Participation as a talisman: a metaphorical-theoretical reflection about the conceptualization of participation

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Abstract

Even if participation has been a key word in many research areas within Communication and Media Studies, there are still theoretical disagreements about its definition. The inevitable coexistence of different approaches to the concept has hindered the development of a unique theoretical framework. However, the efforts to conceptualise participation and to understand the increasing participatory practices in/through media in the last years has nourished the field of participatory communication and participatory culture with insightful ideas that serve as common ground for future research. Most of these ideas, while apparently contradictory, follow similar patterns and interests that could potentially lead to a shared understanding of what participation is or should be. This article tries to contribute to the objective of *rescuing participation* by theoretically reviewing the conceptual apparatus of participation in Communication and Media Studies and introducing the idea that participation can be conceptualized through the metaphor of the talisman. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this article argues that the way we conceptualize phenomena has an influence on how we perceive our practices. If we assume *to rescue* as an act to save from danger or evil, we should reclaim an understanding of participation as a powerful amulet. In that sense, the theoretical review of the conceptualizations of participation in the field of Media and Communication Studies that this article offers, will argue that participation can, at least partially, be structured, understood, defined and used in terms of a talisman. Specifically, the text will discuss four aspects that structure this metaphorical concept: participation as a fantasy, the authenticity of participation, the ritual of participation, and its (aesthetic) value.

Keywords

fantasy; media studies; metaphorical concept; participation; power

A participação enquanto talismã: uma reflexão metafórica e teórica sobre a conceptualização da participação

Resumo

Ainda que a participação tenha sido uma palavra chave para muitas áreas de investigação no âmbito da investigação no âmbito da Comunicação e dos Média, não existe ainda um consenso sobre a sua definição. A coexistência inevitável entre diferentes abordagens ao conceito tem travado o desenvolvimento de uma estrutura teórica única. No entanto, os esforços para conceptualizar a participação e para compreender as crescentes práticas participativas nos/através dos média, nos últimos anos, têm alimentado a área da comunicação e cultura participativas com ideias elucidativas que servem de denominadores comuns para investigações futuras. A maior parte dessas ideias, embora aparentemente contraditórias, seguem padrões e interesses

semelhantes que poderiam conduzir a um entendimento partilhado acerca do que é ou deveria ser a participação. Este artigo tenta contribuir para o *resgate da participação*, ao rever, do ponto de vista teórico, o seu aparato conceptual no campo da investigação em Comunicação e Média, e ao introduzir a ideia de que a participação pode ser conceptualizada através da metáfora do talismã. À semelhança de Lakoff e Johnson (1980), este artigo defende que o modo como conceptualizamos os fenómenos influencia a forma como percebemos as nossas práticas. Se assumirmos que *resgatar* significa salvar de um perigo ou mal, deveríamos reclamar um entendimento da participação como um poderoso amuleto. Nesse sentido, a revisão teórica das conceptualizações da participação no campo da investigação em Comunicação e Média que este artigo oferece irá defender que a participação poderá, pelo menos parcialmente, ser estruturada, percebida, definida e usada como um talismã. Mais especificamente, o texto irá discutir quatro aspetos que estruturam este conceito metafórico: a participação como uma fantasia, a autenticidade da participação, o ritual da participação e o seu valor (estético).

Palavras-chave
conceito metafórico; estudos dos média; fantasia; participação; poder

Introduction

If there is a need to rescue participation it is because, too often, within the framework of Communication and Media Studies, the concept has been taken for granted. Despite its centrality in many discourses, approaches and analysis, the use of participation in many contexts has ended up turning it into a broad and indefinite term. As Carpentier (2011a, pp. 353-354) puts it, "at some point participation simply stops being participation. Participation is a floating signifier that can take on many different forms. Potentially and theoretically it can shift in any possible direction". Similarly, Jenkins, Ito & boyd (2016) stress that "we need a more refined vocabulary for distinguishing between competing models of participation, especially at a time when the rhetoric of participation gets deployed by institutions which have done little or nothing to broaden who gets to participate". The conceptualization of participation is a complex task: even if we considered the manifold approaches that have been concerned with theoretically defining it, we could be accused of being imprecise, given the broadness of the term. However, it is important to defend, as Reifová and Svelch (2013, p. 264) wrote, that "rather than to dismiss the concept of participation, we need to invest it with meaning – to identify, examine, question, and critique it in its specific contexts". In that sense, the way we conceptualize participation will have important implications in the reflections of what we expect from the processes that make it possible.

