Hajo Greif / Larissa Hjorth / Amparo Lasén /
Claire Lobet-Maris (eds.)

Cultures
of Participation

Media Practices, Politics and Literacy

Volume 4

To speak of participation today raises a series of questions on how the presence and use of new media affect modes of social participation. From a variety of theoretical, empirical and methodological perspectives, the contributions in this volume explore participation in different social realms – from everyday life, interpersonal relationships, work and leisure activities to collective and political action. This collection demonstrates that participation is a localised notion, assuming a multitude of shapes under a variety of technological, political, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural conditions.

"An idea with a history, participation is now the watchword for the digital age. This timely book offers a set of genuinely original and conceptually powerful perspectives on the deep cultural and political dynamics of this much-discussed yet elusive phenomenon. Cosmopolitan in disposition, and adventurous in their thinking, the assembled authors offer us an indispensable critical account of participation, its lures and problems, as well as how to assess its rich possibilities. *Cultures of Participation* is required reading for anyone keen to come to grips with this cardinal concept of contemporary technology and society."
Gerard Goggin (Professor of Digital Communication, University of New South Wales, Sydney)

"The Internet is no longer a simple world of email and one-way web. This multinational, multicultural book provides meaty fare, showing how people actively use the diversifying Internet."
Barry Wellman (S.D. Clark Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto)

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Cultures of Participation

Participation in Broadband Society

Edited by Leopoldina Fortunati / Julian Gebhardt / Jane Vincent

Volume 4

PETER LANG

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COST 298 – Participation in the Broadband Society

Contents

Part IV: Social Media and Media Practices

Hajo Greif, Larissa Hjorth, Amparo Lasén and Claire Lobet-Maris

Introduction

About this Book

Contemporary societies are marked by the presence and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) – exemplified by the burgeoning of social network sites (SNS) and mobile media. ICTs have become a central medium in the multiplicity of everyday social interactions, so much so that being able to access and use them has become a necessary precondition of participation today. Concurrently, media practice and consumption – epitomised by user created content (UCC) – has shifted from the twentieth century paradigm of 'packaged media' to the twenty-first century dynamism of 'conversational media'. This shift has created new forums for engagement, agency and interaction. Given these conditions, what does it mean to participate?

This is the question that underscores this collection. From a variety of theoretical, empirical and methodological perspectives, each contribution explores participation in different social realms – from everyday life, interpersonal relationships, work and leisure activities to collective and political action. This collection demonstrates that participation is a localised notion, subject to techno-cultural, political, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural nuances. By focusing upon shifts in modes of social participation in different countries and cultural contexts, the chapters tackle how localities affect, among other things, the temporal, spatial and organisational factors framing participation; the engagement, trust, norms and affects involved; and the personal and collective skills required.

Through the lens of participation we can begin to understand some of the cultures, practices and politics emerging within the contemporary. To speak of participation today raises a series of questions on how the presence and use of new media affect modes of participation, and to which extent they may have become a prerequisite thereof: Do the presence and use of ICTs serve to empower actors on the individual and collective level? Is the use of these technologies already sufficient for participation? Can participation be measured by, or even be equated with, increased connectivity, or with the possibility of providing content and information? If it is not, what would be the conditions that allow us to talk of participation?

The collection is divided in four parts. In Part I we critically explore different ways of conceptualising participation, from theoretical approaches to social

representations. The study of new media helps us to reconsider the traditional ways in thinking of, and empirically enquiring into, participation. Here, notions of both media literacy and mediated activity are subject to reconceptualisation.

In Part II, the affective implications of participation are addressed through empirical case studies of mobile media and online gaming. These contributors contemplate the role of emotion – an area often overlooked when analysing participation. Here we are reminded that the rise of ICTs has also, not by accident, witnessed the rise of 'personal' technologies – a phenomenon that is shaped by, and shapes, affective performativity. Moreover, the significant role of play – central in the invention, adaptation and adoption of numerous social media practices (from Short Messaging Systems [SMS] to gaming) – is unpacked for its cultural relativity. Indeed, what determines play, just as what informs affect, is massaged by a series of factors from micro to macro, individual and collection across a cross-section of factors – age, gender, class, ethnicity, cultural context etc.

