

Digital Keywords |

*A Vocabulary of Information
Society and Culture*

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Participation

Christopher Kelty

Participation is like a monument one passes every day—so routine, so common it’s hard to remember just why it is there, or what it memorializes. When we read a Wikipedia page, answer an Android phone, or log into Instagram, it is easy to, so to speak, *walk past* this monument. The experience of such mediated collectives, and the fact of their material existence, owes much to the keyword *participation*—to the many real hands and minds and hearts necessary to produce that image, that encyclopedia entry, that emotional experience of belonging. Even in a volume of digital keywords such as this, one can risk missing its centrality unless someone points it out, a bit like an annoying tour guide bent on civic pride, detouring away from charismatic concepts like *democracy*, *hacking*, or *sharing* as the crowded, unmissable, tout-ridden destinations at the heart of the city. But there the concept hides in plain sight, with its peculiar power: “One cannot say we did not notice [it]; one would have to say [it] ‘de-notices’ us” (Musil 1987).

Participation has lately been singled out as one of the key features of contemporary digital culture (Carpentier 2011; Delwiche and Henderson 2013; Deuze 2006; Jenkins et al. 2007) whether to signal the promise of something positive (a more egalitarian, just, democratic participation) or to signal a failure (a more exploitative, extractive, involuntary form of participation). From 1994 to 2015, the term found itself applied, with an intensely renewed vigor, to the Internet, new media, mobile technologies, and social media: from free software, to Web 2.0 to social media to the Arab Spring, *participation* was a keyword often invoked in combination with *Internet*, *democracy*, and *freedom*. In 2010, for instance, Malcolm Gladwell issued a *New Yorker* salvo suggesting that digital social media participation (the “Arab Spring” or the Iran “Twitter revolution”)

is only an attenuated and low-stakes version of “real” participation (such as the civil rights sit-ins and marches of the 1960s) (Gladwell 2010). This kind of move is a clear indication of the *aspirational* aspect of the word—it is almost always critiqued in the name of a better, more authentic participation to come. It is hard for anyone other than dictators, autocrats, and Bartleby to be against participation (Casemajor et al. 2015).

In terms of the last two decades of enthusiasm, utopianism, and criticism in and around things digital, the practices surrounding participation have played a central role. The rise of free and open-source software and user-led innovation explicitly focused on new forms of autonomous task choice and “Bazaar”-style (bottom-up) instead of Cathedral-style (top-down) organization of engineering and design (Chesbrough 2003; Hippel 2005; Raymond 1999). The label *peer production* singles out the new centrality of emergent collaborative forms of production and distribution of information goods over against hierarchies and markets of the past; Wikipedia is its emblem, but many other examples were paraded about as new ways of organizing production and consumption (Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008; Tkacz 2015). Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding evoked a new mode of aggregation or emergence of collective wisdom of participants used to solve problems, direct investments, or guide organizations and decisions. Fan fiction and “participatory culture” have exploded in popularity, moving from obscure, illegitimate, or subcultural spaces to mainstream, profitable media, and to new forms of civic involvement (Fish 2013; Jenkins 1992). And last but not least, the rise of “Big Data” alongside WikiLeaks and Snowden’s revelations of spying, secrecy, and surveillance has revealed the role of *involuntary* participation, where the very idea of *not* participating in the digital has become an impossible or at least uncertain alternative.

Participation, n.

Participation’s vagueness no doubt relates to its generality. As a word it is quotidian and unfussy:

- 1a** The action or fact of having or forming part *of* something; the sharing *of* something. In early use: the fact of sharing or

possessing the nature, quality, or substance *of* a person or thing. (*Oxford English Dictionary* online, s.v. participation)

Its earliest appearance in English is in the nominative form—but it is much more common as a verb: “to take part; to have a part or share with a person, in (formerly also of) a thing; to share” (ibid.). It clearly overlaps with the language of sharing, although more often as an action than as a thing. We share food, but we participate in dinner, or eating. Indeed, participation has many partial cognates: engagement, collaboration, cooperation, involvement, democratization, or sharing. But a key feature of the concept is that participation comes with an effect:

- 3 The process or fact of sharing in an action, sentiment, etc.; (now esp.) active involvement in a matter or event, esp. one in which the outcome directly affects those taking part. (ibid.).