This article enters the debate about the concept of participation by introducing the theory of the conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2004), activated as a way of understanding one idea, in this case participation, in terms of another, in this case a talisman. Metaphorical modelling as a research method is based on the idea that knowledge is structured through the process of establishing analogies between conceptual domains (Pärn, 2017). This text proposes the metaphor of the talisman as a way of understanding participation, in terms of an appreciated element that has been ritually invested

with beneficial and protective power. Participation, similar to amulets and talismans, has been defined as being (in)authentic, symbolically empowering, phantasmagorical, dark, aesthetic or valuable. Through a literature review, ranging from Journalism Studies to Cultural Studies, from Education Studies to Political Sciences, this text connects ongoing debates and theoretical proposals with the metaphor of the talisman, aiming to rescue participation by acknowledging it as a driving force and by recognizing the power it represents, its protective role and the importance of the rituals that shape it and make it authentic. The objective of this paper is to acknowledge and appreciate how theories that have dealt with participation consistently connect to the metaphor of the talisman and to demonstrate the relevance and value of this way of thinking participation. At the same time, it is important to point to the limits of the metaphor (which are simultaneously one of its strenghts), as the metaphor is grounded in an always imperfect equation, that necessarily entails a reduction.

The concept of talisman, with its origins in Greek and Arabic cultures, refers to a magical element which is thought to possess the ability to avoid evil and attract good luck. Amulets or talismans are symbols, converted sometimes into tangible objects. Human credulity then allows for the attribution of magical and extraordinary powers and virtues to these objects (Hildburg, 1951; Lecouteux, 2014). The use of talismans goes back to antiquity and their uptake through cultural exchanges has shaped the creation of these amulets. The possession of amulets, made out of different forms and materials, has been understood as a fundamental practice to battle against different forms of evil. Its use can still be observed in people from all economic and cultural backgrounds, although as a socio-cultural practice it has lost its aura of power. Supposedly, its effect can be curative or preventive, but its attraction has been also closely related to adornment, so that, in addition to protecting, talismans serve as a sign of identification or ostentation, and have an aesthetic value (Martín Ansón, 2005).

That duality of the talisman, as a symbol with potential power and as a decoration indicating status, is shared by many conceptualizations of the ambivalent and contradictory nature of participation. Arguably, the metaphor of the talisman also helps to understand the relationship between the "parody of symbolic participation" (Prado, 1986) and its "promise of empowerment" (Carpentier, 2016). At a time when so many media and communication platforms offer interactive affordances, we must ask ourselves if participation is a *fetish* object, disconnected from social reality, or whether it serves a meaningful purpose, also as talisman. At the same time, corporate decisions to invite audience participation can be considered *preventive*, as they follow the generalized trend of digital and convergent media logics, or they can actually grant *status* or *value* to the contributions of the citizen. Also, the talisman requires a specific ritual to *invoke* its power and guarantee its *authenticity*. Similarly, the democratic *potential* of participatory processes is shaped by the norms and agents that rule over these practices.

Approaches to participation

In the last two decades, and especially in the last 10 years, the academic and industrial interest in the participatory turn in media and communication processes has produced a significant research output. A number of these initiatives has specifically dealt with participation *in* and *through* media, if we attend to the useful distinction by Carpentier (2011a). A reason for the success of this research theme has to do with the interactive affordances of new technologies, media and platforms. Moreover, participation is intimately related to other relevant concepts, like interaction (Carpentier, 2011b), engagement (Bergillos, 2017) or empowerment (Barry & Doherty, 2016).

Many research forums, journals and books illustrate the interest of researchers, from around the world (Pasquali, Noguera Vivo & Bourdaa, 2013). The European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) framework funded an action on the theme "Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies" (COST Action IS0906), which devoted one of its four working groups to "Audience interactivity and participation". Academic journals such as *Participations* [volumes 9(2) and 10(1)], *Communication Management Quarterly* (volume 21), *International Journal of Communication* (volume 8), *Communications* (volume 3), *International Journal on Media Management* (volume 14-2), *Comunicazioni Sociali* (volume 3), *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* [volume 5(3)], *Observatorio (OBS*)* (volume 34) or *Media and Communication* [volume 6(4)], among many others, have dedicated special issues to this object of study. Important academic events have hosted conversations between scholars with different theoretical backgrounds. For instance, the symposium "Transmedia generation" celebrated in Prague in 2012 was a timely event that served as a meeting point for some of the most important scholars in the field. The papers published after the conference in *Convergence* [volume *19*(3)] are key references for any researcher that is interested in the complex and nuanced interpretations of what participation means in a convergent and digital media environment.