New media also contribute to a need for further conceptualising the affective implications in a redefinition of political participation. Drawing on cases of collective actions, social mobilisation and political debates, the two chapters of Part III question the divide between communication and political participation and explore the roles being played by new media in the making of a public and in empowering its voice. In both Part II and III, we can see how new media practices are creating opportunities for alterations in the affective culture of various social groups – particularly through examining the political implications of such transformations.

Finally, in Part IV we explore the complex dynamics of interactions and the multiplicity of actors involved. Empirical cases related to different media are presented: social networks sites, sharing sites and digital television. The contributions remind us that participation is framed by social norms and institutional regulations. These practices question whether new regulations are required, both to shape a new media landscape and to address ethical concerns.

The contributions in this book question two dominant perspectives on participation. Firstly, they interrogate some of the assumptions around technological centred perspectives, which equate participation with connectivity and accessibility, to show that those technological conditions do not guarantee the emergence of modes of participation. Technology is only one factor in what determines participation. Secondly, this collection exposes the limitations of dominant models of participation in the social sciences tradition whereby it is viewed as goal-oriented action that is measured through public visibility – often conflated with public sphere debates. In this model, significant factors such as receptivity, emotions and sociability are excluded. Drawing on a variety of media practices and forms of digital literacy this collection provides a richer landscape for understanding the complexities of participation today.

Overview of the Chapters

The first part of this volume, 'Paradigms of Participation', provides readers with some of the theories and models for understanding participation both within and beyond the online. In Leopoldina Fortunati's 'Online Participation and the New Media' we are presented with a case study of how so-called 'digital natives' in Italy are defining and conceptualising online participation. As Fortunati identifies, there are various forms of active and passive modes of offline participation that highlight the highly ambivalent nature of participation and agency historically. This phenomenon is, as Fortunati finds, replicated within the online. Drawing from a study involving 150 students, Fortunati uncovers the way in which the Internet is less of a political – and more of a social – tool for participation.

The interrogation of the changing and often ambivalent definition of participation is furthered in Hajo Greif and Matthias Werner's 'From Information to Broadband Society, Whence and Whither?' For Greif and Werner, if earlier periods have been characterised as the 'industrial society' or 'mercantile society', could contemporary culture be defined as a 'broadband society'? Taking the COST 298 rubric of 'living in a broadband society', they question just how productive and valid it is to argue such a position. By taking to task the very concept of information, they consider the basics of ICTs constituting social participation.

This problematising of the relation between agency and technology (in society) is continued in Giuseppina Pellegrino's 'Participatory Frameworks'. Pellegrino's chapter takes us through a guided tour of some of the important methods of conceptualising and investigation that relation. Starting from a critique of technological determinism, this paper explores and probes the various traditions from the domestication and Participatory Design approaches to Science and Technology Studies and Social Informatics.

Part I concludes with Kate Crawford's 'Listening, not Lurking', in which Crawford challenges the assumptions around voice (and specifically speaking) being determinates of agency and participation. As Crawford suggests, many models of online participation have assumed analogies of the voice. But if everyone is talking, who is listening? Indeed, whilst modes of listening have been given pejorative terms such as 'lurking' within western discourse, we must unpack such a myth. For example, let us consider one of the biggest blogosphere, China. The Internet in China – whilst being a highly regulated and tightly governed medium – is also a space for public opinion in which the practice of 'lurking' is seen as an important form of participation. Can we move beyond didactic and binary models of participation in which practices such as lurking are seen like an Internet version of TV's couch potatoes? Crawford provides much insight into rethinking some of the assumptions around agency and participation.

In Part II, practices of participation are read in light of interpersonal relationships. Through a variety of empirical case studies, all of these contributors contemplate the role of emotion – an area all too easily overlooked in analyses of

participation. Here we are reminded that the rise of ICTs has also witnessed the rise of genuine *personal* technologies. Moreover, the role of play – central in the invention, adaptation and adoption of numerous social media practices (such as gaming) – is unpacked.

The section opens with Naomi S. Baron's 'Attitudes towards Mobile Phones', which presents the reader with a rich sample of culturally variant ways for viewing one's mobile phone and its uses. Rather than simply taking note of functions that are available, the volume of calls and texting – along with the venues in which mobiles are employed – is provided in order to paint a picture of the user's internal perspectives on what she or he associates with using mobile phones. Although a growing variety of country-specific studies on such perceptions have emerged over the past decade, the number of cross-cultural studies has been smaller, especially with respect to identical survey instruments being applied in multiple contexts. To help fill this lacuna, this study presents a quantitative inquiry into mobile phone use by university students in five countries: Sweden, the US, Italy, Japan, and Korea. Using word association tasks, interesting patterns of cultural similarities and differences in attitudes towards mobile phone use – one's own and those of others – are carved out in this study.

