality seems affected by participatory and local culture, and fan-citizens are doing as much of the producing and entertaining as the podcast is. This does seem different than other commercial engagements with participatory culture, which seem more like co-optations or imitations (though we'll see how long that will last). I suppose someday we'll get the big-budget version of Night Vale. Mass media's remakes of popular culture always remind me of the end of *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, when they redo the film we've just seen with James Brolin as Pee Wee and Morgan Fairchild as Dotty.

**Jonathan Gray:**

What I'd like to add to this wonderful conversation is an interest in deconstructing notions of what creativity is at the corporate, commercial level. If we want to consider how regular people are creative, and what chances are afforded them to participate in the production of culture, a danger is that we automatically assume what it means for the "special" people of News Corp, Disney, and so forth to create. As Nick Couldry (2003) notes in his superb work on the "myth of the mediated center," media corporations have been remarkably successful at ritually creating ideas of their labor as somehow magical. As vitally important as it is, therefore, to study grassroots, everyday practices of creativity, there's a risk that such terminology automatically cedes the realm of the special, the magical, and the better to News Corp, Disney, and company.

Thus, let's also take away Rupert Murdoch's pixie dust by challenging the rhetorics of authorship and industrial creativity that he and his colleagues create. The Great White Man Theory of Creativity (aka Auteur Theory) is in particular need of being disassembled. One way to do so is to consider paratexts and their own importance in the creative process. No text is capable of creating its meaning in and of itself. They are all assisted in some cases, or outright usurped in others, by the various paratexts (and intertexts) that surround them, whether official or fan or anti-fan made. Paratexts close off certain meanings, shunt a text toward other meanings, and generally jostle it around. They might seemingly work

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<sup>2</sup> <http://commonplacebooks.com/welcome-to-night-vale>

against The Work, they might fight over a text's meaning, or they might need to be brought in line with each other. In each situation, though, the paratext can craft meaning.

If meaning is one of the ultimate products of creativity, paratexts are vital sites of creativity and key parts of *the* creative act. Every text has many creators and authors, including the people who make the trailers, the *Entertainment Weekly* writer who interviews a cast member, and the fan vidder who remixes scenes and images. The author is disarticulated from a notion of origin and genesis; instead, textuality is always happening and becoming, authored along the way by a large cast of others.

I don't intend this to be a naïve celebration of everyone being the author. Rather, after noting the existence of multiple authors, the required next step is to look at how these authors are networked, to look at techniques of control, to see how collaboration is managed, and to look at how authors and sites of authorship are legitimated via rhetoric, legalities, or otherwise. How is it that Matt Groening and George Lucas can still be considered by so many as "The Authors" of *The Simpsons* and *Star Wars*, especially when they have been absentee landlords for many years? What work has been put into nominating them as authors, and how has that work delegitimated other authors of those franchises? (See here the work of my colleague Derek Johnson, 2013, in *Media Franchising*.)

Once we can take these steps, I'd hope this clears some space for the revaluation of everyday, grassroots creativity. Let us vigorously challenge the myth of magical corporate creativity and authorship so that we can distinguish between acts of creativity and acts of legitimation (even when they occur at the same time in the same place by the same people). While News Corp, Disney, and company are masters at legitimation, they need as much help at creation as do bloggers, fan producers, folks with Tumblrs, knitters, LARPerS, and X-Acto knife-wielders.

**David Gauntlett:**

I'd just like to throw in a note of surprise at Jonathan's assumption that an interest in everyday creativity means that one is assuming that the big media industries are producing the superior creative work ("the special, the magical, and the better," indeed!). I suppose I can only speak for myself. In my enthusiasm for everyday creativity, I could perhaps be accused of suggesting that homemade media is more special, magical, and better than corporate product, but hardly the other way around. As more people make and share their own creative things, and inspire each other and have conversations around them, the products of the big media industries begin to look not so much better or worse but simply irrelevant to meaningful human creativity and communication.