Key aspects in all those debates are the context in which participation takes place and the power imbalances that shape participatory practices (Couldry & Jenkins, 2014; Dahlgren, 2013; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). On one hand, Cultural Studies has served as a framework for analysing the participation of active audiences. For instance, Fan Studies, or the research on fan communities, has addressed the activities of groups that seek a closer relationship with the texts they consume, as well as their increased participation in the construction of culture. Fan Studies researchers emphasize that the audience, organized in communities, adopts a critical perspective towards the producers. Participatory culture is defined here as a context that is in constant change, in which "rather than talking about mediators and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a set of rules that none of us fully understands" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). The capacity that citizens have today to produce and edit messages, and to distribute them freely through different media has raised, is then seen as the democratization of the production of audio-visual content. However, Jenkins et al. clarify that

> no single ideological orientation (...) has a monopoly on the virtues of a more participatory culture. (...) Like internet culture, participatory culture has countercultural and anti-authoritarian valences reflecting its roots, but it is also increasingly intertwined with commercial and capitalist forms of cultural and technological production. (2016, p. 182)

This is an important reminder that not only audiences and fans are willing to take advantage of the opportunities offered by digital technologies and convergent media: the corporate appropriation of participatory culture (Deuze, 2008) complicates the situation.

Although participatory culture was not born linked to a specific technology, or at a specific historical moment, it became an object of study in the eighties, when authors such as Fiske (1987) or Jenkins (2006), from culturalist perspectives, analysed the collaborations and collective knowledge production of active audiences in relation to media texts. The development of home computing, the emergence of the internet, and the growth of broadband technologies were some of the trends that then accelerated the academic interest in participation (Delwiche & Jacobs Henderson, 2013) and that were also associated with the enthusiasm for researching interactive communication (Quiring & Schweiger, 2008). From the perspective of Communication and Media Studies, interactivity has certainly had a close relationship with participation, since both terms have been widely discussed as important affordances of digital technologies. Andrejevic (2004), for instance, introduced the idea of *participatory interactivity* as a promise of new media convergence; that of getting access to the tools of media production and distribution so that media audiences can take an active role in their experience.

As many key communication concepts, interactivity is (like participation) a complex and inconsistently used term without a clear and unique definition, and with different research traditions, from Sociology to Psychology or Computer Science having tried to define or measure it. However, definitions are often imprecise or even contradictory, since they approach the concept from different perspectives, which include interactivity as a process of communication, as a characteristic of new media or as an element perceived by users (Jensen, 2008; McMillan, 2006; Quiring & Schweiger, 2008; Rafaeli, 1988). The most important aspect of interactivity, for this article, is its *potential* to create a sense of *empowerment* in the communication process. Barry and Doherty (2017) argue out that *empowerment* is a dominant mode of interactivity, and in public discourse there are constant references to its *potential* actions, strategies or outcomes, even though the specific examples of interactivity that are then used, very much depend on the technologies of its time.

At the same time, participation is considered an expression of political action, or political involvement. Hence, it is always framed, at least to a certain extent, within struggles in which power imbalances should be identified (Carpentier, 2011a; Delwiche, 2013). As Carpentier (2011b) notes, political theory urges for a differentiation between what participation is and other terms that cannot be considered the same as participation, even if they are related, like access or interactivity. From that perspective, participation

still functions in a relationship with different concepts, but participation's defining characteristics then become the decision-making processes and the power imbalances that influence them. Carpentier (2014, p. 1002) defines participation "as a situation where the actors involved in (formal or informal) decision-making processes are positioned towards each other through power relationships that are (to some extent) egalitarian". There are maximalist and minimalist forms of participation, depending on who retains or shares control over participatory processes and its outcomes. From an analytical point of view, this distinction is very useful. Carpentier (2016) himself has developed on that basis what might be the most nuanced analytical model for the interpretation of participatory media processes. It is important to note, however, that the fact that maximalist forms of participation offer a more balanced power distribution of the agents involved in decision-making does not mean that these participatory processes are always desirable. Similarly, engagement in minimalist participatory practices that create an illusion of empowerment does not mean that we are facing a democratic process. In that sense, more than ever, it is necessary to defend the concept of participation.