Very much complementary to Baron's study, Jane Vincent's contribution showcases a set of findings from a series of qualitative studies conducted by the Digital World Research Centre (DWRC) during the last few years. Evoked by the paper's title 'Emotions and the Mobile Phone', Vincent identifies the ways in which emotions have come to be increasingly mediated via mobile phones. Drawing from interactionist theories in media sociology, Vincent inquires into the roles of the mobile phone as an intermediator for relationships and as a repository of emotions that range from love to hate, from sadness to joy. In these roles, the mobile phone is far from a mere interface through which emotions are mediated – rather, they are two folded. Firstly, the very ways in which emotional relationships are conducted have changed, especially in terms of the modes in which users manage spatial vs. emotional closeness and distance. Secondly, in adopting these very roles, the mobile phone itself has become an ambivalent object of both positive and negative affection – and often of both at once.

In 'Playing the Waiting Game', Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson utilise a case study to discuss notions of 'presence' and 'place'. The authors present an inquiry into practices of mobile gaming, with particular attention to the gendered stereotypes attached to this practice. This qualitative study probes the activities and attitudes of young female students in game design – who comprise an interesting sample for running counter to the common stereotype that girls play casual mobile games, whereas boys profess in playing 'serious' online games. Hjorth and Richardson explore the different spaces in which mobile games are played by their respondents – public transport, at home alone, waiting in queues – and the attitudes and self-perceptions concomitant with engaging

in such play. Most significantly, the ways of 'in-between-ness' is enacted in mobile gaming suggest a more subtle notion of presence than one might expect from mobile games; that is, mobile games are more complex than a mere idling away otherwise unproductive time.

Managing presence and social relations takes a different route in Chung Tai Cheng's 'Imagined Performativity'. Building upon this theoretical concept of Judith Butler, Cheng explores the ways in which young Chinese migrant workers, having moved from their closely-knit rural environment to the cities in search of employment, establish and maintain new social relationships. These relationships are developed in the context of a culture that, traditionally, measures the proximity of social relationships by the degree of proximity of kinship ties, thereby discouraging genuine friendships and emotional ties between non-kinsmen. Encountering themselves within an environment of strangers, those young workers are found to use their mobile phones and a variety of its functions not only to remain in touch with their home community, but also to seek and make new friends in a space that serves to protect them from prejudice. It is in cyberspace where they can enact clearly distinct modes of social relationship, constructing new roles for themselves and their relations.

Moving from interpersonal to political relationships and activities, the two chapters of Part III, 'Redefining Political Participation', invite the readers to reconsider established views of what constitutes the 'public' on the political scene. The papers address this issue on the background of two strongly contrasted political cultures, namely that of Spain and China. They also contrast two concepts of participation, with public mobilisation on the one hand, and deliberative disposals on the other. Yet to both chapters, the issue raised by John Dewey about the public and its power is central.

In their chapter, 'An Original Protest, at Least', Amparo Lasén and Iñaki Martínez de Albeniz introduce us to new and original patterns of mediated mobilisation: the smart mob and the flash mob. These two fascinating types of mobs can be seen as indicative of new public practices this century. While exhibiting commonality such as a similar aesthetic sensibility, the two types of mobs also differ greatly on one central issue concerning their means-ends rapport. If the first mobilises people sharing a same political protest or a 'smart' concern, the second one is free of any purpose beyond the crowd's mobilisation in itself. Shall we see in the flash-mob a post-modern expression of crowd narcissism or a formal rituality without content? For the authors, the flash-mob rather invites us to re-think the traditional paradigm of public mobilisation where *hybrid masses are politics in process.*

In the second chapter, 'The Less Expected', we move from public manifestation to more or less shadowed stages of democratic learning. For Boxu Yang, Yuan Le and Shanshan An, most research into the Internet in China has focused upon the 'Great Fire Wall', to the detriment of other issues related to

Internet use and censorship in China. Their chapter is an intellectual and fascinating invitation to look behind that wall. Through several cases figuring various actors and media, the authors deploy different politically mediated scenes, ranging from pure information to spaces of deliberation. One central feature in all these scenarios is the tension between freedom and control – presenting us with a sort of experimental 'tango' between people and political authorities. All those cases bring some empirical testimonies to John Dewey's approach of the experimental democracy and its public. Although censorship is still well alive in China, these cases should be considered as scenes of democratic learning where the public and the authorities experiment new ways to govern the polity.

