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2014

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15156>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hillrichs, Rainer: Haunted by participatory culture. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 3 (2014), Nr. 2, S. 189–195. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15156>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2014.2.HILL>

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Book reviews

edited by Lavinia Brydon and Alena Strohmaier (NECS Publication Committee)

Haunted by participatory culture

Rainer Hillrichs

Mirko Tobias Schäfer's *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011) and José van Dijck's *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) both approach online services and practices that emerged in the 2000s. The technological and business sides of these phenomena are commonly described as Web 2.0¹ and the user side, more controversially, as participatory culture. Coining the term 'participatory culture', Henry Jenkins suggested in 2006 that '[r]ather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands'. For Jenkins technological and cultural change also holds the promise for broader participation in the realm of politics.²

The aim of Schäfer's book 'is to reveal the constituents of the emerging participatory culture and provide an analysis that is not blurred by either utopian or cultural pessimistic assumptions' (p. 13). Actors in this culture are programmers and designers, technology 'itself', small and big businesses, various kinds of individual users and groups of users, journalists, scholars, and policy makers (pp. 14, 15, 16, 21). Schäfer is not attributing a principal role to either of these actors; analysing different phenomena, different actors, and configurations of actors stand out.

'[B]rashly', as he admits, he refers to the overall set of these interactions as "bastard culture" to indicate how the most heterogeneous participants and practices are blended together' (p. 11). This term seems to be meant as an alternative to the term participatory culture but not as a replacement. In fact, the title of the book and the title of a chapter aside, it appears only once in the text. Schäfer uses 'participatory culture' to refer to the phenomena under analysis throughout, also in the chapter titled 'Bastard Culture' which offers several case studies from 'participatory culture' (p. 77).

Schäfer argues that 'the enthusiasm over user activities' of 'cultural production'

on the Internet (p. 10) – among others by Jenkins (p. 44) and TIME magazine, which in 2006 declared 'You' the Person of the Year (p. 9) – is 'premature' and 'unbalanced' because it 'neglects the fact that underlying power structures are not necessarily reconfigured'. Established companies 'adapt' and 'change business models'. Moreover, 'new enterprises emerge and gain control over cultural production and intellectual property in a manner very similar to the monopolistic media corporations of the 20th century' (pp. 10-11). In contrast with the notion of 'the many wresting power from the few' (TIME 2006), Schäfer argues that 'the consequences of user activities constitute an extension of the cultural industries into the realm of users' (p. 11).

On the macro level Schäfer's approach is informed by Foucault's concept of the *dispositif*. Building on Foucault, Schäfer aims 'to describe a variety of formations of different relations between three domains': the domains of 'discourses', 'technology', and 'people and social use' (p. 16). On the micro level the approach builds on Latour's actor-network theory (p. 17). A broad range of 'media texts and artefacts' are in view, including hardware, software, and web interfaces, advertisements, and terms of service agreements. Schäfer also interviewed 'people affiliated with specific communities, companies or working individually' (pp. 21-22).

The chapter 'Promoting Utopia/Selling Technology' offers a convincing account of how the emergences of the World Wide Web in the 1990s and of Web 2.0 in the 2000s were accompanied and supported by a discourse in which politicians, entrepreneurs, activists, journalists, and scholars linked technological to societal progress. At the beginning of the chapter 'Claiming Participation', Schäfer zooms in on the concept of participatory culture as a way of making sense of online cultures in academia. He correctly assesses that Jenkins' focus on fan productions occludes the plurality of uses: '[p]articipation doesn't take place only in relation to existing media productions' (p. 44). More profoundly, he attests that a 'constant problem with the discourse about Web 2.0 and participatory culture is the ultimately rather myopic idea that participation by many users somehow equals democracy' (p. 45).

The chapter 'Enabling/Repressing Participation' convincingly illustrates how technology – computer, software, and the Internet – supports certain kinds of uses and discourages others. Principally open, participatory, and to a certain extent 'universal' (p. 56), digital technology is specified and delimited to be sold as a product in the marketplace.

Schäfer suggests distinguishing between '[e]xplicit and implicit participation' (p. 51). This distinction is introduced in the second half of the chapter 'Claiming Participation' and illustrated with case studies in the chapter 'Bastard Culture'. It appears to point to the generation of data as a result of the use of online services, which often happens without users' awareness. Schäfer refers to such unwitting

participation at times (pp. 51-51, 121), however, he is more interested in the extent to which user activities are channeled by or even the result of interface design. As he points out, the role of hardware, software, and web design and functionality in co-constituting participatory culture is often neglected (pp. 50-51). Accordingly, he defines explicit participation as 'driven by motivation, either extrinsic or intrinsic' and implicit participation as 'channeled by design, by easy-to-use interfaces and the automation of user activity processes' (p. 50). Participation that qualifies as explicit is further specified: it 'mostly refers to the appropriation of technology by users and the development of technical skills' (p. 52).

