1

INTRODUCTION

What is Participatory Culture?

Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson

> Before you lies cyberspace with its teeming communities and the interlaced ramification of its creations, as if all of humankind's memory were deployed in the moment: an immense act of synchronous collective intelligence, converging on the present, a silent bolt of lightning, diverging, an exploding crown of neurons.
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> (Pierre Lévy, 1997, p. 236)

In 2006, the MacArthur Foundation launched a $50 million initiative exploring the ways digital media were transforming the lives of young people. As part of this project, a research team headed by Henry Jenkins (2006) mapped the rise of "participatory culture" in contemporary society. In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century,* Jenkins and his colleagues explain that participatory cultures are characterized by "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (p. 7). "A participatory culture," they add, "is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connections with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (p. 7).

One only need visit a local coffee shop or public library to see that people of all ages and backgrounds are increasingly active and engaged in participatory networks. Citizens around the world create and distribute messages via online and interpersonal networks at a rapid and ever-accelerating rate. Armed with inexpensive tools for capturing, editing, and organizing, people tap into a vast ocean of real-time data and multimedia content to promote personal and political interests. Functions once monopolized by a handful of hierarchical institutions (e.g. newspapers, television stations, and universities) have been usurped by independent publishers, video-sharing sites, collaboratively sustained knowledge banks, and fan-generated entertainment.

To date, communication scholars and media literacy educators have focused primarily on the implications of participatory creative cultures, but this is just one aspect of a much larger cultural movement. Our world is being transformed by participatory knowledge cultures in which people work together to collectively classify, organize, and build information—a phenomenon that

collaboratively updated websites that review books, restaurants, physicians, and college professors. Participatory knowledge cultures flourish on the Internet each time we exchange advice on programming, cooking, graphic design, statistical analysis, or writing style. These knowledge cultures have become an integral part of our lives; they function as prosthetic extensions of our nervous system and we often feel crippled when our access to these networks is curtailed. It is hard to believe that, for most of recorded history, human beings were unable to instantly find answers to questions such as "How long can I safely store cooked chicken in the refrigerator" or "What should I do about a second-degree burn?"

We are also witnessing the accelerated growth of participatory economic and political cultures. According to Yochai Benkler (2006)—former co-director of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society—cooperative actions "carried out through radically distributed, nonmarket mechanisms that do not depend on proprietary strategies" are radically transforming the information economy (p. 3). Citizen journalists collect and share information to report on news affecting their local communities. Dissidents use distributed communication technologies to organize political opposition in repressive regimes. Humanitarian workers and activists around the globe use geomapping technologies to monitor elections, coordinate relief efforts, and identify looming environmental disasters. Proponents of information transparency have used websites such as WikiLeaks to disseminate formerly secret documents, sparking riots and toppling governments in the process.

These phenomena generate important questions. As individuals, have we lost the right to keep our personal lives and political opinions secret? What happens to anonymity and privacy in an age of ubiquitous connection? What about intellectual property laws that inhibit our ability to access and communicate within these networks? Is it possible that the illusion of participation in this brave new world cloaks fundamental passivity? What if people don't want to participate? Where is the checkbox that allows us to opt out?

Four Phases of Participatory Culture

Academics often think in terms of disciplinary boundaries, but participatory-culture studies are more properly thought of as an emergent, interdisciplinary project. As early tremors rippled across our global media and technology landscapes, scholars across disciplines noticed common patterns and began referencing each other's work. In fact, some of the most useful research on this topic never uses the phrase "participatory culture." For decades, researchers have been writing about contribution, collaboration, and collective knowledge. In an attempt to get a handle on recent scholarship that provides the foundation for this collection, we suggest that participatory culture studies can be divided into four distinct phases.

Phase One. Emergence (1985–1993)

During the second half of the 1980s, our global communication landscape was already beginning to manifest signs of impending transformation. Personal computers had found their way into the living rooms and offices of ordinary citizens, and networking these machines with one another was the next logical step. ARPANET (the precursor to the civilian Internet) grew exponentially on college campuses and military institutions, and virtual communities emerged in dial-up bulletin board systems (BBS), the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, and FidoNet. College radio stations, mix tapes, and independent record labels intersected with the underground music scene. Meanwhile, the advent of laser printers and page layout software put small-scale publishing in the hands of ordinary citizens, accelerating the growth of a vibrant zine subculture.

As these changes unfolded, a growing body of academic research challenged the traditional view of citizens and media audiences as largely passive. In the influential *Television Culture* (1987), John Fiske argued that television viewing audiences regularly resisted, subverted, and recoded the meanings of popular entertainment programs—a process he termed "semiotic democracy." Within Fiske's vision, "individuals can become both producers *and* creators, able to reinscribe and recode existing representations" in a public domain that invites everyone to participate "equally in the ongoing process of cultural production" (Katyal, 2006, p. 3). A similar vision of active audiences was articulated by a promising young scholar named Henry Jenkins—a graduate student who worked with Fiske. Analyzing the behaviors of mostly female *Star Trek* fan fiction writers, Jenkins (1988) argued that these women should be thought of as "textual poachers" who reshape the meanings of cultural products to serve their own needs. Deepening these arguments in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), he became one of the most recognizable thinkers associated with fan culture studies. However, as Jenkins is quick to point out, he was part of a larger movement that included Ien Ang's (1985) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, and Camille Bacon-Smith's (1991) *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth.*

