

## Introduction

*objects of citizen participation*

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# Introduction: Objects of Citizen Participation

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SABINE NIEDERER

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Discussions of participatory practices seem to thrive in a wide range of discourses: from citizen participation and DIY Citizenship (Ratto/Boler 2014), to the *Internet of Things* and its object-centered participation (Engeström 2005). What these practices and their theorization share is an effort to dissect the dynamics of participation. In this introduction, I would like to briefly address three concepts that look at the logic of participation: ‘Group Formation’ as theorized by philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour, ‘Material Participation’ as developed by philosopher and digital sociologist Noortje Marres, and ‘Object-centered Sociality’ by *Internet of Things* designer Jyri Engeström.

## 2 CONCEPTS OF PARTICIPATION

Philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour, in his influential book *Reassembling the Social*, describes how there are no groups without a large retinue of ‘group makers, group talkers, and group holders’ (Latour 2005: 32). Not only are groups reliant on these active group-maintaining actors, groups are also never a given *over time*. Latour states that groups exist merely in instances of group formation. For researchers studying groups and group participation, this means a focus on retrieving traces of these

cases of group formation. For instance, in a study of climate skepticism, I have studied the speakers at an annual conference of climate skeptics, their publications and related issues (Niederer 2013). Such gatherings and output are sources par excellence to study ‘actor language’, or the terminology used by members of the group, and interlinking (in terms of citations or co-authorship in publications, or in the form of hyperlinks on websites).

Philosopher and digital sociologist Noortje Marres has described the role of objects in participation around issues, arguing that material entities make an important positive contribution “to the organization of social, political, and moral life in industrialized societies” (2012: 6). In her book and previous writings she takes the case of the smart meters and other ‘green home’ technologies not as an example of the domestication of new technology, in the way Bruno Latour would describe public experiments as initiation rituals of technology making it into the home (Latour 1988 quoted in Marres 2009: 119), but as lightweight means of participation. In the case of climate change, the complexities of global warming do not need to be grasped fully in order to engage with the issue on a daily basis. Smart meters that reduce one’s footprint instead provide a low-threshold way to make the issue part of your daily routine. That these green home experiments are both highly empirical and mediatized (through blogs and other public media) makes them a suitable site and object of study for investigating the role of devices, settings, and objects in the organization and performance of public engagement and participation. They also remind us that the traces of group formation are to be found both offline (in a kitchen cabinet) and online (on a blog for green home tips). And just as groups only exist in instances of group formation, these issue objects also exist in a moment in time and can quickly transform or lose their political or normative charge (ibid: 21).

How objects in turn can be social, or rather at the center of sociality, is described by designer and engineer Jyri Engeström, active in the field of *Internet of Things* technology. Engeström describes how social media are successful not because they gather people, but because they offer shared objects to people:

“The fallacy is to think that social networks are just made up of people. They’re not; social networks consist of people who are connected by a shared object. That’s why

many sociologists [...] prefer to talk about ‘socio-material networks’, or just ‘activities’ or ‘practices’ (as I do) instead of social networks.” (Engeström 2005)

In his blog post, he illustrates this phenomenon of people connecting through a shared object with the success of platforms such as *Flickr*, where photos are shared objects, the social bookmarking site of *del.icio.us*, where people share URLs, and event-websites such as *Upcoming.org*. He is critical of *LinkedIn*, because it focuses too much on “the ‘social just means people’ misunderstanding”. However, the platform has been able to play with this by adding a competitive element, where the number of connections becomes a marker of reputation. This, he describes as the ‘surrogate object’ of *LinkedIn* (ibid.).

So as well as the traces of group formation and issue participation, we can study the objects that have been charged with issues, be they tangible objects for everyday use or the online content objects that are central to a social media platform. The papers in this section each examine participatory practices in connection to digital media objects, where apps and web platforms facilitate participation by offering socio-technical constructs.

### 3 PRACTICES OF PARTICIPATION

The contribution by Claus Pias (University of Luneburg, Germany) outlines the difficulties tied to adequately describing the rich relations between social organizational forms and material infrastructures that result from their heterogeneous inherent logics. Therefore, the first part of his keynote text asks “the question how connectives become collectives, or how they correlate”. Situating this in a broader context, Pias emphasizes the need for reflecting upon historical and methodological aspects, specifically in their relation to the theoretical concepts in question. The final part discusses the terms ‘transparency’ and ‘understanding’ within a historical context. Hence, putting the concept of participation to the test he concludes pleading to think digital cultures differently from a pre-modern perspective, to be more exact in “the terms of the Arcanum”.

Benjamin Beil and Pablo Abend (University of Cologne, Germany) study participation within the co-creative processes of computer game design in their paper titled “Editor Games: Scripts of Participation in Co-

Creative Media”. Editor games such as *Minecraft* and *LittleBigPlanet* offer their players the means to construct the game world themselves. Beil and Abend analyze such participatory practices by distinguishing between “implicit” participation (scripted by the game software) and “explicit participation practices” (carried out by the players themselves) and explore the range of participatory practices that define participation in editor games.

The paper “Multimodal Crowd Sensing” by Sebastian Vehlken (University of Luneburg, Germany) discusses crowd-sensing technologies and their conceptual and media-technological importance as well as their actual user practices and the challenges these bring. Building on theories of mass behavior and mass psychology, for instance escape and panic behavior in crowds, Vehlken explores the use of sensory systems and computer simulation software to detect and simulate crowds and their dynamics. (Not only the simulation of human crowds, but also animal crowds such as herds and swarms.) Lastly, he discusses multimodal crowd sensing, or the possibility to combine different urban sensory data, such as detecting GPS-location traces from mobile phones and crowd capturing by CCTV, in order to simulate crowd behavior and bring the idea of citizen sensing to the level of ‘the crowd as sensor’, thereby generating big data. Just like Beil and Abend, Vehlken distinguishes between participatory sensing and (top-down) “opportunistic sensing”, where crowds are sensed without the involvement of the individual users.

Closing this section is the paper “Micro-activist Affordances of Disability. Transformative Potential of Participation”, by Arseli Dokumacı (Concordia University, Montreal, Canada), explores a blind individual’s everyday life and investigates what new modes of participation emerge through his embodied engagement with mobile media and digital technologies. Fully intertwined with tools for accessing online content, the paper and its accompanying documentary (available at: [performingdisability.com/video/blindness.mov](http://performingdisability.com/video/blindness.mov)) powerfully demonstrate how a blind Internet user deals with the object-centrality of online communication through usability tools.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The entanglement of participatory practices with digital tools and (offline or online) objects benefits highly from concepts that capture the essence of what one participates with and the dynamics of such participation and group formation. As we have seen from the papers, not only does an issue or an issue-charged object organize group formation and participation, but it can also be a game, invisible security data infrastructures, or a specific set of usability tools for online communication that involve or create groups – knowingly or unknowingly.

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