Participatory and Networked Cultures

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Introduction: Participatory and Networked Cultures

Participation has become one of the key central concepts of contemporary media discussion. Increasingly, the focus is not only on alternative media productions, but on the use of networked digital media. These digitally networked forms shape the practices of contemporary participatory culture, but they must also be embedded in their historical context. The concepts of participatory cultures and networked cultures are therefore closely linked. It is not the media and media productions themselves that are seen as participatory and emancipatory, but rather the cultural practices in which various media are used and produced.

Participatory Cultures and DIY Cultures

The term "participatory culture" fundamentally signifies the active participation of people in cultural and media productions, which they independently shape, publish, and disseminate. Through this civil society engagement, actively decentralized networks and communities are created. The term is widely associated with US-American media scholar Henry Jenkins, who argued that the shift in media cultures, together with the spread of the internet, new media technologies, interactive platforms, and user-generated networks, increases democratization and participation: it was now—at the convergence of old and new media—possible for the average audience or consumers to participate within (media) culture (Jenkins, 2006). This sparked a variety of discussions around active audiences, peer-to-peer production, co-creation, "prosumer," "produsage," and "presumption." Sometimes the term "participatory culture" is used in connection with the terms "cultural participation" and "cultures of participation," as well as with digital developments and processes.

Theories on participatory cultures have been developed interdisciplinarily in cultural studies, media and communication studies, political science, art history, gender studies, media pedagogy, and social movement research. A particular emphasis has been placed on fan culture ("fandom"), popular and DIY (do-it-yourself) culture, alternative media production, online media and digital communities, as well as on pedagogical implications.

Participatory cultures are embedded within multilayered historical developments and are extremely heterogeneous in their expressions, contents, forms, and contexts, as well as in the people who produce them, their motivations and goals. They stand in

relation to many social, artistic, and political movements. Because of this multiplicity of expressions, we speak of "participatory cultures" in the plural.

In general, the theoretical concept of "participatory culture" represents a further development of the seminal work done at the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which was founded in 1964. Scholars at the Centre such as Stuart Hall (who was also long-standing director and who developed the important *Encoding/Decoding* model) analyzed in the 1970s and 1980s current and recent everyday practices, youth cultures, popular culture, and power. This open cultural concept of cultural studies provided the basis for subsequent pivotal studies of fandom and popular media. Analyses of various cultural practices emerged with the aim of focusing on media consumers as active, critically engaged, and creative, as well as placing media appropriation in everyday contexts. They built on the shift in cultural studies to audience ethnographies. Some scholars—such as Jenkins—are avowed fans of the practices they analyze and combine their perspectives as academics with those of subjective fans in the form of "Aca/Fen" ("Fen" as the plural of "Fan"). Fan cultures are thus seen as a central component of participatory cultures and are also analyzed in their gendered dimension.

A sketching of the theoretical lines of development of participatory cultures in the context of digital developments was undertaken in 2013 in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*. The editors Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer J. Henderson worked out four phases of development: First, there was the phase of "Emergence" (1985–1993), in which the global communications landscape changed mainly through the widespread proliferation of computers and the emergence of "virtual communities" (Howard Rheingold). In the second phase (1994–1998), the main focus was on the transformations of the internet and the emphasis on a decentralized network society (Manuel Castells). Studies on activist zine culture and computer games have highlighted the central and participatory nature of forms of cultural expression that have hitherto been considered apolitical. The third phase of "Push-Button Publishing" (1999–2004) highlighted the simplification of publishing content on the Web (through such platforms as LiveJournal, Napster, MySpace, Flickr, and Facebook). Participatory culture was scientifically studied in two strands: in the form of mainly qualitative case studies on the online fan communities (e.g., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Hello Kitty, or Pokémon) and analyses of the patterns, connections, and technological endeavors of participatory culture. The fourth phase of "Ubiquitous Connections" (2005–2011) is defined as the emergence of YouTube and mobile phones as mini-computers and thus the possibility for new forms of citizen journalism, performative art projects, mash-up music videos, and transmedia releases. After the initial euphoria, hope for the potential of participatory cultures ultimately waned under academic analyses and attention was directed to the many challenges of the interconnected world. This sketch of the lines of theoretical development based on Delwiche and Henderson makes the individual phases clear, but gaps can be seen in the focus on a European and US perspective. In particular, Rodriguez, in her studies on community media, has focused her investigations on "citizens' media" (2001) and especially on women's self-produced community media and radio in Nicaragua, Colombia, Spain, and Chile, and also in Latin American communities in the United States.