Schäfer's prime examples of explicit participation are unlicensed hardware and software modifications for Microsoft's Xbox gaming console (pp. 79-104). The prime example of implicit participation is the use of Web 2.0 platforms: 'participation in Web 2.0 occurs as an implicit aspect of clever software design' (p. 108). Not only the unwitting creation of data or clicking on related content offered by interfaces are implicit, but also '[u]ploading files to user-generated content platforms, such as Flickr' (p. 52). This may strike the reader as a simplification, taking into account that there are a variety of user operations offered by Web 2.0 interfaces which all require different degrees of engagement and which are put to use in diverse ways, as other research suggests.³ The argument would have to be supported by research into user practices on both 'sides'. However, Schäfer only conducts such research with Xbox users, not Web 2.0 users. A problem of the exemplary categorisation of Xbox users and Web 2.0 use is that the former is based on an analysis of transgressive user practices and the latter on an analysis of preferred use inscribed into interfaces (pp. 105-114).

Apart from its exemplifying function for the distinction, the case study of Xbox hardware and software modifications is compelling. In tracing the history of Xbox use in the early 2000s it reveals a fascinating interplay between various groups of users – from hackers to regular gamers, licensed and unlicensed third-party developers, and Microsoft. Schäfer demonstrates that hackers, to a certain extent, merely made the Xbox live up to its full technological potential, which had been limited by Microsoft for product marketing purposes. The smaller study on the modification of Sony's toy robot AIBO is equally compelling.

The chapter 'The Extension of Cultural Industries' describes and categorises business responses to media practices of participatory culture in terms of 'confrontation, implementation, and integration'. Confrontation refers to legal and other measures to 'preserve the conditions under which old media practices had functioned'. Implementation describes attempts 'of enterprises to successfully exploit new tendencies and take advantage of them', above all through their conversion 'into software design'. Strategies of integration, by contrast, aim 'at responsibly employing user activities' (pp. 126, 157). In spite of a few terminological fric-

tions, Schäfer's study is a rich and fascinating account of discourses, technologies, and user practices of participatory culture.

The aim of José van Dijck's book is to provide 'a critical history of roughly the first decade of connective media, relating the analyses of five specific platforms to the larger ecosystem and the culture in which it evolved' (p. 22). Social media and connective media are alternatively used and comprise 'social network sites', sites for 'user-generated content', 'trading and marketing sites', and 'play and game sites' (p. 8). Sites of the first and the second types are the focus of the study. Individual chapters are dedicated to Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Wikipedia. Toward the end of each chapter and in the concluding chapter the 'ecosystem of connective media as well as of traditional media' comes into view (p. 41).

The 'transformation' of 'a participatory culture to a culture of connectivity' is the principal development that is said to have unfolded (pp. 4-5). Between '2000 and 2005, most platforms thrived on the enthusiasm of users as they ran and operated their new virtual spaces, which were often regarded as experiments in online citizenship and a reinvention of the rules for democratic governance' (p. 15). Indeed, van Dijck suggests that 'many platforms, such as YouTube and Flickr, started out as community initiatives; they were carried by a group of video buffs and photo fans, respectively, eager to share their creative products online' (p. 12). Two developments characterised the transformation: user bases 'began to explode after 2005' so that 'the focus of most platforms was diluted. At the same time many platforms were taken over by big corporations or otherwise incorporated' (p. 15). Initially, 'corporate owners remained cautious about exposing their profit motives to user communities' (p. 15). The key to their business models became 'coding relationships between people, things, and ideas into algorithms', turning 'connect-edness into connectivity' (p. 12, 16). Connectivity, in van Dijck's terms, is the 'behavioral and profiling data' that users unwittingly produce: '[u]nder the guise of connectedness they produce a precious resource: connectivity' (p. 16). Such data can obviously be used to personalise advertising (p. 63), but it can also be sold to other companies (p. 48).

The transformation into the culture of connectivity entailed changes of sociality. The 'meanings' of words such as "like" [...] "social", "collaboration", and "friends" known from the 'offline world' and the participatory culture of the early 2000s 'have increasingly been informed by automated technologies that direct human sociality' for commercial purposes (p. 13). The same can be said about the meaning of 'sharing' (p. 19). Norms – for example, of sharing 'private information and accepting personalized advertisements' – have 'dramatically changed' (p. 19). Far from being mere changes of online sociality they have an 'impact' on people's 'everyday lives' (p. 23), since, toward the end of the period of analysis in 2012, 'the worlds of offline and online are increasingly interpenetrating' (p. 4).

In the methodical chapter, ‘actor-network theory’ and the ‘political economy of networks’ are specified as informing methods for the study of platforms and the overall system (pp. 26-27). Each platform is dissected first as a ‘techno-cultural construct’, with sections on ‘technology, users, and content’ and then as a ‘socio-economic structure’, with sections on ‘ownership status, governance, and business models’ (p. 28). Finally, it is put in relation with ‘the larger ecosystems of connective media as well as of traditional media’ (p. 41). This analytical model is applied to each of the five platforms.

