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FROM STAKEHOLDERS TO JOINT KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION PARTNERS THE PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND TOOLKIT TO STRUCTURE THE PARTICIPATION OF NON-ACADEMIC PARTNERS IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

ACADEMIC RESEARCH INVOLVING SOCIETAL PARTNERS OFTEN APPROACHES THE LATTER AS LESS KNOWLEDGEABLE, NOT POSSESSING THE SKILLS AND AUTHORITY THAT THE ACADEMIC FIELD HAS IN PRODUCING LEGITIMATE KNOWLEDGE. STILL, SEVERAL (ACADEMIC) TRADITIONS HAVE ENGAGED IN PRACTICES THAT DESTABILISE THE NOTION OF THE ACADEMIA AS THE EXCLUSIVE FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, ALBEIT NOT WITHOUT INCONSISTENCIES BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE. BUILDING ON THIS TRADITION, THIS ARTICLE ADDRESSES THE NEED TO INVOLVE SOCIETAL PARTNERS IN THE START-UP PHASES OF PROJECTS THAT AIM FOR PARTICIPATORY KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION. USING (AUTHO)ETHNOGRAPHY THIS ARTICLE REFLECTS ON THE START-UP PHASE OF A RESEARCH PROJECT ON ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION, WHICH INVOLVES A WIDE RANGE OF SOCIETAL ACTORS. IT CRITICALLY EVALUATES THE PARTICIPATORY INTENSITIES OF THE START-UP PHASE PROCESS WHICH INVOLVED A SERIES OF COLLABORATIVE DECISIONS ON HOW TO STRUCTURE PARTICIPATION, AND REPORTS ON THE OUTCOMES OF THIS PROCESS, NAMELY A SET OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND A TOOLKIT AIMING TO FOSTER AND ENABLE PARTICIPATION.

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Introduction

Research projects that involve non-academic partners sometimes approach the latter, mainly or exclusively, as the 'beneficiaries' of the projects' actions. This positioning produces the risk that these societal partners become seen as deficient or as weak, and in need of empowerment. Particular approaches, as for instance participatory action research (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991) and multi-stakeholder partnership approaches (Brouwer et al., 2016), have developed an awareness of these problematics, even if their actual practice has not always managed to resolve all issues.

There is also an extensive literature on how to engage in what is called 'stakeholder participation' and 'stakeholder management' (e.g., Holloway, 2017; Scharioth & Huber, 2008), which is often grounded in business perspectives, and which rarely engages with the theoretical debates on participation. Moreover, if there is any participation at all, it is often restricted to its minimalist versions, hardly touching on the status-quo at societal level (or even at company level). Even if more balanced work certainly exists, for instance, in development theory and practice, there is still space to develop these reflections, methods and practices further, in a diversity of societal fields, and to strengthen the more maximalist-participatory strands.

Our article is concerned with the participatory dynamics of knowledge production, and aims to engage in a discussion about these power dynamics between academic and non-academic partners, keeping in mind the many articulations and integrations of these positions. More in particular, we want to focus on the start-up phase of a specific research project on environmental communication, which has the explicit objective to engage in joint knowledge production with a wide range of societal actors, because start-up phases in particular are prone to be excluded from participatory processes. This article has two objectives. First, it aims to communicate the outcome of this participatory process, where academics and non-academics collectively produced guiding principles for participation in the project and a set of methods ('a participatory toolkit') to enable participatory practices. Even if this first part is more descriptive, we believe that it is important to include these documents. They are the tangible outcomes of a participatory start-up phase, and—while their later application might be worthwhile to study as well—this first phase was autonomous from later stages and had its own particular dynamics, which made it relevant for study. Moreover, communicating these documents is equally relevant, as these operationalisations are useful for all involved in participatory processes, but only rarely published in this form. Secondly, this article will also critically evaluate the participatory intensities of this start-up phase process, grounded in a critical re-reading of the relevant literature, structured by Carpentier's AIP model (the access, interaction and participation model) (Carpentier, 2011, 2015, 2016).

Participation and power

The starting point of this reflection is a theoretical discussion on the AIP model, which allows distinguishing between access, interaction and participation. Following earlier work (Carpentier, 2011, 2015, 2016) that draws from the political studies tradition, participation is defined as a process that is characterised, in its maximalist version, by equalised power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in formal and informal decision-making processes. It is grounded in the idea that society is characterised by a multitude of power inequalities in many different fields, and that participatory processes redress these imbalanced relationships, without (symbolically) annihilating diversity in society—which is the populist version of participation. Participatory approaches acknowledge the importance of, for instance, expertise and leadership, but argue against their monopolisation of expertise and leadership by particular groups in society.

According to the AIP model, access refers to presence, namely the presence of/to specific spaces and places, or to—when it concerns media—media technologies, media organisations and media content (Carpentier, 2011, pp. 130–131). Interaction refers to the establishment of socio-communicative relations, associated to 'concepts such as response, meaning and communication itself' (Carpentier, 2016, p. 74, 2011, pp. 130–131). In this perspective, access and interaction are considered necessary but not sufficient conditions for participation—or, in other words, they are the conditions of possibility for participation—not to be equated with participation, 'as the power-driven, decision-making element renders participation different from access and interaction' (Carpentier, 2015, p. 24).