The benefit or effect of participation is most often understood to accrue to the participant herself. For example, one receives an “educative dividend” of learning how government works by participating in it. But participation can also benefit the entity enabling it—as when a corporation makes “worker participation” a key platform in measuring productivity or efficiency; or when scientists can claim advances and discoveries that depend on the contributions of countless observers, as in astronomy or ornithology (Wiggins and Crowston 2011; Vetter 2011). Almost all contemporary digital production and communication involving participation invokes this “dyadic” meaning—designating a smaller formal entity that both provides and receives benefit from a much larger, inchoate public or market of participants (Fish et al. 2011).

Heteronym

A peculiar feature of the term *participation* is that the same word seems to have multiple, nonoverlapping uses. These “heteronyms” have their own distinct discursive and epistemic circuits covering a remarkably wide range of inquiries, experiments, and domains of

practice that are both practical problems to be solved and theoretical conundrums for scholars. The adjectival form, *participatory*, is an evocative and familiar case in point. It is the offspring of a particular time and place: the coining of “participatory democracy” in the 1962 Port Huron Declaration of the Students for a Democratic Society in Michigan, written by Tom Hayden (Hayden 1962). Participatory democracy, as a slogan, ascended rapidly, and the adjective has since been used to modify just about every form of human endeavor. Subsequently, one can find participatory art, budgeting, culture, design, economics, learning, management, medicine, planning, research, and urbanism, just to name the most obvious. *Participatory* shares some of the vagueness and rhetorical sloppiness of *excellence* in contemporary culture—signaling a nostalgia and a normative desire without risking any specific promises.

An early exemplar of participation as a practical problem is the creation of cooperatives starting in the 1830s and 1840s, and especially the famed “Rochdale Pioneers” and their principles of 1844, which include rules about membership, duty, sharing of resources through dividends, and the role of education. Such co-op style organizations have been a persistent, if periodic, feature of capitalist economies ever since (Cole 1944).

Participation gained a new momentum under the label *Industrial Democracy* in nineteenth-century Britain and America. Fabian socialists in Britain and early institutional economists in America (such as Richard Ely) understood participation as the extension of representative democracy from the state to the workplace, and possibly to all domains of life (Lichtenstein 1993; Derber 1970). This approach actualizes a specific idea of democracy (Lincoln’s “of the people, by the people and for the people”), wherein the everyday “participatoriness” of society is related to the overall inclusiveness and democratic nature of a particular state and sovereign people (as opposed to the “elite” theories of representative democracy discussed below (see also [democracy](#)). The piecemeal replacement of industrial democracy by unions and collective bargaining after World War I also exemplifies one of the tensions in participation—that it often denies the existence of antagonism and functions instead as a “containment strategy” rather than an acknowledgment of class struggle.

In the 1950s and 1960s, groups such as the Situationists or Allen Kaprow and his “happenings” inaugurated a tradition of participation in conceptual and avant-garde art (Frieling 2008; Turner 2013) that has received its most enthusiastic expression and critique since the 1990s, when “relational aesthetics” or “socially engaged” art dominated the activities of artists like Felix Gonzales-Torres, Tino Seghal, Helio Oiticia, Rirkrit Tiravanija, or Jeremy Deller (Bourriaud 2002; Bishop 2012). Here participation has evoked a particular question about the autocracy of the artist and the question of aesthetics and its compatibility with social change or activism.