In an inspiring conversation between the two representatives of these approaches to the concept of participation in Communication and Media Studies, Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) suggest a deconstruction of traditional theories to move towards an integrated and complementary model for the analysis of participation that offers a nuanced language to communicate the complexity of the concept. One of their conclusions is the acknowledgement that full participation or the ideal participatory culture is an utopian goal, that consequently will never be achieved, but can still serve as points of reference for the critical evaluation of participatory practices. Based on that idea, the fantastic or chimerical nature of participation features as the first element to explain why participation is a talisman.

The participatory fantasy

Like in the case of talismans, there is, at a theoretical level, a tension between the abstract principle of participation and its reality. If talismans are usually related to mystical circumstances, participation has been interpreted as an uncomfortable *myth* (Domingo, 2008), as *dark* (Quandt, 2018) or as a democratic *fetish* (Carpentier, 2011a), and therefore usually located on an imaginary or groundless sphere.

The Lacanian concept of fantasy was introduced in the theoretical debates about participation by Carpentier (2014), who avoids an exclusively negative interpretation of the term. As García-Catalán (2012) argues, Lacan puts forward dark concepts that end up giving light. Carpentier (2014) turns to Lacan to define fantasy as having protective and generative capacities. As a driving force that is connected to desire, it also shows the "paradox of simultaneously desiring the object and of fearing the impossibility of fulfilling this desire" (p. 1003). In relationship to participation, he connects the concept of fantasy to his own theory of maximalist forms of participation and Pateman's (1970)

concept of full participation; the aim of reaching balanced power relations between all actors at every social level:

> this end point is unreachable and utopian – phantasmagoric – but it arguably also serves as a crucial driving force for attempts to "deepen the democratic revolution" (Mouffe, 1988, p. 42), for the "democratisation of democracy" (Giddens, 1994, p. 113) or for a "more participatory culture". (Carpentier, 2014, p. 1004)

However, Carpentier (2014) notices that the participatory fantasy interacts with other fantasies (the fantasy of universality and homogeneity, the fantasy of leadership and the fantasy of freedom and agency) which – at different levels – create drawbacks, structural limits and dependencies between participatory practices and the participatory fantasy.

In the conceptual structure of participation as a talisman, the participatory fantasy illustrates its belonging to an abstract framework, as well as the tensions with other fantasies that hinder or protect its potential. Under the Lacanian interpretation of fantasy, we can further understand it as a way of engagement. We participate and are engaged within the frame of our *fantasme*. As Carpentier (2014, p. 1013) stresses, "the focus on participation as a fantasy also allows showing the complexity of participatory practices and the very deeply embedded drives that sometimes work in its favour and sometimes against it".

The authenticity of participation

Usually, defining participation also means to differentiate it from what participation is not. This has been especially important in the last years, when participation has become a buzzword in many disciplines. In the field of Communication, some authors have turned to concepts that are closely linked to the conceptual system of the talisman in order to establish what kind of participation is meaningful:

> attempts to counter this softening-down of (the signifier) participation have been based on the construction of dichotomized systems of meaning. In these dichotomies, specific forms of participation are described as "real" and "authentic", while other forms are described as "fake" and "pseudo". (Carpentier, 2007, p. 87)

For instance, Prado (1986) points to the *symbolic* nature of participation, in those cases when it does not provide the tools or frameworks to raise the voice of social actors and minorities. In the field of communication for development and participatory communication, Servaes (1999, p. 187) underlines that "utopian visions of development communication have been called 'genuine' and 'authentic' participation, as opposed to the manipulative, pseudo-participation". This *illusion* that simulates processes of participation and intimacy with audiences has been identified in Communication and Media

Studies (McQuail, 2005, p. 444), but was defined earlier in Political Sciences, as Carpentier (2007) recalls:

> in the field of so-called political participation, for example, Verba (1961, pp. 220-221) points to the existence of "pseudo-participation", in which the emphasis is not on creating a situation in which participation is possible, but on creating the feeling that participation is possible. (Carpentier, 2007, p. 87)

