



Participatory Knowledge Production 2.0: Critical Views and Experiences

Sally Wyatt , Jess Bier , Anna Harris & Bas van Heur

To cite this article: Sally Wyatt , Jess Bier , Anna Harris & Bas van Heur (2013) Participatory Knowledge Production 2.0: Critical Views and Experiences, Information, Communication & Society, 16:2, 153-159, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2012.746382](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.746382)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.746382>



Published online: 28 Feb 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 779



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Sally Wyatt, Jess Bier, Anna Harris & Bas van Heur

PARTICIPATORY KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION 2.0: CRITICAL VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

In recent years, the role of social media (also referred to as Web 2.0, user-generated content, participation, and crowd sourcing) in nearly all aspects of daily life has hardly been out of the news, and it has also become a fashionable topic amongst scholars from many disciplines. Social media can be defined as web-based applications, which facilitate the exchange of ideas and information through their 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly 2005). Popular and scholarly accounts of the participatory potential of new digital technologies are usually enthusiastic. Twitter, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia are all lauded for their capacity to harness people's creativity and knowledge, and for their potential to challenge traditional hierarchies in politics, science, and the media. It is claimed these web-based applications have facilitated political uprisings, the solution of scientific problems, and the emergence of hitherto undiscovered talents in music and the arts. Others question the validity of such claims, pointing to the dangers of hoax, misinformation, narcissism, and loss of privacy. Sometimes, the stories are very serious, such as the controversy about the YouTube video about Joseph Kony and child soldiers that 'went viral' in March 2012. Sometimes, they provide voyeuristic entertainment, as in the case of the bigamist and his two families who found out about each other via Facebook photographs and connections. Social media are used in areas where citizens and fans have long participated such as politics and popular culture, and in domains where the boundary between expert and amateur is more tightly guarded such as medicine, science, and scholarship. The decentralized architecture of social media and the internet more generally challenges traditional knowledge authorities and hierarchies. Questions subsequently arise about whether lay inclusion helps to 'democratize' knowledge formation or if existing hierarchies are re-enacted online. The resulting fascination with new forms of knowledge production may signal a desire for change in

those traditionally hierarchical and increasingly commercialized institutions that produce and distribute knowledge.

In this special issue, we bring together a collection of articles that critically examine these claims. The articles are based on empirical research in different domains, including an online encyclopaedia, games, art, health, and policy-making in urban sustainability. One of the advantages of bringing such disparate domains together is that it reminds us that participation or crowd sourcing mean very different things across these domains, and even within domains. For example, clicking ‘like’ on the Kony video is a somewhat different level of political engagement than making and uploading the video itself.

The authors of the articles also come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (including medical sociology, geography, political science, media studies, and science and technology studies), allowing us to see how different disciplines have dealt with these questions both in the past and again now with the spread of social media. ‘Participation’ is a term that is much used (Surowiecki 2004; Jenkins 2006), and it has a long history in political theory, human geography, sociology, and design. But there is surprisingly little specificity about its meaning when used together with social media (for exceptions to this generalization, see Carpentier 2008; van Dijck 2009). Geographers have tended to be much more critical than their colleagues in other disciplines, perhaps because geographic information systems have a long history of participation, and scholars have had time to assess the long-term consequences. Within political science, ‘political participation’ is the usual term to describe the involvement of citizens, though engagement is also used (Zukin *et al.* 2006), with differences captured by the choice of adjective. Thus, civic engagement is contrasted with political engagement to capture more voluntary, bottom-up activities.

The articles presented here shed light on four sets of questions:

- How does participation vary across social groups and across spheres of activity? Are different subjectivities being created by various forms of participation?
- How does knowledge itself change as a result of greater participation? Can different types of participation be identified, more or less active and engaged?
- How does the architecture of participation (O’Reilly 2005) shape the possibilities for participation? Do all Web 2.0 platforms live up to the promises?
- How does academic work from different disciplines inform how we think about participation, and participatory governance?

Participation has long been seen as one of the hallmarks of digital culture (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), but the articles presented here remind us not to confuse the potential for participation with what is currently happening. We need to distinguish between participation as an action that millions of people now engage in every minute of every day from the consequences of those very

diverse forms of participation for science, politics, and culture. In addition to the empirical and theoretical questions listed above, we need to ask the normative question of whether ‘participation’ is always good or to be desired. We also need to remember that hopes about the participatory promises of technologies have accompanied all new media, at least since the printing press.