Participation appears forcefully and even doctrinally (e.g., “maximum feasible participation” was mandated in the War on Poverty legislation) in the Great Society of 1960s America. Here, participation was extended beyond issues of legislation and popular will to the very administration of government. It moved beyond the hands of elite experts and into the very citizens who would build, for instance, “Model Cities” and transform communities (Arnstein 1969; Haar 1975). Beginning with these experiments, “direct citizen involvement” has expanded and bureaucratized administrative activities, perhaps most visibly in cases of environmental regulation (Beierle and Cayford 2002) and more recently in attempts to involve the public in science and technology policy (Jasanoff 2003; Fisher, Mahajan, and Mitcham 2006; Wynne 2007; Irwin and Wynne 1996; Rowe 2005).

In the wake of the “participatory democracy” enthusiasms of the 1960s, worker participation saw renewed attention and experimentation throughout the 1970s and 1980s, ranging from the novel experiments of “Scandinavian Participatory Design” (Asaro 2000), initially concerned with control over the introduction of technology in factories (and more recently the inclusion of client perspectives in the design disciplines), to the proliferation of management theories about “teams,” “total quality management,” or “high-involvement” workplaces designed to benefit both efficiency and worker “satisfaction” (Miller and Rose 1988; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Lezaun 2011).

As a last example, participation has been most thoroughly incorporated—and critiqued—in the domain of international development since the 1980s (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The United

Nations, the World Bank, and other nongovernmental organizations have advanced participation practices such as participatory rural appraisal (PAR), promulgated evangelically by Robert Chambers (Chambers 2011), beneficiary assessment in the World Bank, and more radically “participatory action research.”

Recipients of aid and development are awash in the language and legitimating promise of participation. Here participation comes to include aspects of research, knowledge production, and evaluation most explicitly and formally. The list of cases of practical and theoretical inquiry into participation extends even further—in science, in education, in regulation, in workplaces and organizations, and so on.

Concept

If the word is rarely remarked upon, then the concept is even less well understood. Philologically speaking, it has two roots whose overlap and connection are hazy.

Methexis

The first goes back to Parmenides, and to the Greek term *methexis* (μεθεξίς), which is also at the heart of Plato’s theory of forms. To participate is to be self-predicating (as analytic philosophers like to say): to be an instance of something, not a copy or a representation (see [mirror](#)). A beautiful thing participates in the idea of Beauty; something is red because it participates in the idea Red; a given internet meme participates in the idea Internet Meme. This usage is elaborated by the Neoplatonists (Proclus, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius), who articulate a tripartite relation of participant, participated, and unparticipable. The concept is worked over throughout medieval and scholastic philosophy and theology, especially in Thomas Aquinas’s work, primarily as a question of the being and essence of God and God’s action in the world; and to a lesser extent in Calvin’s theology as a problem of the believer’s participation in God through prayer. It slowly diminishes in centrality as modern philosophy progresses through the “classical age

of representation,” but is never abandoned. Indeed, the nineteenth century sees a “rediscovery” of the concept among the neo-Thomists of the time (McCool 1994).

A late exemplar of this conceptual use of the term is Malebranche, whose attempt to synthesize theology and rationalism, contra Descartes’s solution to the problem of knowledge, directly connects the older tradition to modern philosophy. Malebranche’s occasionalism investigates the problem of causality as the problem of the participation of God in the world of events. The question of causation is subsequently the philosophical battleground for the concept of participation—and one could perhaps be forgiven for drawing a connection all the way forward to the twentieth-century conundrums of quantum physics, where the participation of the observer in what she observes is debated. Indeed, the general concern with the effect of the observer on what is observed, from physics to the social sciences, is a legacy of this unfinished business with participation and causality, but the language of classical participation is not used in that debate—with the curious exception of physicist John Wheeler’s concept of a “participatory universe” (Kaiser 2011; Wheeler and Patton 1975).