The fourth and last part of the present volume, 'Social Media and Media Practices', provides readers with valuable insights about social and policy implications of media practices such as SNS, digital photography and digital television. In 'The Facebook Family', Brian Simpson discusses how ICTs are constructing new forms of regulation of family life. He focuses on how perceived risks about SNS are generating new forms of regulation for families. For example, *Facebook* pages of young people are used by parents to discover why a child has taken their life or gone missing. Spouses or parents may use mobile phone records or tracking software for online activity to check the behaviour of their partner or child. While this may simply be viewed as increased surveillance within the family, it also raises questions about how this changes the nature of participation in family life, whether as partner or parent. Digital technologies generate public or traceable records in traditionally private realms of existence. The author analyses the implications of new media practices and public guidance and corporate safety tips regarding parenting and the notion of parent responsibility nowadays. The potential for surveillance and discipline of social media goes beyond family and the domestic realm.

Lieve Gies' 'The Frenzy of Digital Photography' illustrates the dynamics of power and resistance in relation to everyday uses of digital photography. Body and bodily functions are often at the centre of digital content and this invites a broader reflection on the privileged position of the corporeal in the formation of social identities in digital culture. The reality of Web 2.0, with its enhanced capacity to carry visual content, is that the corporeal is being reaffirmed as the ultimate marker of identity and has become the focus of intense surveillance, a phenomenon that, as Gies argues, has a strong biopolitical undercurrent. Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'bare life' and Jean Baudrillard's 'war porn' are discussed with reference to images of torture from the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, revealing that these extreme cases of shocking and disturbing user-generated content (UGC) share biopolitical elements with digital practices of ordinary users, when truthfulness becomes tantamount to visual, personal and biometric self-revelation.

Privacy, identities and young users practices regarding SNS are discussed as well in Romina Cachia and Alexandra Haché's 'Hyperlinked Avatars'. This chapter explores some of the social externalities arising from young people's increasing interaction through SNS. The aim is to shed light on key emerging areas about how young people interact through SNS and how they appropriate these online spaces, in particular, for identity negotiation and the management of personal networks. People's profiles in SNS are considered as a sort of hyperlinked avatars playing a crucial role in the way young people manage and perform their identities and build their relations. Network capital becomes a growing part of young people social capital, but the authors remind us that significant numbers of young people still remain at the margins of the knowledge society and social networks.

In the last contribution to this section we move from the social implications of people's practices regarding new social media, to the policy implementations of changes regarding old media, such as television, in order to reinforce its participatory character, as television becomes digital. In 'Tracing the Policy Challenges of the Digital Dividend', Lilia Raycheva traces out the major European policy measures, related to the priorities of the transition period from digital terrestrial television switchover to analogue switch-off. Her analysis focuses on the basic European policies for best use of the spectrum dividend during the last decade from the viewpoint of the current digital terrestrial television developments. Pan-European moves for further promotion of the efficient usage of the released frequencies in the audiovisual sector are of major economic, social and cultural importance. One of the key questions in the context of digital switchover refers to the task of best use of the spectrum dividend not only in terms of improvement of the terrestrial broadcasting services, but also in the development of the 'converged' broadcasting services, as well as of the new 'uses' which do not belong to the broadcasting family.

Background

This volume collects a refereed selection of contributions to the international conference 'The Good, the Bad and the Challenging', organised by COST Action 298, 'Participation in the Broadband Society', in Copenhagen, 13-15 May 2009. One strand of this conference was titled 'Humans as e-Actors', from which all papers included here were selected. The international character of the conference ensured the international scope of this book, concerning both the authors and the empirical studies presented here. Contributions are coming from Europe, the United States, China and Australia. A similar diversity is to be found on the level of content, as empirical research on the topic is complemented with novel theoretical insights, and as a variety of forms of participation are systematically addressed: politics, everyday life, family, and leisure. Up until recently, few academic books addressed the issue of participation in conjunction

with media practices. In an attempt to fill this gap in interdisciplinary scholarship, this collection presents new modes of participation that, in turn, serve to revise and redefine the concept of participation itself.