**Jonathan Gray:**

I didn't say that "an interest in everyday creativity means that one is assuming that the big media industries are producing the superior creative work." Indeed, I said it was "vitally important" to study this type of creativity. My concern is with the framing and terminology, whereby the moniker of "everyday" risks making these types of creativity sound like they're hum-drum, banal, and C grade/average work, in comparison to creativity that doesn't need the adjective, which may be suggested to be the more

impressive, noteworthy, A grade/excellent work. And I deliberately spoke of this as a "risk" and a "danger," not as a foregone conclusion, since I don't at all mean to suggest that mere use of the word will lead to a framing of these acts of creativity as such; rather, my concern is that we put effort into steering clear of that. I'm not wagging a finger at people's (nor specifically your) use of the word *everyday*, much less at anyone who studies such forms of creativity; I'm just wary of how that terminology may carry a lot of unintended baggage.

**Francesca Coppa:**

Word to so much of your comment, Jonathan: I did a review of Paul Booth's *Digital Fandom* (2010) for *Transformative Works and Cultures* (Coppa, 2012), where I made a similar argument about the need to question author and auteurship, though I'm not willing to move to this new idea of the collective author—ceding authorship and name-checking creative fans—until *everyone* is out of the pool. I get very suspicious when authorship gets disregarded just when the mechanisms start to exist for women and minorities to become authors. And as I chided Paul, I notice that all the academic work talking about collective creativity always makes sure to cite the academic sources properly! So name-checking and canon remains important in *some* contexts.

I've always found Marjorie Garber's work (2003) on amateurs versus professionals to be useful; a lot of grassroots creatives are amateurs the way Olympians are—that is, doing first-rate work for love—and a lot of professionals are hacks. Mostly that's allowed me to talk about the absolute ridiculousness of auteurship when there are seven minutes of film credits, or when the significance of editors, filmic or literary ("Hi, Sally!"), is known, not even going into your own wonderful work on paratexts, and the ways in which context is collaborative and creates meaning. In theater, where I came out of, it's critics who make the play.

**Nancy Baym:**

Like Sarah, I have come to feel that the term *participatory* doesn't do justice to what's most intriguing about contemporary cultural production. I don't think a center-to-periphery model works either. Even conversation, as David offers, falls short, although it is much more in line with my own thinking. I haven't found a word that works better, but *participation* feels too hierarchical.

When we remain stuck in language of production and consumption, of producer and consumer, and even of texts and paratexts, it's hard to pose questions about circulation and flow that get beyond back and forth to the wild, messy, unexpected, unmapped, and unknown tangle of paths that materials take as they move across the Internet, television, books, films, games, off-line encounters, markets, gift economies, and so on. Bakhtin's (1986) thoughts on how utterances are always "filled with others' words" (p. 89) remain prescient in grappling with how communication builds worlds through circulation rather than authors who speak texts that are then consumed and acted upon in some kind of participation. Gerlitz and Helmond's recent piece (2013) in *New Media & Society*, mapping flows of what they call "the Like economy," opens a door that needs a stampede of communication scholars running through it.

I agree with Sarah that this occurs within cultural contexts steeped in power dynamics. But let's not imagine that the people producing cultural materials in the media are inherently powerful. Music is replete with tales of people who made amazing things to be left penniless while those in the middle profited. We need to rethink who the intermediaries and institutions are, how they make some creations easy and others hard, and how they reward some players and not others. So I second Jonathan's call to rethink authorship, but let's rethink "media institution" as well.

Participation, as Francesca points out, is shaped by intermediaries and institutions that mediate the conversations. The media industries are not just Fox and CBS and the BBC; they are Google and Facebook and Twitter (and, yes, my employer, Microsoft). This makes the point Francesca raises about questions of code and terms of service absolutely critical for understanding the power dynamics of participatory culture. We also need to think through how media platforms embed politics, as Tarleton Gillespie (2010) and Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) have discussed, and how the needs of platforms skew what kinds of participation are possible and the terms under which participation happens. It's no coincidence that there are "like" buttons and "share" buttons, but not "dislike" buttons (Facebook shut down the app that made one) nor "empathize" buttons.