Finally, one last case of *methexis* that has bedeviled modern scholarship is the philosopher-anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl. Levy-Bruhl used “mystical participation” to account for the difference between modern rationalist theories of causation and representation and those of “primitive mentalities” (Keck 2008). For most anthropologists, Levy-Bruhl, along with the theory of participation he espouses, is an embarrassment, of sorts; but the theory does have its defenders and considered reappropriations, from Evans-Pritchard’s “test” of the theory in his work on the Azande, to Stanley Tambiah’s adoption of the distinction between causality and participation (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Tambiah 1990), to a recent invocation by Marshall Sahlins in an attempt to explain kinship as “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013). In philosophy and sociology of science, the concept is clearly explored by Polanyi in his theories of personal knowledge and the tacit dimension of scientific practice—scientists participate in science; they do not represent it (Polanyi 1958).

Political Participation

The second aspect of the concept of participation is the more recognizable one. It is the one routinely subordinated to the concept of democracy: the relation between individuals and collectives. To participate in an election, to participate in a community, to become part of a governing body, and the like. This aspect comes with all the connotations of agency, autonomy, direct involvement, and the priority of choosing. The confusion with democratic participation is based on the common assumption that there are two forms of participation under democracy, direct and representative, the former of which is rejected and abandoned after the French Revolution, only to reemerge repeatedly (e.g., in Port Huron in 1962).

Although the term (and the word itself) is not always the central one, the concept is at the heart of Rousseau's theory of the general will, Mill's understanding of liberty, Tocqueville's characterization of American political life, and the Federalist papers' anxieties concerning tyrannies of the minority and majority. Enlightenment political thought mutates or hybridizes the theological aspect of the concept, sometimes retaining its ancient aspect (in Rousseau), sometimes abandoning it (in Mill).

In the twentieth century, there is a minor tradition of political theory, starting with Carole Pateman, that has argued for the distinctiveness of participation (Pateman 1976; Bachrach and Botwinick 1992; Mansbridge 1980). Often the concept is synonymous with small-scale, local, community organization, as in the case of Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright's "empowered participation" in cases such as local schooling or community policing, or in a high-profile case, "participatory budgeting" (Fung and Wright 2003; Wampler 2012).

Beginning with the coining of "participatory democracy" the question was put explicitly: what is a "nonparticipatory" democracy? Why was it necessary to redouble and emphasize the "participatory" aspect of a system already assumed to rest on participation? But for mid-twentieth-century political theorists like Joseph Schumpeter, there was only one kind of participation by the people: voting. Politics for Schumpeter was simply the "competition amongst elites for votes." This "elite democratic" theory, according to people

like Pateman, abandoned the classical tradition's emphasis on participation other than voting—participation in the public sphere, participation in deliberation, critique, and protest—for ideological reasons (a sociologically diagnosed “apathy” and the general suspicion about the ignorance of the people).

A “diarchic” theory of representative democracy, however, makes space for participation either through participation in the “will” of the people—elections and voting (where it is the subject of extensive research and intervention)—or as participation in free discussion in the public sphere: sometimes “deliberative democracy,” sometimes public spheres or “publics and counterpublics.” Under the theory of representative constitutional democracy, procedure and law circumscribe participation in order to both check and potentially guide officials in the government.

Such participation is not “direct democracy” however, because such a demand encounters a different problem: that of scale. Direct democracy is universally rejected as possible only at the small scale—the agora and the town hall where consensus decision making takes place. At any larger scale, it becomes literally impossible to incorporate the opinions and desires of everyone; representation is the only solution for modern large-scale democracies.

However, the actually existing schemes to create and implement participation under the label *participatory democracy* are rarely about legislation—they are more frequently about *administration*. They concern the carrying out of various aspects of government administration (or, in the case of worker participation, the organization and execution of tasks or jobs).

What's more, these cases of participatory administration are increasingly focused not only on deliberation and decision making, but also on the production of knowledge as such. The “wisdom of crowds” and the concept of “lay expertise” are both examples of this extension of participation to knowledge-production. In one sense this is a clear reaction to the administrative and bureaucratic reliance on expertise—with its history from the scientific management and Great Society debates of the early twentieth century. In another, it is also an extension of knowledge making to include ever-wider circles of expertise—as in “Mode 2” science, for instance (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001). For some, the implication

of this extension is troubling because it extends the function of democracy beyond the play of *doxa* (opinion) into the domain of *epistemè* (truth) (Urbinati 2014).