Given this background, the present volume is intended for a readership of scholars and students in Media and Communication Studies, Science and Technology Studies, Sociology, Political Science, but, for its mostly non-technical style, also for technology designers and developers, technology and media consultants, policymakers and public authorities, and for journalists inquiring into the role of new media in forms of social, cultural and political participation.

Part I:

Paradigms of Participation

Leopoldina Fortunati

Online Participation and the New Media

Introduction

Participation is one of the main features of communication. Communication in fact means to put something into a common format so that others can share in it. Broadband technologies, by enhancing communication, are thus also expected to enhance participation. E-actors can participate more actively and with more power in deciding the everyday agenda-setting of public conversation. Thanks to the creativity and will of e-actors, the Internet and the mobile phone have been transformed into instruments increasingly capable of conveying personal and social participation.

In light of these transformations, this paper explores the following questions:
– How can online participation be defined?
– Is it a mode of social communication or a form of political involvement in important discussions?
– Did the advent of the Internet and broadband technologies alter the notion of participation?
– Does online participation enhance, weaken or supplement participation in co-presence?

In this paper I will focus on how a group of young people experience and conceptualise online participation. I will draw my reflections from research I carried out with university students in north-east Italy where I asked more than 150 students to write an essay on participation and the new media. These texts have undergone content analysis with the aim of understanding how young people frame this topic. The most relevant categories of discourse have been analysed and preliminary results are presented here and discussed.

Setting the Context

This paper arises from my interest, both theoretical and empirical, in the relationship between participation and the new media. On a theoretical level, participation is an ambivalent notion, as stated by Luciano Gallino (1993, p. 479), since it has both a 'strong' (direct and active) and a 'weak' (indirect and more passive) meaning. In the robust sense, participation means the intervention of an individual or group in the governance of a community of which he/she/they are members. Individual or group intervention, continues Gallino, represents the concrete act

of contributing to determine the principle goals of community life, to decide how to allocate resources, to outline the model of living together and to decide the distribution of costs and benefits among all members. Thus, a high degree of participation is assumed to be one of the characteristics of democracy. Participation, in this definition, is a political notion and might be considered to be the 'extent to which people as a whole are active in politics: the number of active people multiplied by the amount of their action' (McLean, 1966, p. 362). In particular, political participation is a notion that refers to the concept of 'participatory, direct democracy', in which all citizens should be actively involved for all important decisions. This feature of direct democracy was observed by John Scott and Gordon Marshall (2005, p. 480) in their depiction of the youth and student movements of the 1960s. In practice, this meant that all debates and decisions took place in body-to-body meetings of the whole group.

Other movements, such as the early women's movements, the anti-nuclear and the peace movements of the 1960s and 1970s, applied this kind of political participation. Direct and democratic political participation was also a feature of the ecological and community movements that survived into the 1980s and 1990s. The strength of this kind of internal organisation is that it binds members to the group through their active involvement in all decisions. One of the practical limits is that it slows down and complicates the decision-making process. Scott and Marshall (2005) add that, by general agreement, this form of political participation can be really effective only in groups with at most 500 active members.

In the diluted sense of the term, participation means taking part to a greater or lesser degree in the activities of a group or association: these can be voluntary associations, interest or religious groups. All these forms of participation, which correspond to the notion expressed by Robert Putnam (2000) of bridging forms of social capital, are generally performed regardless of the fact that it is possible for the subject to influence the decisions which are made inside the governance of the related community. The meaning of participation in these cases is to do something together for the community and/or for oneself.

Direct and indirect forms of participation are destined to correlate and combine with different degrees and modalities. But if the weak forms of participation are scarce and contingent, very rarely will there be a high degree of the strong form of participation. The lack of both of the active and more indirect forms of participation is an indicator of social and political marginality. Generally in mass society a scarce presence of strong participation is noted by a high presence of weak participation. The gradual and simultaneous increase of both forms of participation is considered among the indexes of modernisation. There is evidence to show that the best places for considerable participation by the people are industrial democracies and the best strategy is the devolution of power to small territorial units. These in fact seem 'to offer the best possibilities for large numbers

of people to co-operate in the exercise of some real political control over their lives' (McLean, 1966, p. 362).