(Pseudo)participatory processes and practices of engagement are very present in media, although increasingly intertwined with the promotional interests of corporations and the purposeful intentions of engaged publics (Jenkins et al., 2016). In the case of the former, corporations can take advantage of the energy, the time, the effort and the creativity of audiences and users, whose activity and dedication enriches contemporary cultural production and political communication. In the case of the latter, participation could become a demonstration of an affective commitment with ideas, values and arguments. In a moment when social media and popular culture are crucial for political communication (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thomson & Zimmerman, 2016), exploring the invitations that frame participation in different contexts can give us a nuanced understanding of the agreements, the tensions or the "authenticity contracts" (Enli, 2015) that these processes facilitate. However, as McQuail (2005, p. 444) puts it, "in practice it is difficult to empirically distinguish 'real' attachment from 'artificial' attachment". But we can still consider these initiatives as strategies for the construction of *mediated authenticity* or a participatory appeal (Klein Shagrir, 2018). Following Enli (2015), mediated authenticity benefits from participatory practices since they usually serve as a catalyst for spontaneity, immediacy, ordinariness or ambivalence in media.

The ritual of participation

The authenticity of participation, or the perception of authentic participation, comes usually from the *ritual* that makes it possible. It is not about participation itself, but rather about the process or event that takes place, the (magical) knowledge required to make it possible, including the conditions required to activate its power. Participatory practices are complex, unique and sometimes contradictory; they are based on processes that are shaped by the interplay between agents whose power relation is (un)equal. From a cultural perspective, a key reference is James Carey (1989), who presented communication as a *ritual*; a *symbolic* process that (re)produces and transforms reality. Carey's (1990) ritual model is closely linked with terms like association, sharing and participation. In a similar vein, for talismans to be considered authentic, it is important that certain conditions are guaranteed during its preparation and implementation, such as the moment in which they can be applied, the person who manufactures the object or who officiates the ritual. Helck (1984, quoted in Velázquez Brieva, 2004, p. 34) explains that esoteric rituals were first lead by shamans or priests who knew the practices and possessed the

special qualities to invoke powers and virtues. Later on, through writing and learning, this exercise was extended to more layers of society, who had access to the tools and the knowledge to manufacture amulets. There is a certain parallel between the history of talismanic rituals and the "waves of media democratization" (Carpentier, Dahlgren & Pasquali, 2013) that have permitted an easier access to participatory tools that once were limited to experts or elites. Interestingly, when underlining the potential danger of embracing the participatory rhetoric in the analysis of the role of journalism in democracy, Peters and Witschge (2015) use repeatedly the verb to *invoke* in order to warn against the often celebratory discourse of the democratisation of media through participation. In addition, Carpentier (2014) warns that there is a fantasy of participation about the disappearing media professional that leads to a democratic-populist fantasy that articulates media professionals as unnecessary. All in all, it seems that there is a need to identify who can participate, the relationship between ordinary people and experts who lead the process and the importance of contextualizing participation as a ritual.

A second element that serves to ground the idea of the ritual is the fact that media *invite* our participation. This is a key aspect in Carey's ritual model, but also other authors from a socio-cultural approach have pointed out the invitational nature of participation (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2011; Johnson, 2007). Hille and Bakker (2013, p. 4) underline that "the audience needs to be stimulated and invited by the media before they will provide (meaningful) contributions. This suggests that participation is not the result of offering opportunities but is also dependent on active 'participation' from the medium itself". Johnson (2007, p. 78) says that "multiplatforming allows the audience to enter into new cultural spaces, but the significance of that invitation remains ambiguous, at once both empowering and exploiting the audience". Gaventa (2007) establishes three possible spatial categories of participation; one of them is that of invited spaces. Unlike closed spaces or created spaces, the invitational spaces are those in which there is an explicit invitation to different agents for decision making. In relation to television, Ross (2008) categorizes three types of invitation: overt, organic and obscured. Gulbrandsen and Just point out that

> the relationship between invitation and participation becomes a major concern, since it is clear that how users are invited to participate may condition their actual participation – not in the sense of determining the participation, but by creating the framework or path that one may either follow or go up against (Just, 2008). At the same time, however, any specific invitation is conditioned by already existing participation – any invitation is also a response. (2011, p. 1104)

From another perspective, Carpentier (2011b) defends the invitational nature of participation, but moves away from a hierarchical invitation where only some have the control over the process. He turns to the concept of invitational social change that acknowledges the agency of the participant and his right not to participate:

