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Media and Participation. A site of ideological – democratic struggle

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The book provides an interdisciplinary overview of the topic utilizing both extensive overview, systemisation and quotation of references as well as practical case studies (Jan Publiek, Barometer, Temptation Island, Video Nation, RadioSwap, Kinoautomat). The book is divided into seven chapters plus introduction. Some chapters focus on analysis and definition of participation phenomenon itself, some are more focused on media, with options of participation in media and through media. The overview and analysis is mostly verbal, with very rich and serious quotations. There are few simple models described and few pictures. Data are very rare, just for some basic information in case studies. References used are those of theoretical matter, political matter as well as official documents of international organizations (World Bank, UNESCO, NWICO, ...)

If one talks about interdisciplinary approach, absence of economic analysis should be mentioned, e.g. some basic cost benefit analysis, I/O model, look at the entry barriers, market structures etc. It is obvious economics influences media and behaviour of the players fundamentally. Explaining some topics and interactions without touching economic incentives and consequences is questionable

The author is primarily and dominantly ideologically oriented on the more “leftist” theories and references. Naturally, the author’s personal view and analytical conclusion are those in favour of the “maximalist” concept of participation. It would be interesting to compare and to complement this comprehensive book by a fundamental text from an opposite, “rightist” point of view, analysing opposite theories and authors. Otherwise, the full picture must be necessarily incomplete.

Chapter one provides an overview of democratic theory and participation answering the question, “What is the definition of participation?” The typology of the minimalist concept versus the maximalist concept of participation shows that the minimalist concept is closer with respect to the structures and in some malicious forms could be totalitarian, while the maximalist concept enables wider direct participation with more creative influences of the public sphere, with less respect to institution and with some extreme anarchistic forms. One should mention that border is not strictly defined (e.g. maximalist concepts in totalitarian theories and practice). We can read an overview from classical Marxism to recent theories, Arnstein’s classical participation ladder included. Soviet concept is described (narodnost etc), nevertheless not finished by later doctrines (perestroika).

Special attention is given to the special area of museums and arts. TV talk shows as well as new media/internet studies are mentioned, although not fully up-to-date. E.g. the most dynamic phenomenon of social networks as a pure symbol of participation is not elaborated.

Chapter two uses the Keyword Power. Various interactions between participation, power, control, materiality and ideology are quoted. A substantial part of the chapter is occupied by Jan Publiek and Barometer cases, raising the post-political and ethical-democratic questions. Although any case of such type is demonstrative and usable, some cases from non-democratic public spheres and media would be very useful and transparent to demonstrate.

Chapter three is characterised by the Keyword Identity. Again, Jan Publiek's case together with the Temptation Island case are used. Some quotations and conclusions (sexual content e.g.) represent probably a parallel focus providing little value added to an open question of identity as both a theoretical and practical unsolved problem.

Chapter four has the Keyword Organization. Different types of media are presented with the characteristics and preferences. Here, the new organizations and facilities like Ourmedia, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace are briefly mentioned. As a key case study, the BBC's Video Nation is analysed. Questions about ordinary people and cultural diversity are raised. The second case is RadioSwap as an attempt to construct a new community alongside the other communities.

Chapter five focuses of the Keyword Technology. This obvious interaction (new technologies enable more, direct and creative participation with powerful results) is briefly conceptually analysed. Topic technology and society is very robust and autonomous. Nevertheless, the author introduces a forgotten case of Czechoslovak Kinoautomat successfully operated in the sixties. The question is how this interesting, but specific entertainment tool can help to analyse such fundamental topic technology - society - media - participation. There are very detailed quotations from scenarios in the text, together with detailed pure technical description of a used Kinoautomat machine.

Chapter six has the Keyword Quality. In the conceptual introduction, typological models of quality are listed and characterised. Again, 16Plus and Barometer case studies are used followed by discourse on democratic and professional, as well as negotiated quality discourses.

The book is accompanied by an unusually comprehensive list of references. Some of them represent an interesting reminder of historical sources. Some of them enable a rare opportunity to quote, as the author is able to use references in Russian and Czech languages to utilise analysed topics in detail. On the other hand, the number of internet references is limited. One could expect more research on newest web sources, as they are crucial for the key topic Media and participation.