

## Participatory Media throughout History

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Ekström, Anders *et al.* Eds. (2011). *History of Participatory Media: Politics and Publics, 1750–2000* (204 s.). New York: Routledge. [Part of series: Routledge Studies in Cultural History]. ISBN 978-0-415-88068-8.

Participatory media and participatory culture have become almost synonymous with the Internet and its related practices. Blogs, Wikipedia, YouTube and Facebook are all examples of tools that engage and activate people in many different ways – from fueling revolutions, to web piracy, citizen journalism, and people sharing/spreading the latest gossip. As a historian now working within the field of digital humanities I am often struck by the lack of a historical perspective on digital media. Sometimes it seems like we are now experiencing a media revolution never seen before. In some aspects, that is probably correct, but being a historian I would say that a historical perspective adds nuances and a better understanding of the contemporary media situation.

The focus of *History of Participatory Media* is the notion of participatory culture, today commonly associated with digital media. The aim of the anthology is to nuance the concept by highlighting a variety of historical examples and drawing parallels between them and the contemporary situation. In their introduction the editors claim:

*Media educators explore issues of literacy in relation to the notion of a new participatory culture ... However, they are all too often*

*obscured by a 'rhetoric of newness' that assumes participatory media is radical and revolutionary, something unique in history. But active and politically engaged uses of media are not exclusive to our time. As a matter of fact, it is fair to ask the question: Has there ever really been such a thing as a passive audience? (1)*

The book has its starting point in Henry Jenkins' concept of "converging cultures", a concept introduced in the introduction and subsequently nuanced and discussed by the different authors in the book. In his book *Convergence Culture* Jenkins defines new versus old consumers of media. Old consumers are claimed to be passive, predictable, isolated individuals, while new consumers are depicted as being active, migratory and socially connected (Jenkins 2008, 18–19). Jenkins also states that contemporary "convergence culture is enabling new forms of participation and collaboration" (256). Here are in other words two different approaches to participatory culture.

In the chapters of *History of Participatory Media* the authors provide historical examples of media related participatory cultures, and how different media have been used to engage and commit people by blurring the boundaries between the consumer and the producer. A few examples: Patrik Lundell writes about the late 18th century press, and how contemporary newspapers considered it a duty to print what people sent them, and thereby to support the public debate. People thought of it as their right to be published in the papers. Anders Ekström discusses how providing arenas for open/public dancing at the late 19th century world fairs engaged people (dancers and spectators), through showing and performing democracy and equality on the dance floor. Ekström and Frans Lundgren also point out how a variety of visual techniques, sound effects, actors and buildings were used for an embodied reenactment of historical or current issues. Lotten Gustafsson Reinius uses the example of a Swedish revivalist movement during the 1920s, which deployed an ambulating bus (The Congo Bus) for a mis-

sionary ethnographic exhibition in order to encourage missionary zeal among the viewers (and successfully, too). And in his article about the popular reality TV show “Survivor”, Per Wisselgren relates the series to previously conducted social experiments and highlights how producers, participants and viewers are intertwined in the whole process of making and implementing the show.

In many of the articles it is striking how participation is seen as means to engage citizens in various issues and to promote democratic values. The last article however, by Bodil Axelsson, deals with the web presence of museums, and points to the problematic relation between traditional, hierarchical institutions and the public; it is one thing to be in favour of non-excluding ideals, but obviously another to involve “the man on the street” in the actual production of knowledge. The participatory culture of the net was not easily intertwined with the ideals and the role carried by the museum management.

According to the authors, participatory culture is neither new nor exclusively related to digital media. The aim of the anthology – to put digital media and participatory culture in a broader historical perspective – is however important (when asking a historian) if we want to acquire a better and more nuanced understanding of so-called new media.

Through the various examples the authors emphasize the importance and relevance of a historical and multi-disciplinary perspective on digital media. It would however also have been interesting to see a comparative historical analysis of the actual participatory culture of the Internet and its associated web tools in relation to historical examples. Yes, there are definitely predecessors to the participatory culture of the Internet, but at the same time it must be said that the Internet brings new forms of participation. Thus, the majority of the contributors write about participatory culture from a top-down perspective – about how media have created or promoted participation – but the Internet related participatory culture is as much about bottom-up perspectives and initiatives by grass root movements. Although the anthology does an-

swer the question “What is old?”, it is still of interest and importance to distinguish and discuss “What is new?” with the Internet. A summary concluding the different contributions, and bridging the gap to the introduction, would have been relevant to point out a more “historically aware” direction within the discipline of digital humanities.

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## References

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