I concur with Foss and Griffin (1995, p. 3), who contrast invitation and persuasion (the latter being fed by the "desire for control and domination"), and Greiner and Singhal (2009, p. 34), who develop the concept of invitational social change, which "seek[s] to substitute interventions which inform with calls to imagine and efforts to inspire". These kinds of reflections allow participation to be seen as invitational, which implies that the enforcement of participation is defined as contradictory to the logics of participation, and that the right not to participate should be respected. (Carpentier, 2011, p. 22)

In their conversation on participation and politics, Allen et al. (2014) add further nuance to the points already made. Invitation is an integral part of the participatory process, but sometimes it is the lack of it that drives activism. Participation then comes from individual engagement that fuels activism. In that sense, Dahlgren (2013, p. 20) adds that "the subjective engagement behind it and the participation in which it results can have varying degrees of affective intensity (...). It is also the political circumstances that will shape the emotional character of the participation of individuals and groups". Thus, the invitation does not necessarily come from a powerful agent that enables participation, but from the participatory process (the talisman) itself, that invites to take action and creates a sense of empowerment.

The aesthetic value of participation

A final aspect that supports the idea of participation as a talisman is its aesthetic value. Some authors have observed that in some media contexts participation is more important for what it represents, rather than for the outcomes of its process. The corporate appropriation of participation and participatory culture (Deuze, 2008) has tended to mean that interactive and collaborative affordances are in many cases nothing more than a showcase. For instance, in the field of journalism,

as more and more news outlets introduced comment sections and participatory formats, it became fashionable to do this, and many just did it because everybody else did it. This bandwagon effect was quite pronounced; not to be left behind and having the appearance of being "modern" was often the primary motivation. (Quandt, 2018, p. 38)

Much of this participatory excitement has been very much related with the possibilities of new technological affordances and platforms. Mosco (2017) turns to the concept of totem, a synonym for talisman, to explain how these tools and systems represent different meanings:

next Internet systems, especially the "internet of things", are more than banal instruments to meet economic or political goals. They are also cultural objects that signify a range of meanings. Like tribal totems, they have

magical qualities that embody the sublime. (...) They take admittedly tiny steps to ground these mythic beliefs but they also participate in a technological complex that contains profound political economic and cultural power. (Mosco, 2017, p. 100)

Participation, as a talisman, serves as a symbol of power and a guarantor of status. There is, however, a substantial difference: today, gemstones and amulets are produced by the millions. Their magic powers play a secondary role and they mainly function as facilitators of social recognition or simply as decoration. Similarly, media participation has been heavily implemented as a cosmetic way of integrating audiences but still needs to rescue the democratic, pluralist and cultural values it represents.

Conclusion

Recently, Quandt (2018, p. 45) has called for "the development of integrative theories on the conditions of participation that are neither driven by wishful thinking nor doom and gloom". From cultural and political approaches, Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) have defended the theoretical reconstruction and shared understanding of the central concepts that define participatory practices. They all argue that future research on participation should care for the complexities and ambivalences of this research object.

Inspired by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this article has introduced the metaphor of participation as a talisman, as a way of understanding participation, as – at least partially – structured as a symbolic element over which a ritual is performed in order to enrich it with power. Previous conceptualizations and categorizations of participation already introduced aspects of the term around this metaphor: 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*, ... This text has tried to coherently organize four aspects of the metaphor: the participatory fantasy, the authenticity of participation, the ritual of participation, and the aesthetic value of participation.

Participation matters. And how we think, metaphorically, about participation matters too. Under the umbrella of Communication and Media Studies, participation as a talisman invites us to embrace the ambivalence of the concept and to attempt to integrate the contributions from different fields. Hopefully, this text will also serve as a guide for future conceptualizations of the metaphor. If participatory actions and practices continue to be associated with it, they could reinforce its power. The interpretation of participation as a fantasy brings to the table a series of questions, not only regarding its authenticity or the ritual that goes along with its creation, but also about its potential use in different contexts, the sense of empowerment and engagement that it inspires, and the generative capacity it has. If we understand participation as a talisman, we can protect it, and rescue it, by enhancing the belief in its potential. Bringing back our faith in its power, we will be better equipped for the emotional and sentimental democracy (Arias Maldonado, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) that we are currently living in. ⟋

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