Meanwhile, journalists, scholars, and science fiction writers were taking note of the nascent computer subculture. Anticipating themes that would emerge in subsequent definitions of participatory culture, Steven Levy's *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984) argued that computer hobbyists and the technology industry itself were influenced by a "hacker ethic" that celebrated access to technology, the free flow of information, decentralized networks, creative expression, and self-actualization. Howard Rheingold—a technology writer and cultural critic who participated actively in the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link—coined the term "virtual community" in a 1993 book of the same name that explained on-line computer networks to a general audience. In 1987, Microsoft Press published an updated version of Ted Nelson's *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*—a ground-breaking manifesto dedicated to the radical proposition that *everyone* is capable of understanding how to program their own computers.

Phase Two. Waking up to the Web (1994–1998)

Twenty-five years after the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency began networking mainframe computers and military researchers, the American public began paying attention to what *TIME* magazine referred to as "the strange new world of the Internet." No longer shackled by a clumsy text interface, the advent of graphical web browsers such as Mosaic made it possible for people to easily search the Internet and create their own web pages. Netscape was the most well-known of the new web browsers, and the company's initial public stock offering was wildly successful, kick-starting a speculative technology bubble (the "dot-com bubble") that lasted five years. These transformative years witnessed the birth of the Internet Movie Database (1993), Yahoo (1994), web-based electronic mail (1994), the Linux operating system (1994), Amazon (1994), streaming audio (1995), Craigslist (1995), eBay (1995), and Google (1996).

The scope and speed of these transformations in our media landscape captured the attention of scholars across disciplines. Working at a macroscopic level, the sociologist Manuel Castells mapped the rapidly changing global infrastructure in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), *The Power of Identity* (1997), and *End of the Millennium* (1998). His core message—the notion that decentralized participatory networks were transforming the ways we work, learn, and play—was indirectly supported by a series of more locally focused case studies. Stephen Duncombe's (1997) *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* argued that emerging networks of amateur

publishers represented a "crack in the seemingly impenetrable wall of the system" and could be interpreted as "a culture spawning the next wave of meaningful resistance" (p. 3). Nancy Baym (1985) appropriated ethnographic research methods from the field of anthropology to document the norms, behaviors, and conversational themes of soap opera fans who posted in Usenet forums. In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995) the psychologist Sherry Turkle investigated the interactions of gamers in text-based virtual worlds, suggesting that these spaces could be used as tools for identity experimentation and personal growth. These seemingly disparate case studies were united by their authors' bold insistence that seemingly frivolous social networks were worthy of serious scholarly analysis. Duncombe, Baym, and Turkle demonstrated that the practices and cultural expressions of these amateur publishers, soap opera fans, and computer gamers were both interesting and important. If the first wave of researchers had unlocked the door to participatory culture studies, this second wave kicked the door off its hinges entirely.

Phase Three. Push-button Publishing (1999–2004)

Although it is relatively easy to create web pages with HTML, the mystique surrounding computer programming frightened many people away from creating their own web sites. The advent of user-friendly web publishing systems such as Blogger (1999), LiveJournal (1999), and Xanga (2000) almost completely obliterated remaining barriers to entry, increasing the number of potential participants by several orders of magnitude. During these transitional years, we witnessed the emergence of Napster (1999), the game EverQuest (1999), the iPod (2001), the BitTorrent protocol (2001), the social virtual world Second Life (2003), MySpace (2003), Flickr (2004), Yelp (2004), and Facebook (2004). Though some of these platforms have already crumbled or mutated beyond recognition, each represented a significant step forward in the ability of citizens to share, annotate, publish, and remix digital information.

On the academic front, there were two noticeable strands of research on participatory culture during this phase. The first strand was composed of mostly qualitative case studies. Shifting attitudes about what constituted legitimate research topics, combined with increasingly refined tools and methodologies for studying on-line communities, generated a tsunami of fandom studies on topics ranging from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Hill & Calcutt, 2001) and *Doctor Who* (McKee, 2001) to *Hello Kitty* (McVeigh, 2000) and *Pokemon* (Willett, 2004). A second strand explored macroscopic patterns, interconnections, and technological underpinnings of participatory culture. In the English translation of *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (1999), the Canadian philosopher Pierre Lévy identified the existence of a "universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills" (p. 13). Pointing out that "no one knows everything" and "everyone knows something," Lévy argued that it was now possible to create democratic political structures in which people could participate directly as unique individuals rather than as members of an undifferentiated mass. Howard Rheingold drew similar conclusions in *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (2002), predicting that "large numbers of small groups, using the new media to their individual benefit, will create emergent effects that will nourish some existing institutions and ways of life and dissolve others" (p. xiii). Though optimistic about the potential, he also highlighted such risks as the loss of privacy and the deterioration of private life that one might encounter in a world saturated with network connections.

