

INTRODUCTORY NOTE NOTA INTRODUTÓRIA

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Why is participation relevant? What is meant when the concept is used? How can we ensure that participation is used in a responsible way, and rendered meaningful in the different spaces of society? These may be the most important questions that motivated us, editors of this volume of *Comunicação e Sociedade*, to propose a discussion on the noteworthiness of participation, and to invite scholars from across the globe to present their perspectives on what a positive and meaningful approach towards participation means to them. The result of this long process is this journal issue, entitled “Rescuing participation”.

This volume presents 10 articles, available in both Portuguese and English, produced by researchers from different latitudes that span the globe. Many come from Europe (Belgium, Portugal, United Kingdom, Spain and Sweden), but some come from Brazil and Indonesia. They present their perspectives on what they see as a positive – and pragmatic – approach to participation, in a variety of fields, including public consultations on environmental issues; participation within the scope of cultural policy; participation in elementary schools (as a media literacy project); in fiction/drama; and, ultimately, as a way to engage underprivileged and marginalized communities. Probably the only exception to this pragmatic view can be found in the last article, which brings high theory back to the table, by arguing that participation can be perceived as a (again, positive) talisman within contemporary social dynamics.

The first article in this volume, “Rescuing participation: a critique on the dark participation concept”, plays a specific role. Written by the volume editors – Nico Carpentier, Ana Duarte Melo and Fábio Ribeiro –, it reflects about the contribution of the thematic volume to participatory theory. Its starting point is the fluidity of the concept of participation, and its different meanings in a multitude of theoretical frameworks and academic traditions. Moreover, as a key concept, participation is also subjected to the waves of

fashion that characterize academia. In Communication and Media Studies, the concept re-gained popularity with the advent of Web 2.0 – and later with social media – condensing the optimism and hope for further democratizations of our societies. Unavoidably, disappointment about these impossible expectations followed, which now produces the risk of discrediting the notion of participation itself, through its alignment with the dark sides of human behaviour. This article aims to resist this movement, through two lines of argument.

A first line of argument is based on the discussions about the definition of participation, where the dystopian and alarmist approaches towards participation are seen to deploy very broad definitions of participation, which implicitly equate participation to all forms of social interaction. The more restrictive approach towards participation, that we propose and render explicit, allows emphasizing what participation is not. It also enables us to argue that participation is inherently ethical, and needs to be distinguished from its conditions of possibility, from its outcomes, and needs to be embedded in a democratic culture. The second line of argumentation is not so much critiquing the critiques, but is based on a more positive approach, analysing the areas of relevance for participation. Here, the three logics model – developed by Glynos and Howarth (2007) – is used to argue for the social, political and fantasmatic relevance of participation. The combination of these logics produces a wide-ranging list of arguments (namely the protective, agonist, human-rights, educational, integrative, *juissance* and drive arguments) that together allow to argue that participation still matters, and that it needs to be protected from theoretically-naïve alarmist critiques.

The second article in this volume, by Miren Gutiérrez, is entitled “Participation in a datafied environment: questions about data literacy”. The author discusses the consequences of the “datafication of everything” for participation, pointing to a context where the digital environment has become both an important location and an important enabler for participation. Instead of naively celebrating the capacities of the digital to enhance (or even “realize”) participation, Gutiérrez looks at its barriers and opportunities, where data anxiety and the working of the data infrastructure industry can be seen to impose serious limits. Gutiérrez mainly focusses on another barrier, namely the absence of data literacy, where data literacy is a significant condition of possibility for participation. Her key argument then becomes that – in this matrix of unequal power relations – participation can (and needs to) be rescued by demolishing these barriers, and by creating new spaces that allow ordinary people to enact their data agency.

In “Beyond the hindrances: experiences of public consultations and the possibility of ethics and relevance in participation”, Maria Fernandes-Jesus, Eunice Castro Seixas and Anabela Carvalho analyse the participatory capacities of public consultations, which have often been critiqued for remaining stuck into a tokenistic approach towards participation. To engage with this theoretical discussion, the article introduces an empirical approach and looks into a particular public consultation, that was launched in 2013 and dealt with the construction of extra-high voltage power lines connecting the northwestern parts of Portugal and Spain. In order to better understand the citizens’ narrated

experiences, the authors deploy the distinction between access, standing and influence, that was used by Senecah (2004). This distinction refers to three (interdependent) elements: the ability to speak about opportunities and choices, the legitimacy of the process, and the impact that these voices have on the outcome. The interviews and focus group discussions show a discerning set of critiques on the democratic nature of the consultation process, which was considered to be deceitful, dishonest and disrespectful. But, as the authors argued, the analysis of citizen voices also showed the expression of a desire for (genuine) participation, for instance, by formulating proposals to improve the participatory intensities of public consultations. These voices feed into the argumentation that there is a drive for participation and empowerment, that makes participation precious and necessitates its implementation in social practice.

Sofia Lindström Sol's article, entitled "The democratic value of participation in Swedish cultural policy", focusses on the field of culture and the arts, in order to study how (cultural) participation becomes articulated in this field. Even if Swedish cultural policies have a hegemonic starting point – the idea that culture is good – there are still different discursive articulations of this main idea. The author distinguishes two main discourses, namely culture-as-enabler (of good things) and culture-as-preventer (of bad things), a distinction that structurally impacts on how participation is defined, either as inherent or as instrumental, as a means in itself or a means to an end, or, in yet other words, as driven by a corporatist or by a populist model. In reflecting about the possible reconciliations of both models, and their possible complimentary nature, the author points to the struggle over the interpretation of participation, and thus its centrality in contemporary cultural policy discussions – where participation is clearly significant enough to be struggled about – but also to the difficult relationship between the fields of arts and politics, with their logics of cultural creation and governance. This then ultimately raises the question about who gets to decide on the nature, object and intensity of participation in the field of the arts.