Van Dijck provides an approach for a comparative study of websites that could inform others in a useful way, but it seems to be suited primarily for a synchronic analysis. Methods for a diachronic analysis – that is, for an exploration of changes over time – are not provided. A basic question for a historical analysis would have been: what sources do we have? The Internet Archive has been tracking three of the five platforms since shortly after they went online, thus there would have been primary historical sources to refer to. However, archived web pages are not referenced in the study and there are neither screenshots of archived pages nor of pages accessed during the time of research, which makes it difficult for a reader to follow the changes that are suggested. In fact, in many instances it is not clear what the foundation is for making a statement about a certain state or change of a platform:

YouTube’s initial logo was ‘Your Digital Video Repository’, denoting the platform’s original function as a container or an archive for home videos (Gehl 2009). The motto changed into ‘Broadcast Yourself’ soon after Google purchased the site in 2006 (p. 114).

Robert Gehl did not write about logos or mottos in his article, and looking up YouTube’s home page at the Internet Archive suggests that the initial motto was ‘Broadcast Yourself’, then changed to ‘Your Digital Video Repository’ in mid-June 2005, and back to ‘Broadcast Yourself’ in early August 2005⁴ – more than a year before Google bought YouTube.⁵ In the context of the aim of studying the history not of unrelated platforms but of a system of interrelated platforms, approaching them in their order of appearance would have been the most evident choice. However, they are studied in the following order: Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005), and Wikipedia (2001). Van Dijck chose to start with Facebook because of its ‘[s]ize and dominance’ in the system toward the end of the period of analysis (p. 45).

More generally, choosing these particular platforms to support the overall argument outlined in the introduction is perhaps a bit of a surprise, since they did *not* start out as ‘community initiatives’ (cf p. 12). Flickr⁶, Twitter⁷, and Wikipedia (p. 143) were all projects from startup corporations run for profit. According to Jawed Karim, YouTube was a ‘product’ developed by himself and two other former

PayPal employees who wanted to found their own ‘company’.⁸ Facebook was the product of individual entrepreneurial efforts that was incorporated soon after.⁹ Wikipedia has been run by a non-profit organisation, including members of the user community, only since 2003 (pp. 143-144). With the exception of Wikipedia all platforms were continuously owned and run by business entities, not by user communities. The for-profit corporations owning Flickr and YouTube were bought by bigger corporations: Yahoo! and Google, respectively. Those owning Facebook and Twitter over time merely became big corporations themselves.

Interestingly, whereas both Schäfer (pp. 42-45) and van Dijck (pp. 10, 16) criticise Jenkins’ term and concept as overly idealist, neither of them rejects the term altogether. In fact, each study closes with calls for participation. Schäfer demands and encourages the participation of users and scholars in societal and legislative debates and decision-making about issues like ‘copyright enforcement, software patents, surveillance technologies, data retention, privacy, as well as network neutrality’ (pp. 171, 174). A truly ‘participatory culture’ is invoked, ‘a technologically aware society where new media practices transform many aspects of everyday life, including politics, the economy, and public discourse’ (p. 172). Van Dijck calls for ‘awareness and vigilance’ with regards to ‘platforms and companies and how they operate’ and to changes of ‘social and cultural norms’ (pp. 174-175). She points to advocacy groups like ‘Bits of Freedom’ and the ‘Electronic Frontier Foundation’ (p. 175). She also demands a ‘sustained media education’, teaching not only technical but also critical skills (p. 176). Parents are encouraged to partake in their children’s media use, providing a ‘healthy diet of engaged enjoyment and pragmatic criticism’ (p. 176).

The term participatory culture will probably prevail in spite (or maybe because?) of its inherent idealism and conflation of technological change, cultural production, and political emancipation. Indeed, it would be a pity to completely give up the hope that technology could somehow partake in creating a better society.

Notes

1. O’Reilly 2005.
2. Jenkins 2006, pp. 3, 220-221.
3. See Lange 2008, pp. 87, 90-91; van Dijck 2013, pp. 94-97.
4. See page title (or <title> tag) on 28 April, 14 June, and 4 August 2005.
5. McDonald 2009, p. 387.
6. Graham 2006.
7. Miller 2010.
8. Karim 2006. See also Burgess & Green 2009, p. 76.
9. Rosen 2005.

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Female celebrity and ageing in the limelight and under the microscope

Julie Lobalzo Wright

Female celebrity is policed, under surveillance, and interrogated within contemporary culture, illuminating the gendering of not only celebrity but fame in general. There are political, historical, and social implications to this gendering of fame which are explored within celebrity studies – an area of film and media studies which continues to expand in new directions. The establishment of the journal *Celebrity Studies* in 2010 and its bi-annual conference, recently held in June 2014 at Royal Holloway, University of London, indicates the position of the journal as an authority on the academic subject of celebrity. This is further evidenced by