Phase Four. Ubiquitous Connections (2005–2011)

Made possible as a result of widespread broadband Internet connections, the video-sharing site YouTube (2005) introduced global citizens to a meme-filled world of sneezing pandas, awkward

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pre-teens, and piano-playing felines. Users immediately bent the platform to their own purposes, experimenting with new forms of citizen journalism, creating performance art projects, designing mash-up music videos, and sharing DIY tutorials on a wide range of topics. No longer constrained to print or audio, digital publishing became transmedia publishing. At roughly the same time, mobile phones were evolving into small hand-held computers with powerful multi-media capabilities. The iPhone (2007), the Android operating system (2008), and the iPad (2010) each played a part in this revolution.

During this most recent phase, researchers have tempered their hopes about the positive poten-tial of participatory culture with an acknowledgment of the many challenges that characterize our increasingly networked existence. In *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (2004), the legal scholar Lawrence Lessig argued that a problematic conceptualization of intellectual property undergirds a draconian regulatory framework which stifles creativity, inhibits popular democracy, and limits the autonomy of the very people it is supposed to protect. Yochai Benkler (2006) made a similar case in *The Wealth of Networks*, hailing "new opportunities for how we make and exchange information, knowledge and culture," while calling on his readers to pay close attention to the laws and institutions that influence the "institutional ecology of the digital environment" (p. 2). During this period, Henry Jenkins's (2006) *Convergence Culture* further developed the author's ideas about the intersection of media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence; a cross-over hit, the book helped make these ideas accessible to a general audience. However, noises of doubt emerged from unexpected quarters. In *Alone Together* (2011), Sherry Turkle argued that ubiquitous technology penetrates every nook and cranny of our lives, leaving us alienated and indifferent. "We expect more from technology," she writes, "and less from each other" (p. 113).

About This Book

As we begin dipping our big toe into Pierre Lévy's "knowledge space," we are confronted with exponentially expanding information, connections, and potential. What shall become of that potential is yet to be known. As many authors in this collection suggest, it might be an expansion of creativity, scientific knowledge, civic engagement, and activism. Or, if others are correct, it could spiral into incivility, passivity, and exclusion. While we cannot see the future clearly, we do know that grappling with these participatory cultures requires new ways of speaking about information, new methods of education, and a rethinking of traditional ownership structures.

Just as Lévy describes our current situation as the "knowledge space" set astride the "commod-ity space," we also see hybrid creator/consumers of media working alongside traditional media producers and the new theories arising from participatory culture (e.g. informationalism, collec-tive intelligence, transmedia narrative) intersecting with traditional understandings of our postmodern condition. Few doubt that this is a time of transition. This book seeks to be both a snapshot of that transition and a speculative probe into possible futures.

When we recruited authors to participate in this collection, we emphasized three principles. First, these chapters are intended to be accessible to all readers, and therefore free of specialist jargon. This does not mean that the ideas are simple. Readers might occasionally need to look up unfamiliar words or references. However, all of the contributors to this collection share a desire to be understood. Second, to the extent possible, all the contributors have steered away from an emphasis on specific technological platforms. Technology ages quickly; today's buzzwords may be forgotten or laughable tomorrow. By the time this book reaches your hands, your technologi-cal landscape might look very different than that of 2012. Yet, the underlying principles, patterns, and challenges endure. Third, you will note that this collection synthesizes contributions from a wide range of disciplines. Geographers. Physicists. Economists. Poets. Game designers. Activists.

Computer pioneers. Cartoonists. The world around us is less constrained than ever by disciplinary boundaries, a condition reflected in this collection.

This book is organized into seven sections. These sections explore fan subcultures, participatory creativity, knowledge cultures, civic engagement, activism, and looming challenges on the boundaries of participatory culture. You are welcome to read the chapters in order, though we find it highly unlikely that most readers will do so. The advent of the web, with its decentralized hyperlinks and stream-of-consciousness lateral browsing, highlighted an unspoken truth about the relationship between authors and readers: we have absolutely no control over how you choose to use this book. You, the audience, are unpredictable, and may choose to consume and participate on your own terms.

At the broadest level, this book wrestles with the hopes, the stumbling blocks, and the potential pitfalls of participation in our rapidly changing world. It is both idealistic and realistic; it is both optimistic and cynical. While recognizing that we are hardly on the brink of Utopia, we agree with Pierre Lévy (1997) that "a new communication space is now accessible, and it is now up to us to exploit its most positive potential on an economic, political, cultural, and human level" (p. ix).

The following pages contain essays from some of our favorite thinkers. Many you know by name; others you may not yet have discovered. They are not housed in one discipline, and certainly not in one university. Their commonality lies in their ability to see a world where participation thrives—on-line and off. As a result, we hope that you will bump into ideas you didn't set out to find. All too often readers forget to browse the stacks, turning instead to recommendations, stars, tomatoes, and "likes." When was the last time you found a new favorite author because a book had been placed on the wrong shelf? When was the last time you picked out your next novel based solely on the beautiful lettering on its binding? We hope this volume reminds you of how wonderful it is to stumble across new concepts and beautiful language. And, of course, how important it is to participate.

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