Historically, participatory cultures and DIY culture have been closely interconnected in their development and their close relationships with social movements. In DIY cultures, as examples of participatory cultures, it is central that individuals or groups produce their own media, projects, and artifacts, and publish and disseminate them in activist networks. DIY cultures can be characterized by self-organization and activism, by a breaking down of the boundaries between consumers and producers and by nonformalized learning practices.

The starting point of DIY cultures lies in a deliberately alternative, subcultural, and anti-commercial attitude. In addition to the development of the amateur printing press in the middle of the 19th century, its beginnings are often described in Dadaism in the 1920s and in the various left and avant-garde art movements of the 1950s and 1960s (including the Situationists, and the Happenings of Allan Kaprow). This DIY ethos spread through the hippie movement and punk rock scenes. Since the 1990s, the formation of additional DIY cultures can be observed. In the context of feminism, the 1990s riot grrrl scenes developed a cultural activism based on doing-it-yourself, whereby art, cultural production, music, and skill-sharing were fused with political resistance and celebration, and the boundaries between organizer, participant, and audience became blurred. Under the motto "female self-empowerment" and DIY, festivals, concerts, exhibitions, and workshops have been organized and fanzines founded to counter the permanent underrepresentation of female musicians and artists with their own creativity and to vent their anger about existing conditions. Their political claims encompass feminist as well as antiracist and antidiscrimination perspectives. In the further development and international dissemination of the riot grrrl movement, a multitude of different DIY cultural-artistic and activist, feminist participatory cultures emerged.

Feminist DIY Cultures and Zines

Various feminist analyses have taken alternative media and cultural production and their networks into account and investigated the personal and political aspects and participation in society (Harris, 2004; Rodriguez, 2001). Many feminist alternative media producers position themselves within self-organized feminist DIY cultures and within feminism as a new social movement (Zobl & Drüeke, 2012). An integral part of a lively DIY culture are zines—ephemeral, self-published magazines. Zines are used for feminist networking and critical reflection by zine makers in different parts of the world, as evidenced by a vibrant transnational network of feminist zinesters and grassroots projects. Building a participatory, supportive feminist community and network is an often-stated goal of zine makers. A rhizomatic network of zine distros, mailing lists, message boards, and resource sites, as well as zine archives, festivals, exhibits, and workshops, is closely tied to a vivid DIY cultural activism. It is important to recognize that feminist zines are embedded in rich histories and are extremely heterogeneous. Feminist zine makers turn to self-publishing for a variety of reasons, but one of the main reasons is to create an alternative to the narrow and distorted representation of women, queer, and transgender people in the mainstream.

Even though queer-feminist zines claim to be feminist, antiracist, and in solidarity with women, LGBTIQ*, and marginalized groups, social and structural as well as

discursive exclusion mechanisms are nevertheless also in effect. The demographic group associated with queer-feminist zines is predominantly White, middle-class, young, and educated. It is therefore important to question such exclusions in continuous processes of self-reflection and to take an intersectional perspective in order to promote critical and anti-colonial practices.

Feminist Participatory Cultures as Informal Learning Spaces

The concept of participatory cultures has been included in media pedagogy in relation to the acquisition of digital media literacy and the creation of peer-to-peer learning environments characterized by informal learning. In the much-cited but also criticized white paper, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," which came out of the large US-based "New Media Literacies" research initiative (2006–2011), Henry Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison (2009) describe a participatory culture as a culture with a low threshold for artistic expression and engagement. As a result, the people who are perceived as active contributors and participants in cultural and media production are those who, in particular, act online and collaboratively, support each other in networks and communities, and share and pass on knowledge through informal mentoring.