I'd also like to broaden the notion of creativity. Creativity is about making identities, relationships, and communities as much as arts or crafts. The growth of Facebook shows that people are engaged in "consuming" what their peers produce in ways that make the producer/consumer hierarchy far less relevant than the owners/users hierarchy. I don't know what fraction of Facebook posts or tweets have to do with traditional media products, but I'm willing to bet that plentiful as they are, it's a small share of the total activity. Mostly, people are participating in media by exploring and sharing musings and pictures taken by people they know. They are status updates, memes, vacation snapshots, comments left on each other's posts, and so on.

**Henry Jenkins:**

I have been struggling with how we reconceptualize the opposition between mainstream/commercial and grassroots/noncommercial culture for some time, in part inspired by the work of Yochai Benkler (2007), who encouraged us to think about a range of other kinds of professional and semiprofessional groups—nonprofit, academic, governmental, activist, religious—that produce media for their own motives and do not fit easily in the binaries we so often set up. Additionally, there is amateur media produced with the goal of entering into professional spheres as well as amateur media produced to serve subcultural communities and amateur media produced as purely personal expression (though we are less likely to see that posted online.) And the same cultural production might be motivated on multiple levels—a work produced as a gift within a subcultural community might at the same time be striving to see how many hits it might generate within a reputational economy and might be making money based on ad exposures within YouTube's commercial economy.

I fear some critical studies types hear the word *participation* and substitute the word *co-optation*. If we take the category of fans, which was my point of entry into discussing the larger field of participatory culture, the fan is always already engaged—in almost every case—with works that come from the

commercial culture, even if the fan seeks to build upon them in ways that are unauthorized and often seeks to construct a work whose motives are subcultural. From the start, I saw the fan as motivated by both fascination and frustration with the commercial culture—though some want to imagine fans as purely resistant rather than implicated in complex ways within the commercial culture that provides them with their raw materials. What fans produce also gets shaped by systemic factors ranging from the gender and sexual politics that have been oft discussed in fan studies to the racial politics that have often been conspicuously absent.

At the same time, fans, and other forms of participatory culture, build upon older traditions; these practices have a history, they have a set of collective norms and ethics, and they have a politics and an aesthetics, which is never simply reducible to the mandates of commercial platforms, and so we need some way of discussing the values/value fans bring with them as they engage with the opportunities and risks that networked communication poses for a set of practices that in almost every case had its origins in predigital forms of production and circulation. At a moment when Web 2.0 companies have developed a business model that seeks to capture and commodify the desire to participate, we should, indeed, be concerned, as Francesca suggests, with the ways that fans are being exploited for commercial interests, yet we should also recognize that fans have been among the most self-conscious of all groups about the ways they are being exploited and means to resist that exploitation.

Corporate power seeks to shut down or foreclose certain forms of unauthorized production and circulation through legal mechanisms, such as cease-and-desist letters, and fans respond through a series of calculations or trade-offs, which determine not so much what they create but through which channels they circulate it. Second, corporate power exerts itself through its control over the platforms whose affordances enable or block certain forms of participation, and fans have responded to this by creating their own platforms.

**Nancy Baym:**

I guess I want to pose the question "participation in *what?*" The term presupposed participation in *something*, and when we take for granted what it is that people are participating in without identifying or interrogating it, we find ourselves talking in terms of media and fans rather than culture and life. As I read Henry's thoughts, I completely agree, especially when he notes that these practices have histories, but I also feel frustrated because audience members were always participating. Soap fans were participating in conversations with each other that meant at least as much and often more than the TV shows. My soap opera work was about people participating in building community; soap operas were the excuse. We could say the soap producers were participating in peer community formation by providing texts for them, much as restaurants participate in conversations by serving meals and providing tables.