These two aspects of the concept combine in the present to form a kind of schizoid concept. On the one hand, it wants to signal the concerns with agency, autonomy, decision making, and involvement that are most central to the second sense described above: voice, agenda setting, direct democracy, deliberation, action. On the other hand, it also wants to signal the primary meaning of the term: to become-collective, to become an instance of a collective, not just one individual among others, but the very thing itself: social, collective, to share in the existence of many others. To belong.

Outside and beyond Participation

Participation today encounters a range of challenges from outside or beyond it (Marres 2012). Excess participation is frequently a problem, from websites overwhelmed by traffic to DDoS attacks, to the breakdown of communication or organization in protest movements, to the surprising proliferation of reality television programs. Involuntary participation is a frequent feature of modern technical platforms—something that emerges because of the constant demand to measure and monitor participation, often in order to display those metrics back to the participants as incentive or reward.

Finally, “nonparticipation” is often a question mark (Casemajor et al. 2015). Can one simply *not participate* in something, and what would it mean to do so? Despite the seemingly obvious connection, participation is not simply about inclusion or exclusion. The decision to include or exclude is a separate one from the demands or desires to participate, and it necessarily produces a different possibility: critique, denunciation, competition, sabotage, jamming. Participation is not about direct action; it is about belonging. One can belong and not participate, but one cannot participate without belonging in some way.

What might it mean that I participate in this volume, *Digital Keywords*, for instance? In this contemporary moment, participation is almost always coupled with “openness”—a demand, an offer, an

explicit structure that enables known and unknown forms of participation, as in the case of free software or Wikipedia. Shouldn't *Digital Keywords* be an open website on which "anyone" can contribute or update an entry, creating an archive of keywords argued over, updated, and extended by those who know them best, and who participate in order to establish an authoritative document? Though the editor didn't go that far, the entries in this volume were nonetheless vetted publicly on the *Culture Digitally* blog, soliciting participation in peer review, editing, conception, and critique. Participation is not always open to everyone—because not everyone belongs; participation is not inclusion. Indeed, *exclusion* also has its functions. Scholarship in science and the humanities relies on a certain kind of "constitutive closure," openness within bounds. Belonging comes with an expectation of participation, but a willingness to participate does not guarantee inclusion. So even though I offered this entry to the editor without being explicitly asked—as with many such volumes, inclusion and exclusion of contributions are often fluid and negotiated—it is possible only because I already belong, in some sense, to this closed community of scholars and writers and reviewers, and already know the format and expectations of such work. Just as contributors to Linux already know what an operating system is and does, or Wikipedia editors know what an encyclopedia entry should look like: we have all become (a) collective through participation (Kelty 2012).

I end with the starting point: it is easy to miss the centrality of participation. There is a particular monument that we—scholars and teachers, readers and students—pass by every day unnoticed: the so-called participation grade on our syllabi. For many of us, this placeholder has been copied from syllabus to syllabus for years, decades—probably copied initially from someone else's syllabus. We dutifully assign an arbitrary grade to each student in each term. For some teachers it reflects attendance and etiquette, for some discussion skills, for others a certain *je ne sais quoi*—the very thing students often resent in the grade. But it does not, I wager, genuinely reflect *participation*. The classroom—in particular, the grade—is not a site of democracy; there is an experience of "belonging" but not one voluntarily chosen; and perhaps most importantly, students are rarely *instances* of the class—the class, *as such*, seems strangely

the last thing on our minds, or our syllabi. It is the students' individual performances we evaluate, not that of the class as a whole. As a result we are trapped: between a participation that values the autonomy and voice of the individual, and one that values the experience of becoming-collective, of belonging. Properly speaking, participation is both of these things.

See in this volume: community, democracy, forum, internet, mirror, sharing

See in Williams: bureaucracy, collective, democracy, development, experience, expert, individual, labour, popular, representative, work

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