In the first article, René König focuses on Wikipedia, one of the most celebrated successes of participation and the wisdom of crowds, in which people work together to produce entries on a variety of topics. Drawing on insights from the sociology of knowledge, König examines the German-language Wikipedia entry for the 11 September 2001 attacks and the related talk pages. Alternative accounts emerged that contradicted the account presented by established authorities. These views collide on the talk pages, thus providing an opportunity to examine the role of experts and lay participants in the process of knowledge construction on Wikipedia. He focuses on how the different contributors negotiate ‘what actually happened’ and which knowledge should be represented. Knowledge which is not verified by external expert authorities is excluded or relegated to a separate page labelled ‘conspiracy theories’. In this case, lay participation did not lead to a ‘democratization’ of knowledge production, but rather it re-enacted established hierarchies.

In the second article, Karin Wenz turns to another popular site of participatory culture. She investigates ‘theorycrafting’, the name given to a practice that some dedicated members of gaming communities undertake. It is a process of reverse engineering in order to understand better how the design of the game, and its underlying algorithms, structure the gaming experience. Players produce knowledge to share with one another, and to develop tools for improving playing skills. Drawing on Aristotle’s notions of *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*, Wenz analyses theorycrafting as a form of the scientification of game play that can increase some players’ control over the game as well as control over other players.

Payal Arora and Filip Vermeulen explore the art world, a very different cultural form from games. In the art world, expertise is crucial to the evaluation of the quality and economic value of works of art, but art institutions are also under pressure to use social media to reach out to new audiences. Arora and Vermeulen adopt a historical perspective and examine how art experts in the past used media, such as catalogues, to produce knowledge about art and to establish their claims to expertise. This historical perspective enables the authors to move beyond the present-day hype about the democratising potential of new media, in an arena where elite expertise continues to hold sway.

The fourth and fifth contributions both deal with health, another field where professional expertise has been challenged by technical developments. Samantha Adams examines websites where patients rate and evaluate healthcare services as mechanisms for transforming citizens into monitors of public services in order to generate knowledge about the everyday performance of professionals and

institutions. Using post-panoptic theories about the use of information and communication technologies in daily life, she questions how such sites, and the knowledge they generate, relate to existing surveillance structures. Adams focuses on a Dutch site, *Zoekdokter* (DoctorSearch), which encourages patients to evaluate individual healthcare professionals by name and location. Adams draws attention to the ways in which the site facilitates multiple types of surveillance that occur simultaneously and in different directions.

Anna Harris, Sally Wyatt, and Susan Kelly examine another development in the health arena. Direct-to-consumer genetic testing makes it possible for people to send a sample of their saliva to an internet-based company in order to discover genetic information about themselves. After they have done so, they may be enticed to engage in various forms of 'participatory' practices, including taking part in genetic research by providing phenotypic data. Harris and her colleagues analyse the research activities of 23andMe, one of the largest and best-known of these companies. The company's research is based on what they term 'participant-led' research methodologies, which combine consumers' genetic information and self-reported data in the form of completed online surveys. The authors argue that the notion of gift exchange is used to draw attention away from the free labour which drives the profitability of the companies selling this service, and offer a timely analysis of emerging participatory practices.

The final contribution focuses on the development and use of participatory tools for creating and managing knowledge in the area of urban sustainability. Karin Pfeffer, Isa Baud, Eric Denis, Dianne Scott, and John Sydenstricker-Neto examine how recent developments in geographic information and communication technologies have extended the opportunities for participatory spatial knowledge production, use and exchange. Pfeffer and her colleagues identify a number of problems, including the reliability of user-generated content, social exclusion due to dependence on technology, and the interpretation and implications of digital maps. Drawing on examples from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they provide a heuristic framework for assessing the extent to which participatory spatial knowledge management tools can be instrumental on several fronts. They argue that important issues related to accountability, empowerment, control and use of knowledge are not adequately addressed.

Before closing, we would like to provide some of the background to this special issue. It grew out of a low-key, low-budget workshop that we hosted at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University in March 2011, with the same title as this special issue, *Participatory knowledge production 2.0: critical views and experiences*. This drew upon our own research, and we felt it would be of interest to people from a range of disciplines, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the Faculty where we were all working at the time.