The creation of peer-to-peer settings is important for learning in participatory cultures. This results in collaborative and noncommercial spaces characterized by forms of informal learning, as well as process-oriented and nonhierarchical working methods, activism, and civil-society engagement. For example, in DIY workshops—such as those at queer-feminist festivals and camps (Ladyfests, Grrrls, Rock Camps)—technical, artistic, and handicraft skills are conveyed through "learning by doing" and "skill sharing" with the aim of making one's own cultural productions and disseminating them via noncommercial networks, thereby subverting the established standards for "perfect," commercially oriented cultural productions. The workshops, in particular, play a central role as informal learning sites in which young people can exchange their ideas and experiences outside of formal (educational) institutions. These process-oriented and collaborative working methods, which, on the one hand, regard deliberate reflection and negotiation with the aim of reclaiming space as foundational, always require, on the other hand, the acceptance of potential conflicts and thus constitute a learning process that must be wanted by the participants. Fundamentally, in participatory festivals and events, identity and citizenship can be questioned, a critique of "consumer citizenship" can be practiced and collective forms of participation in politics and civil society can be tested.

Networked Cultures and Net Feminism

In recent years, participatory practices have continued to change and differentiate through digital media and its participatory networks. The term "cultures of participation" also refers to forms of citizenship that are of particular significance in movement contexts and media protests. It is important not to take the technological platform as

the starting point, but to focus on shared practices and cultures. Participatory processes are therefore always associated with acts of citizenship. Participatory communities use digitally networked media as a further platform for the exercise of cultural practices (see Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016). In more recent approaches, these forms and practices are mainly understood under the term "cultural citizenship." Klaus and Lünenborg (2012, p. 204) define cultural citizenship as "cultural practices that allow competent participation in society and includes the right to be represented and to speak actively." Diverse forms of such cultural and participatory practices are increasingly found in digital publics. These practices thus encompass various cultural expressions, which also include affective and performative dimensions. The affective turn, which inspired studies on performative publics, also took place in media and communication studies. Lünenborg and Raetzsch (2018) speak of "performative publics" to describe public articulations that cross different platforms and consist of constellations of different actors. This emphasizes the process character and calls the dichotomies into question, performatively expressing the fact that these publics are temporary and situational and form themselves through the media-mediated exchange of actors. These publics emerge beyond the traditional structures of social movements and institutionalized media. boyd (2010, p. 39) describes such publics as "networked publics," formed out of "spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks." As a result, the network character is emphasized, since different applications have to be analyzed in their interconnectedness rather that separately from one another. Papacharissi (2014) associates boyd's concept of "networked publics" with affect theories and describes such publics as "affective publics" in order to integrate feelings and emotions consistently. At the same time, digital publics are temporary and fleeting; Thimm (2017, p. 106) describes them as "mini-publics," which can be distinguished into "event-driven mini-publics" and "user-initiated mini-publics," which take the different contexts of origin into account and refer to single events or actions initiated by the users. At the same time, they are characterized by polymedial practices, as technical affordances and activist cultural practices can be seen in their interaction. In queer-feminist movement contexts, the use of various media platforms creates multifaceted and many-voiced publics. With digitally networked media, other forms and platforms for political activism and the exercise of citizenship have emerged. The increasing use of the internet in the 1990s and 2000s created euphoric views of the emancipatory potential of "new media." In the 1990s, Plant (2007) and Haraway (1991) designed utopias of a feminist cyberspace. This seemed to open up spaces for women and call the dichotomy between technology and gender into question. In addition to notions of cyberfeminism, possibilities for opening up feminist spaces on the internet were particularly emphasized. The creation of counterpublics made it possible to form a protected space for exchange and networking while at the same time opening up the opportunity to make demands of the hegemonic public beyond this internal exchange and call for a place in the public debate. In and through such counterpublics, "media at the margins" could be formed, with both the number of media and the number of margins left open-ended (see Rodriguez, 2017). Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of the internet for women's political networks and actors, as well as for the empowerment of women and girls, and have analyzed

their publics, which were viewed as counterpublics to a hegemonic public sphere. The increasing digitization and media convergence have inspired further research as the use of digitally networked media has become differentiated and especially as platforms under the (criticizable) concept of the "social Web," such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, have opened up further opportunities for use. Compared to the earlier, rather static use of the internet through homepages and forms of communication such as mailing lists, new forms of exchange, mobilization, and participation are revealed here. These interconnections, not only on the platform level, but also with regard to the commercial and noncommercial offerings and the technical affordances, in turn change the forms of participation.