With both its active and passive meanings, the notion of participation can be read as ambivalent – that is, presenting positive as well as negative features. As is emerging from a number of research projects (Le Bouedec, 1984; Sarrica et al., 2009), participation is characterised both by the capacity to be *included* in the community and to be *excluded* from social life. In particular, the research carried out by Mauro Sarrica et al. (2009) on the social representations of participation shows a case study of young people who are aware that participation in its imperfect mechanisms contains the germ of social exclusion and discrimination. In fact these young respondents denounce the sense of failure and falsity they feel when the contribution of each member is not appreciated in the same way or when competition intervenes and there is a winner and all the others are excluded. These negative experiences might put in motion processes of exclusion (and a sense of delusion) and may lead to social discrimination.

The ambivalence of participation also comes into sharper focus if we consider how participation is valued. According to Iain McLean (1966), it is not a matter of course that more participation produces better decisions, since under many circumstances an increase in participation has caused a reduction in policy quality. Perplexities about the value of participation are expressed by many actors because of the costs of participation with regard to slow, poor quality decisions, or incoherent combinations of policies. These perplexities are so widespread that some scholars read political and social apathy on the part of the majority of people as a kind of contentment or incapacity on the part of citizens to find their way to influence important decisions and events. Nevertheless, it is evident that at the same time participation brings with it a developmental value in educating people, and it enhances both the meaning of their lives and the value of their social relationships (McLean, 1966).

Trying to site my discourse in this decade, I refer to many empirical studies such as that carried out by Putnam (2000) in the US which show in general a reduction of social and political engagement. In the Italian studies IARD (2000) and CENSIS (2001), a decrease of social and political participation was found, in particular on the part of young people. This data is reconfirmed by another research study carried out the following year in north-east Italy (the same location as my research) by the Regional, Permanent Observatory on Youth Condition (Osservatorio regionale permanente sulla condizione giovanile, 2002). In this geographical area participation involves only a minority of young people (14%) and this phenomenon is explained – as expected – by their lack of confidence in their chances of orienting social choices and political strategies and decisions. However, many forms of participation, including new ones, are practised by young people in areas connected to voluntary associations, communities of mutual interest or religiously oriented groups. Very often these forms of participation by

young people are complemented and/or supported by the use of the new media. As Kathryn Montgomery et al. (2004) argue, generation Y represents the first generation of young people to grow up in a world permeated by networks of information, digital devices, and the possibility of perpetual contact and connectivity (see also Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Wellman & Hoogan, 2006). Although adolescents in general, for a variety of reasons, seem to spend less time online than adults, they are much more involved in the communicative and interactive aspects of the Internet (Livingstone, 2007).

Several studies on the use of the Internet for the purpose of participation conclude that people's sense of participation seems to be enabled by the Internet and by its interactive features (Lupia & Philpot, 2002; Pew, 2005). The development of forums, mailing lists, discussion groups, chatrooms, virtual communities, blogs and social networks shows that in particular the Internet has the capacity to enable people's sense not only of participation but also of engagement and exchange. In further studies by Leopoldina Fortunati et al. (2010) and Julian Gebhardt et al. (2010), these mature, contemporary users of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are referred to as e-actors. E-actors have many different merging roles and practices via ICT such as user, producer, citizen, customer, consumer, co-designer or stakeholder.

Technically, the Internet offers the possibility for a circular communication model. But the fact that the Internet is structurally able to offer a more equal communication status to every participant through interactivity and that the communicator and the recipient could all the time change their roles, is a necessary, but far from sufficient condition for more equal participation. In these last two decades several research projects have been carried out with the purpose of investigating if the practices of using Internet communication by young people were responding positively or negatively to this hope (Bessant, 2004; Jensen & Helles, 2005).

With the new media, the issue of participation takes on a more peculiar connotation. Web 2.0 is described as a technology designed and structured in a manner that allows a new 'architecture of participation' encouraging the contribution of users (Governor, et al., 2009). With Web 2.0 people can, for the first time, invert control over information and the processes of its production and diffusion (including the control of software). According to these authors, in the equality of access on the part of the global audience there is a new possibility of augmented participation. However, the degree of participation amongst users remains quite different. There are *primary participators* who make Web 2.0 a vibrant place by providing both information as well as enrichment. And there are *secondary participators* who usually consume information, although they may contribute occasionally in the form of tagging, rankings, reviewing, etc. These users are very probably a larger group of people than the primary participators. Lastly there are users who only *consume* things on the web: lurkers. This is the largest

group of users on Web 2.0, as well as being the predominant group in Web 1.0, and of the traditional mass media, where there was routinely no mechanism by which to participate. Given all these factors, how can online participation be defined? Through the following case study I address some of the earlier questions around participation and its agency (or lack) within the online world.