Participation at the very young ages is at the centre of the article "Active citizenship and participation through the media: a community project focused on pre-school and primary school children". Here, Vítor Tomé, Paula Lopes, Bruno Reis and Carlos Pedro Dias – all from the Autonomous University of Lisbon (Portugal) – look into how educational environment and families enable children to become active digital citizens. The article is an analysis of participation in the "Digital citizenship education for democratic participation" project that took place in 2015, in a community in the outskirts of Lisbon. Using an action research methodology, the research studied formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts, assessing children's self-perception regarding citizenship and civic participation, but also the teachers' and guardians' perceptions. The analysis tracked the children evolving from non-participation to clear involvement, and from using traditional media to producing digital content. In their evaluation, the authors point to the importance of prior knowledge of the context, in order to allow for the adequate implementation of such projects, ensuring the involvement and commitment of educational authorities, the researcher's support for the teachers and the contribution of media professionals.

“The practice of mediated participation in Indonesian marginalised communities” by Kurniawan Adi Saputro, from the Indonesia Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta, and Bari Paramarta Islam, an independent researcher, deals with participatory film production. The article focuses on two case studies of marginalized communities in Indonesia: a community of believers in a traditional religion (*penghayat*) in Elu Loda and a community of disabled people in Salam Rejo. The two communities were observed during their participation in film workshops from October 2018 to February 2019, resulting in an analysis of the context of participation and how these practices enable and constrain it. Using interviews and questionnaires to study the relation between communicative practices and storytelling, the authors show how personal and collective narratives about the participants’ identities and histories emerged from the experience, and how these were structured by the communicative forms and genres, by the cultural context, and by the participants’ embeddedness in the community.

A case of non-human, hybrid participation – showing that participation matters because of its ability to bring in a diversity of voices – is described in “Participation and intangible cultural heritage: a case study of ‘Tava, place of reference for the Guarani people’”. In this article, Rodrigo Lacerda focuses on the process of recognizing intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as it has been institutionalized by Unesco (2003); it is a process that requires the participation of groups and communities in the identification, safeguarding and maintenance of their heritage. Analyzing the decade-long patrimonialization of the ruins of the São Miguel Jesuit-Guarani Missions, in Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), the author describes how the initial Guarani resistance to the process was gradually overcome by affinity and reciprocity in the relations between indigenous and non-indigenous agents, the valorization of the political potential of the heritage recognition process and the influence of spiritual aspects – namely the participation of non-humans actors – that, resulted in 2014 in the identification and registration of this cultural landmark.

In the article “Online platforms for citizen participation: meta-synthesis and critical analysis of their social and political impacts”, written by the Brazilian authors Rose Marie Santini and Hanna Carvalho, we can find a deep concern about the effectiveness of citizens’ inclusion in the public and digital sphere. Based on a very systematic literature review, focussing on the world-wide top journals included in Scopus and Web of Science, the authors analysed a large number of scientific articles. Their analysis allowed them to conclude, for instance, that citizens still struggle with their governments to get explanations on political strategies. For Santini and Carvalho, “power – and not technology – is the key obstacle for effective online citizen participation, whose barriers are nurtured by traditional political elite with little interest in building a transparent, inclusive and collaborative democracy” (p. 155). It is exactly this obstacle that prevents citizens from becoming involved, motivated and responsible.

Anna Zaluczkowska, in her article “Meaningful participation via negotiated narratives”, analyses the interactive and transmedia “Red Branch Heroes” project, set in Northern Ireland. This project, which involved the author, experimented with the creation of negotiated narratives, that agonistically incorporated a diversity of voices, including

the voices of authors, facilitators and coordinators. Interactive narratives, even if they often open the door for a certain degree of user involvement, can still be organised in a variety of ways, with many different ways of empowering participants, or not empowering them. The “Red Branch Heroes” project shows that – partially through the liminality of this genre and by carefully navigating through the complexities of contemporary surveillance society – opportunities for democratic multivocality and stronger participatory intensities can arise, which in turn can support the construction of more democratic and decentralized societies. But this project also demonstrates that scholars can actively contribute to the enhancement of participatory practices, thus signifying their relevance through the performance of practice-based research.

Finally, Ignacio Bergillos’s article, as mentioned before, takes a specific perspective. Less keen on using an empirical/pragmatic approach towards participation, the article “Participation as a talisman: a metaphorical-theoretical reflection about the conceptualization of participation” draws on a peculiar (and still positive) definition of participation, articulating it as an amulet or talisman, “symbolically empowering, phantasmagorical, dark, aesthetic or valuable” (p. 209). Ignacio’s effort is concerned with the social, psychological and fantasmatic dimensions of participation, which makes his contribution highly innovative, and even a bit provocative. But eventually, also Ignacio Bergillos concludes: “participation is articulated with power, participation invokes democratic values, participation is *authentic* or a *fetish*, participation is *symbolic* or a *myth*, participation requires a certain *ritual* that *empowers* and it *engages emotionally*” (p. 217).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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