Cultural practices of citizenship, which contribute to the formation of public spheres and open up new public spaces, are demonstrated by numerous digitally networked groupings. This increase of cultural activism and production on the part of female youth in recent decades has not only benefited from the more widespread use of the internet and transformations in media technology but also the influence of feminist youth cultures and the emerging "girl power" discourses. It has also been argued that the heterogeneous cultural spaces girls and young women create are characterized by processes of active cultural production, agency, and participation; hence, they could be seen as a premise of participatory democracy and active citizenship (Harris, 2004).

Over the past few years, hashtags and blogs have also created such temporary, event-related but also persistent publics that support participative processes. This "digital feminism" (Scharff, Smith-Prei, & Stehle, 2016) is an effective articulation of protest to draw attention to marginalized issues and demand public visibility. In recent years, it has been, in particular, hashtags against (sexualized) violence and discrimination of women that have been perceived as an effective protest. In addition to #aufschrei in the German-speaking countries, there are numerous hashtags around the world that draw attention to the discrimination of women and (sexualized) violence, such as #YesAllWomen, in response to a racist and misogynistically motivated rampage in Santa Barbara, United States, and #YesAllWhiteWomen, which has to date mostly dealt with the hidden experiences of violence on the part of women of color and trans persons (see Rodino-Colocino, 2014). Feminist hashtags therefore serve as a platform for collective protest and, by networking with other hashtags, blogs, and websites, as a network that can create a public through an emergent movement. Feminist blogs are also part of this digital feminism, or Web feminism, and are usually characterized by collaborative associations of feminists, such as the blog Mädchenmannschaft, in the German-speaking countries, and the English-language blog The F-Bomb. The published contributions and the respective positions are mostly the result of a common process (see Keller, 2013). Through the process of collective writing and exchanges with other bloggers, these blogs offer a proving ground to test feminisms and develop feminist ideas, as the interviews with bloggers from The F-Bomb make clear (see Keller, 2013). In and through blogs, solidarity for feminist perspectives is generated and actors are supported. Other platforms, such as Facebook, also have feminist groupings that can expand

feminist networks and create online communities. From these groupings on different platforms, a kind of "digital sisterhood" (Fotopoulou, 2017) can therefore also emerge.

Conclusion: Challenges and Problems

Participatory cultures make use of a variety of media, especially digitally networked media. This reinforces the possibilities of having a voice, raising it publicly, and articulating positions. This is likewise central to movement contexts, as it promotes the public visibility of queer-feminist issues and enables participation in public debates. Participatory cultures that are formed through queer-feminist movement contexts, and that have emerged from informal learning spaces and DIY cultures, serve the purpose of networking, an exchange of experiences; they enable solidarity and mutual support. However, the fluidity and temporality of such publics are also evident online; temporary alliances are effective for taking a position on a topic, as in the case of feminist hashtags, but they do not always result in long-term movements and movement contexts. One central critique of the conception of participatory cultures also refers to an optimistic, unquestioned, and thus simplified use of the idea of participation and of resistance. Not all participation in technological platforms is participatory (or resistant), nor are participatory processes always seen in terms of emancipatory and democratic participation ("The Janissary Collective" in Delwiche & Henderson, 2013). It is important to consider the commercial and capitalist forms of cultural production and, at the same time, not to implicitly associate participatory cultures with progressive politics. Concurrently, there is an appropriation of culturally emancipatory practices that use queer-feminist DIY practices but depoliticize them.

The concept of participatory cultures is anchored in emancipatory, resistant, and non-exclusionary contexts. Resistance itself plays a central role in queer-feminist movement contexts, in which power relationships and privileges are continually called into question. But even in movement contexts, there are exclusionary solidarities, and in queer-feminist movement contexts, privileges and exclusions become clear—often expressed in the lack of consideration for intersectional interconnections and the dominance of a White Western perspective. Participatory cultures are therefore to be understood as contradictory, conflictual, and contested spaces, which can also be permeated with inequalities and exclusions.

In conclusion, it can be maintained that, despite the aforementioned challenges, participatory culture and networked culture/publics can still create new spaces, new forms of articulation, and new visibility for queer-feminist movements and actors.

SEE ALSO: Fans and Fan Cultures; Feminist/Activist Responses to Online Abuse; Feminist Media Activism; Feminist Press; Gender and Media; Gender and Technology; Girls' Media Cultures; Online Women's Networks; Postfeminist Media Cultures; Women's Activism; Women's Blogs; Zine Culture

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