The technology we were discussing was not invited, except to enable the remote participation of Jad Baaklini from Lebanon. Authors were not allowed

to use PowerPoint as all texts had been pre-circulated, and the level of security of the University's wireless facilities make it difficult for guests to gain access to the internet. One participant expressed disappointment at not being able to tweet during the workshop, but others realized that once they had overcome their initial anxieties of not having internet access or tweeting capabilities, they could engage in the workshop more fully (although there was a twitter discussion about the workshop before and after the event, using the hashtag #pkp20).

In addition to the editors and authors of the papers included in this special issue, the following people attended the workshop: Smiljana Antonijević, Jad Baaklini, Ruth Benschop, Philipp Dorstewitz, Graeme Evans, Ike Kamphof, Matthijs Kouw, Nicolle Lamerichs, Bernike Pasveer, Isabelle Peters, Jason Pridmore, Cornelius Puschmann, Ana Raus, and Katrin Weller. Matthijs Kouw and José Cornips helped us to organize the workshop. We are very grateful to all of them for their contributions.

After the workshop, we began to explore publication options, and were delighted that the editors of *Information, Communication and Society* were interested in helping us to prepare a special issue. We thank Brian Loader and Sarah Shrive-Morrison for their help and patience in guiding us through the process. We are also grateful to the many reviewers who provided generous and detailed comments on the papers that were submitted, but who must remain anonymous. They may or may not be grateful to us for a decision we made after the first reviews came in. One of the features of the iCS online submission system, only visible to guest editors such as ourselves at a relatively late stage, is that we too were asked to engage in the increasingly pervasive request to review everything from books, to hotels, to doctors. We were asked to rate the reviewers on the quality and the timeliness of their reviews. We were very happy with the reviewers we had selected, but we feared that if we made this too well known to the iCS system they might be overloaded with requests. So we too engaged throughout this process with the potential consequences of judgements as to the level and quality of participation in this special issue itself.

References

- Carpentier, N. (2008) 'Introduction: blurring participations and convergences', in *Participation and Media Production: Critical Reflections on Content Creation*, eds N. Carpentier & B. De Cleen, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, pp. 1–15.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Trans. B. Massumi.
- van Dijck, J. (2009) 'Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 41–58.

- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York.
- O'Reilly, T. (2005) 'What is web 2.0: design patterns and business models for the next generation of software', [Online] Available at: <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html> (16 November 2012).
- Surowiecki, J. (2004) *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*, Random House, New York.
- Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K. & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2006) *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life and the Changing American Citizen*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Sally Wyatt divides her time between the e-Humanities Group of the Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences, and Maastricht University. Her research focuses on digital inequalities and on the everyday uses of web-based technologies by people looking for health information and by scholars engaged in research. Together with Roma Harris and Nadine Wathen, she has edited two collections, both published by Palgrave: *Mediating Health Information* (2008) and *Configuring Health Consumers* (2010). Address: Maastricht University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands. [email: sally.wyatt@maastrichtuniversity.nl]

Jess Bier is a PhD candidate in Science and Technology Studies at Maastricht University. In her research, she analyses the ways that segregated landscapes influence the use of mapmaking technology in Jerusalem and the West Bank. She has a background in geography, anthropology, and postcolonial theory, and overall her work investigates the spatiality of the production of knowledge. She previously conducted research on intersections of migration, Arabic language, and everyday economic life in New York City. Address: Maastricht University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands. [email: j.bier@maastrichtuniversity.nl]

Anna Harris is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society (Egenis) at the University of Exeter. She has a background in medicine and medical anthropology/science and technology studies and conducts research on the social life of medical technologies, workers and institutions. Her current research with Sally Wyatt and Susan Kelly focuses on the emerging direct-to-consumer genetic testing market. Address: Maastricht University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands. [email: a.harris@maastrichtuniversity.nl]

Bas van Heur is an Assistant Professor of Social Geography at the Department of Geography of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium. His main research interest is in the politics of urban development and the role of research in

engaging with and analysing urban development strategies and their effects. He has a background in cultural and media studies and geography and has published on the creative industries, cultural policy and urban development for a wide variety of journals and publishers. *Address:* Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Department of Geography, Faculty of Sciences, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium. [email: bvheur@vub.ac.be]