So when we say people (not just fans) couldn't participate before as they do now, we privilege a certain kind of participation activity that goes unstated but is somehow taken to be more valuable, real, and important than the participating they were doing before. What exactly are we talking about here?

We can say that participatory culture is about amateurs getting to make things only professionals got to

make before. The second half of that sentence may be true, but it also implies that what people did before wasn't really participating. So, again, participating in what? People were participating. People have always been participating; that's how culture continues.

**Adrienne Shaw:**

Nancy's question actually gets to the heart of what I was introducing earlier. People producing things outside of a recognized industry is not new. Outside of media in the way it is often framed, people have made creative things for fun, profit, sanity, or spirituality. What the celebration of digital distribution and internet-based productive communities does, perhaps, is signal a shift in the potential goal or role of these activities (certainly in addition to the "value in terms of the change it makes for the producers themselves" to which David points).

I think there are two key ways that participation is being articulated in a manner that speaks to the concerns several of us have raised: representation and, for lack of a better phrase, entrepreneurialism. I do not think that they are the *only* ways to think about participation, but these are two areas in which there is something new about participation and production flows.

When it comes to representation, there are ways that people produce media (sometimes paratexts and sometimes standalone works) that express marginalized viewpoints, experiences, embodiments that are not (sometimes legally cannot) be represented in mainstream media. These texts have *always* existed. The archiving and distribution of them are aided by digital technologies. Are they more accessible? Not to everyone. There is, however, an increased potential in the number of places these texts can go.

With that comes the increased possibility of those images being absorbed into mainstream media texts. Information about a web series about gay teens can gain traction on the Web and in the process come to the attention of a TV executive who thinks, "Hey, gays are popular. Where can we find some more gay content?" Here, I find the concentric circles of production particularly useful. In that shift of representation from the margin to the center, marginalized voices are often absorbed into a liberal (in the sense described by Sarah via Nick) form of representation where a single body comes to stand for an imagined community. The power dynamics involved here are of crucial importance, though, because there is a danger of exploitation, both in terms of the appropriation of marginalized voices and the channels of distribution (as both Sarah and Francesca address).

A major network can absorb marginalized voices, but there are many outlets (sometimes sanctioned by the industry, sometimes not) where audiences do not just reshape the preferred reading to invoke Stuart Hall (1997) but create meaning through media texts. That has been going on for as long as there have been audiences, as Nancy points out, but the increased spreadability of that meaning-making practice matters.

I confess to being very conflicted about the celebration of this increased recording of meaning-making practices. First, because of the surveillance it allows (something of particular concern to those whose race/sexuality/gender/religion/citizen status makes certain practices illegal). Second, because it opens up

those practices to co-optation. I think it is important, still, to the extent that people have access to more people who are also challenging those meanings via these technologies.

The other level at which it seems a lot of discussion of production and participation are discussed specifically is via that breaking-into-the-industry or making-money paradigm. This totally builds on Nick's myth of the mediated center and the special status media industries are accorded, as Jonathan describes. The qualities the industry values are the basis on which noncommercial work is judged. More than that, the myth that anyone can make it on the Internet belies a history of structural inequality at all levels of production. Further, it seems to expect media makers who want to make it in the industry that they need to prove themselves working on their own for free (or for bagels). I can't help but read that in relation to neoliberal logics. Particularly because, more often than not, it is people who are structurally unable to access these professions through other means. Culture is essentially about participation (in the sense of Geertz's, 1973, "web of meaning"), and, as such, it is inherently fraught with questions of power, access, inclusion, and exclusion.

**Jonathan Gray:**

As I read these provocative troublings of the concept of participation, I find myself wondering whether it could help to work out what it means not to participate and why people opt out. Some of these folks are assumed by the terms of discussion: There are those who don't have access and hence can't, those who sit atop their high culture perches and look down in disdain, and those who are imagined as proto- or would-be participators whose skills haven't yet been activated. But there may be others whose nonparticipation signifies other things.

