

## Section Two: Introduction

# Participation and Media

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Participation is a highly fluid and contested notion, or a concept that can be called – following Laclau and Mouffe (1985) – an empty signifier. In practice, this means that – as Pateman (1970: 1) puts it – ‘the widespread use of the term [...] has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; “participation” is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people’. It is tempting to see this process of the emptying of the signifier participation as a neutral event or as an accident of history. A more critical analysis shows that this is actually an ideological process, which aims (or threatens) to remove the more radical meanings from the concept of participation.

Attempts to counter this softening-down of (the signifier) participation have been based on the construction of dichotomized systems of meaning. In these dichotomies, specific forms of participation are described as ‘real’ and ‘authentic’, while other forms are described as ‘fake’ and ‘pseudo’. In the field of so-called political participation, for example, Verba (1961: 220–221) points to the existence of ‘pseudo-participation’, in which the emphasis is not on creating a situation in which participation is possible, but on creating the feeling that participation is possible. An alternative name, which is among others used by Strauss (1998: 18), is ‘manipulative participation’ [1]. An example of an author working within the tradition of participatory communication who uses terms as ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic participation’ is Servaes. In his *Communication for development* (1999), he writes that this ‘real’ form of participation has to be seen as participation ‘[that] directly addresses power and its distribution in society. It touches the very core of power relationships’ (Servaes, 1999: 198; my emphasis). Moreover, this shows how crucial power is to the definition of participation, as is also emphasized by White (1994: 17):

*It appears that power and control are pivotal subconcepts which contribute to both understanding the diversity of expectations and anticipated out-comes of people’s participation. (My emphasis).*

Other strategies consisted out of the construction of hierarchically ordered and multi-layered systems. A seminal example is Pateman’s (1970) book *Democratic Theory and Participation*. The two definitions of participation that she introduces are ‘partial’ and ‘full participation’.

Partial participation is defined as:

*A process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only* (Pateman, 1970: 70; my emphasis),

while full participation is seen as:

*A process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions* (Pateman, 1970: 71; my emphasis).

Through the UNESCO-debates on the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), the distinction between access and participation was defined. While their definition of access stressed the availability of opportunities to choose relevant programs and to have a means of feedback, participation implied ‘a higher level of public involvement [...] in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems’ (Servaes, 1999: 85, see MacBride, 1980). Within Communication Studies, attempts have been made to introduce the notion of interaction as an intermediary layer between access and participation (Grevisse and Carpentier, 2004). From a Policy Studies perspective, complex typologies have been developed to tackle all variations in meaning – see, for instance, Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (1969). Also illustrative in this context is the OECD’s (2001) three-stage model, which distinguishes information dissemination and consultation from active participation.

When focussing more explicitly on the media’s role, and the importance of media participation, we need to distinguish between participation ‘in’ the media and ‘through’ the media, in a similar way that Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) distinguished between democratization ‘in’ and ‘through’ the media. Participation ‘in’ the media deals with the participation of non-professionals in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media decision-making (structural participation). These forms of media participation allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life and to put their right to communicate into practice. Second, these forms of micro-participation are to be considered important, because they allow people to learn and adopt a democratic and/or civic attitude, thus strengthening (the possible forms) of macro-participation. Verba and Nie (1987: 3) briefly summarize this as follows: ‘a participatory polity may rest on a participatory society’. Although mainstream media have attempted to organize forms of audience participation (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Carpentier, 2003; McNair *et al.*, 2003), especially alternative media have proven to be more successful in organizing more deepened forms of participation in the media (Girard, 1992; Downing *et al.*, 2000; Rodriguez, 2001).

Participation ‘through’ the media deals with the opportunities for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in the public spheres, thus, entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation (Couldry, 2003). Starting from a broadly defined notion of the political, consensus-oriented models of democracy (and participation) emphasize the importance of dialogue and deliberation and focus on collective decision-making based on rational arguments à la Habermas. Other authors (Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 1994) stress more conflict-oriented approaches. They point to the unavoidability of political differences and struggles and see the media as crucial sites for struggles for hegemony (Kellner, 1992: 57). Both consensus- and conflict-oriented models enable to stress the need for citizens to participate in these processes of dialogue, debate, and deliberation.

Both participation ‘in’ the media and ‘through’ the media see the (mass) communicative process not as a series of practices that are restrictively controlled by media professionals, but as a human right that cuts across entire societies. When the right to communicate was originally proposed in 1969 by the French civil servant Jean d’Arcy, it aimed to broaden the right to be informed, which is embedded in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although the definition of the right to communicate was highly debated, Jim Richstad and Michael Anderson wrote in their 1981 book on *Crisis in international news*, that the right to communicate included (amongst other rights) the right for active participation in the communication process. A necessary condition to remain an effective and inextricable part of the right to communicate is the protection of participation from signifiatory reductionisms. These reductionisms try to remove the politicized notion of power balances from its meaning and attempt to conflate participation with interaction. As an endangered species, this key notion needs – more than ever – our attention, care, and protection.

## Notes for Section Two: Introduction

- [1] The well-known rhyme, which according to myth appeared some time around the beginning of the 1970s on a Paris wall, also refers to this dichotomy between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ participation. ‘Je participe, tu participes, il participe, nous participons, vous participez, ils profitent’. (Verba and Nie, 1987: 0)

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