Aim and Method

To understand the current conceptualisation of the relationship between participation and the new media, a convenience sample of Italian students living in north-east Italy was selected. The large majority of this group is made up of undergraduates born in the late 1980s, thus of young people who can be considered to be 'digital natives'. According to Marc Prensky (2001), digital natives are those that grew up in environments saturated by all kinds of digital technologies. This definition has been criticised for being too generic and misleading (Bennett, et al., 2008). However, in this research it mirrors quite well this convenience sample composed of students of the undergraduate programme on the Multimedia Sciences and Technologies Programme at the University of Udine (Italy), who are very much present online as prosumers (Toffler, 1980).

I charged the students with the task of writing an essay on 'participation and the new media' and recommended that they indicate only their first name to guarantee anonymity. An essay like this might be considered as the answer to an open question. The decision to build in this feature has been dictated by the will to avoid, to a great extent, the so-called effect of social desirability, typical of the answers in questionnaires and interviews (Corbetta, 1999), and to have an instrument which could allow more expressivity and spontaneity in the content. From a formal point of view, the texts obtained have been analysed as artificial documents that do not contain 'reactive' information. As such they are influenced in a very limited way by the interaction between the researcher and the object of study and are less involved with distorting effects. The texts collected were studied by means of content analysis. They were broken down into categories of discourse with the purpose of capturing the most relevant discursive frames on participation and the new media that recur in essays (Altheide, 1996). While the frequencies of the categories were calculated and the most recurrent ones singled out, those categories with relatively few frequencies but which are significant to enlighten or clarify some points of my analysis were also retained and discussed, as David Silverman (1997) suggests. This has allowed me to trace a conceptual map of the discourse on participation outlined by these students and to build a classification scheme, useful in describing the most important issues discussed in an analytical way. The content analysis applied in this way is a markedly non-intrusive and very flexible methodology (McNeill & Chapman, 2005).

Although many aspects of such texts might be analysed, here I limit my analysis only to some of the most relevant issues outlined by the students. These are:

the existence of various dimensions of online participation and in particular the importance of its diachronic dimension; the motivations, needs and content of online participation; the issue of visibility; and finally the main concerns expressed by this group of students about online participation. The results involve issues concerning the development of the information society in Italy as well as participation through new media.

Results

The Various Dimensions of Online Participation

The texts reveal several dimensions of participation involving online communication. First of all, the general notion of participation is discussed by the students. To summarise, as a first step, participation is conceptualised in terms of pure presence, such as attending public debates or demonstrations in the streets or reading political forums. 'Being there' is an important aspect of social and/or political participation, because this shows people's interest or adhesion to an idea or an objective. So, physical presence motivated by interest is the most basic form of participation. The second step is intellectual contribution, and this is a more active form of participation, understood as formulating ideas, analyses, proposals, and so on. This form can help to open/develop a debate, or to create a political program but in any case serves to co-create collective, political knowledge. A more active form of participation involves *influencing the decision-making* on concrete social, political, and economic issues. Finally, the most important form of participation is *influencing the strategies* carried out to resolve key problems and questions, and this is considered the most political form of participation.

These students, however, more often discuss a form of generic, social participation. Only in some cases do they speak about political participation, even though, during data collection, 'The Wave', a social movement of students protesting against the government's reform of schools and universities, was active in Italy. They believe that the Internet is an important tool of social participation. Against those who see in the new media a risk of impoverishment for every form of participation, these students are convinced that the more instruments people have at their disposal, the more dimensions their participation acquires. This sentiment, which was expressed in different ways, is a kind of mantra throughout the essays. According to Federica P.,

> the Internet and the mobile phone contribute to create a new social participation, which is a flow of ideas, often divergent, not aligned, not confluent towards the same point, but adapted to create an exchange, a common sharing. Online participation is different from public demonstrations, but not less useful.

Even the few students who stress the importance of the Internet for political participation argue that online participation represents another, new dimension in comparison with the past.