Let's say 20 million Americans watch a TV show—a large audience, for sure. That means that more than 280 million didn't watch the show. Some don't have televisions, or the time to watch. Some are too busy telling anyone who will listen that they don't own a television or only watch HBO or AMC. Some haven't been introduced to the show. Some were simply elsewhere, doing something else, and didn't care. But we should also expect to find some who are angered by the show, who feel annoyed, disgusted, alienated, and/or excluded.

At root, I'm an optimist, like Henry, so I share the sense of excitement when I see people engaging public culture in cool ways. But I want to know more about those who aren't doing that, and for whom access, snobbery, or not knowing aren't the reason why. Celeste Condit (1989) had a retort to John Fiske's (1987) notion of polysemy in which she notes that being an active audience takes work, and that not everyone will want to put in that work. Turning to participatory culture, will some not feel it's worth putting in that work (even when they have the time)? Why? I'd love to know.

**Adrienne Shaw:**

Adding to Jonathan's point, sometimes there is a politics to that lack of participation. It is problematic to me that marginalized groups, for example, are called upon to make themselves knowable as audiences often via the production of subcultural texts (shameless self-promotion: I have a forthcoming book on this

issue). Not participating or producing can be read as a rejection of that oppressive responsibility. Opting out can include those creating texts as well—DIY punk is the example that springs to mind as a form of creation that rejects a lot of norms of production.

**Sarah Banet-Weiser:**

I absolutely second Nancy's question of participation in *what*. That's why I'm not really sure whether participatory culture makes the same kind of sense now as it did a few years ago. Perhaps we can think more specifically about the "culture" part of the concept. As Nancy says, there has always been participation. So what do we mean when we attach culture to this term? All of us have offered our thoughts about the ways in which participation is complex, contradictory, and isn't well captured by a binary frame. So perhaps we need to rethink what we are invoking when we say culture.

I really liked Francesca's comments about the Night Vale community, because that culture speaks to the different practices of consumption as well as production and really makes the case for how complex participatory cultures are. This kind of complex economic culture is left out in the commercial/noncommercial binary that is invoked so often. As Francesca points out, the consumption practices of the fan-citizens look different than, say, traditional audiences—precisely because consumption takes different shapes and has different goals depending on the economic culture in which it is embedded. But they are *both* economic cultures. Manuel Castells (2013) usefully categorizes different practices of consumption as "individual consumption" and "collective consumption," acknowledging that these practices often overlap—in both mainstream commercial and amateur productions.

I just don't think that, for me, participation gets at the cultural phenomena I'm interested in and in which I have great intellectual and political stakes. For me, it is a question of not only *what* we are participating in, but for whom and for what goals, aims, and so on.

**Henry Jenkins:**

So far, we've seen robust academic critique of concepts such as "community" or "public" or "audience" or "subculture" to describe what kinds of social spaces are emerging around and through our participation, but, as a consequence, we don't have a shared vocabulary to describe what people think they are participating in. All cultures are participatory, yes, but power relations set limits on how we participate, who gets to participate, and what we get to participate in.

Keep in mind that my own first use of the term "participatory culture" was in *Textual Poachers* (1996), which described a largely predigital fandom, so I don't think networked communication brought these forms of participation into being. Networked communication has made it possible for people who share interests and identities across geographic distances to interact on a more regular basis. Some forms of social connections have strengthened, some shared practices have emerged, and we have seen some kinds of expansion in who gets to participate in these exchanges. Moreover, the Web offers shared spaces, where different subcultures/communities/whatever are interfacing in new ways. We can thus see rapid innovation and diffusion at the intersection between groups that were once closed off from each other. At



its best, this communication between groups may allow for people to discover important commonalities in their experiences and perspectives.

Arely Zimmerman (2012) has been looking, for example, at the DREAMers, undocumented youth who are seeking to change U.S. immigration policy and who have been producing confessional videos where they come out as undocumented. One function of these videos is to help undocumented youth find each other given they are often closeted even in their own communities. A second is so that they can share their stories with other potential supporters who may not have ever knowingly talked with someone who was undocumented. None of this requires massive scale circulation, but there is a real shift in how one spreads messages or content that is possible at the scale of 1,000 to 10,000 viewers, which would be unimaginable before.

Nico Carpentier (2011) makes a productive distinction between participating *in* and participating *through* a platform. So YouTube is not a space that allows the public much participation in its own governance and has certainly failed to produce any kind of civil discourse through its own platform. Yet my colleagues here at USC (Thorson et al., 2013) have been tracing the use of YouTube by the Occupy movement and have found tens of thousands of videos that circulated there at various scales of visibility for many different purposes. Occupy did not have that same degree of access, say, to Fox News, which suggests to me a need to make distinctions between different kinds of corporate control and constraint on collective expression.

As we turn to the issue of nonparticipation, I find myself drawn back to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger: "As a place in which one moves towards more-intensive participation, peripherality is an empowering position. As a place in which one is kept from participating more fully. . . . It is a disempowering position" (1991, p. 36). For me, the struggle toward a *more* participatory culture is a fight for the widest possible access to the means of cultural production and circulation and to the skills and social infrastructure needed to use them effectively in pursuit of one's own personal and collective interests. I fully agree that the refusal to participate can be its own kind of political statement. The same can be said of choices we make about how visible we want to become and which levels of culture we want to participate within. Each of those choices means giving up something—privacy, control over your own data—versus the potential to exert some kind of influence in the largest conversations within the culture. The same would be true of where people choose to participate, whether they seek to join a fully commercialized site such as YouTube, whether they want to engage with an Archive of Their Own (where they control more fully the mechanisms and policies), or whether they seek to friends-lock their contributions so that it only communicates on a highly localized level.

■ ■ ■

### Biographical Notes

**Sarah Banet-Weiser** is a professor in the School of Communication at the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism and the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity. She is the author of *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (1999), *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (2007), and *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012). She is currently the editor of *American Quarterly*.

**Nancy Baym** is a principal researcher at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, MA, and a visiting professor of comparative media studies/writing at MIT. She has written about fan–artist relationships, online audience community, digital media and personal relationships, and qualitative methods for Internet research. She is the author of *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, *Internet Inquiry: Conversations About Methods* (co-edited with Annette Markham), and *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community*.

**Francesca Coppa** is professor of English at Muhlenberg College and a founding member of the Organization for Transformative Works, a nonprofit established by fans to provide access to and preserve the history of fanworks and culture. She is currently editing a fan fiction reader and writing a history of fan vidding for the University of Iowa Press.

**David Gauntlett** is professor of media and communications, and co-director of the Communications and Media Research Institute at the University of Westminster, UK. He is the author of several books, including *Creative Explorations* (2007) and *Making Is Connecting* (2011). He has created several popular websites and YouTube videos and has worked with some of the world's leading creative organizations, including the BBC, the British Library, and Tate. For almost a decade, he has worked with LEGO on innovation in creativity, play, and learning.

**Jonathan Gray** is professor of media and cultural studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is author or editor of numerous books, including most recently *Television Studies* (with Amanda D. Lotz), *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, and *A Companion to Media Authorship* (with Derek Johnson).

**Henry Jenkins** is currently the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California and formerly the co-director of the comparative media studies master's program at MIT. His recent works include *Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture* (with Sam Ford and Joshua Green) and *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick for the Literature Classroom* (with Katie Clinton, Jenna McWilliams, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, and Erin Reilly). His first book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, was just released in a 20th-anniversary edition.

**Adrienne Shaw** is an assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies and Production at Temple University. Her research and teaching focus on popular culture, the politics of representation, technology, cultural production, and qualitative audience research. Her primary areas of interest are video games, gaming culture, and gender and sexuality studies. Her forthcoming book, *Gaming at the Edge* interrogates how and why the representation of marginalized groups matters in games.

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