In the very heart of this approach lies the decentralisation or equalisation of power relations in decision-making processes. Hence, one cannot engage in a discussion about participation, while disregarding the concept of power. One of the widely

shared approaches to power conceptualises power negatively and antagonistically. Power is hence understood as imposition, as the ability of an actor to force other actors to act in specific ways (Dahl, 1968; Parsons, 1967). Also, an opponent's power is a source of threat and danger for the 'other' side; therefore, it is considered legitimate to attempt to control it, by limiting the opponent's potential to act. A variation of this dichotomised perspective—and equally problematic—still describes power as negative, as domination, as being imposed from above or externally, but contrasts it with empowerment, which is seen as positive and liberating (see e.g., Allen, 2003). These binary approaches to power—as either positive or negative, as liberating or restricting—tend to neglect that power relations are dynamic and subject to change, that power and resistance are entangled in not always straightforward ways, and that context (space, time, materiality) matters. Furthermore, such approaches often disregard that action, resistance and empowerment take place within historically specific contexts that are already invested with meaning, promoting the deployment of specific participatory affordances, while ignoring others (Cornwall, 2004; Jupp, 2007; Kesby et al., 2010, pp. 24-25).

This is why we will follow a more encompassing and non-binary approach to power, which centres around a Foucauldian understanding of power as productive, being 'exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations' (Foucault, 1990, p. 94). Power is seen, in this perspective, 'as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization' and 'as the process which ... transforms, strengthens, or reverses' these force relations 'through ceaseless struggles and confrontations' (Foucault, 1990, p. 92). This perspective points to the contingent nature of power relations encompassing the logics of resistance, which is pertinent to our understanding of participation.

This approach to power feeds directly in how we see participation, as the equalisation of power relations. It also allows questioning and critiquing many cases where the signifier participation is used strategically, a critical approach which aligns well with some of the earlier critical deployment of participatory theory (Arnstein, 1969). Our understanding of participation also aligns with the voices of scholars and practitioners who warn against fetishizing particular technologies as necessary facilitators for participation, and participatory research methods 'as some form of Golden Ticket to progressive, respectful or sensitive forms of research' (Russell, 2015, p. 225). Technologies and methods are not inherently participatory, and even if their procedures are participatory, the outcomes and results of these processes might not be. Technologies that can facilitate participation can also be used in non-participatory ways and for non-participatory purposes: They can be used to propagate intolerance and hate, undermine democratic values and practices, and create spaces and politics of exclusion and discrimination (Statzel, 2008). Furthermore, they can be used as a pretext to legitimise hidden agendas of co-optation and suppression, maintaining or enhancing practices and structures of power imbalance and exploitation (Bouchard, 2016).

We should also warn against the celebration of all participatory projects, as especially maximalist forms of participation are famously difficult to organise and maintain. For instance, in development and action-oriented projects that focus on empowering the involved groups or communities, the strategies of empowerment are often designed on the basis of the organiser's vision of empowerment. In such projects, the position of the 'beneficiary' actors who participate is fixated beforehand within the framework of that vision. Their empowerment is framed as the inherently positive ultimate aim, but, as Kesby et al. (2010, p. 23) write, the broader context, and the limits it imposes, are frequently ignored:

> 'When defined at all, empowerment is imagined as a more or less linear process of "enlightenment" ...
> However, this formulation does not recognise that agency itself is constituted from available resources or that empowerment is often experienced as hard to maintain over time and/or space.'

A number of critical scholars have also focussed on the workings of power in participatory projects and practices, arguing that they tend to conceal the fact that they operate within particular power configurations, or that they reproduce existing power hierarchies (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Kesby et al., 2010, p. 21). In addition, participatory processes create space for democratic deliberation, which entails contestation and conflict (Mouffe, 2005). Sometimes such projects address conflict as inherently problematic and destructive, thus to be avoided at all cost, which undermines the workings of participation, which is—arguably—better based on agonistic pluralism.

Participation in organisations

Some academic research traditions tend to focus on a particular field when examining participation (e.g., political participation, media participation, cultural participation). However, we would argue that participation, as the equalisation of power relations, can be deployed in a diversity of societal fields, in relation to an equally vast multitude of societal structures (e.g., organisations, companies, institutions). Our focus on participation in knowledge production, with the strong presence of universities, merits (and requires) to start with a discussion on organisational participation, which has its distinct characteristics and discussions, for instance in relation to how companies organize participation (or not). But the tensions between minimalist and maximalist participatory intensities also occur here, and we can find similar insider/outsider dynamics as in research teams and universities that engage in participatory projects. Moreover, we also need to keep the context of the neo-liberalisation and marketisation of the university and its impact on participatory processes (Brackmann, 2015), in mind, which has brought universities closer to (some of) the logics described in the literature on organisational participation.

One indicator of the struggle over participatory intensities in organisational participation is the label used for the non-privileged ('external') actors, who are engaged in projects and activities in organisations. They are called among others, recipients, beneficiaries, stakeholders, participants, and (societal) partners. Often, the chosen formulation is illustrative of the power position these actors are allocated (and allowed to have) in these processes and settings. The terms 'participant' and 'partner' are usually attributed more agency than the terms 'recipient' and 'beneficiary'. Furthermore, the term 'partner' suggests more equal relations than the other terms. The term 'stakeholder' is a good starting point for this discussion as it has been related to enhanced agency (e.g., Chauke, 2016, in development theory and projects), mixed agency (e.g., Anastasi, 2018, in public administration and policy studies), and to limited agency or negative agency (e.g., Clarkson, 1995; Green & Hunton-Clarke, 2003, in business and management studies).

For Freeman (2010, p. 46), a stakeholder in an organisation is 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives.' A stakeholder is generally understood quite literally, as the one who 'holds a stake' (in the project, in the organisation, etc.) and has some interest in taking action to protect it. When the term is found in management and business-related literature, it is frequently argued that the degree and forms of stakeholder involvement are expected to serve the needs and interests of the organisation. It is argued, for example, that '[a] typology of stakeholder participation for companies must be one that is "company" rather than "community" focussed' (Green & Hunton-Clarke, 2003, p. 295), which is telling of whose interests and power positions will be privileged. Still, there is, in this approach to stakeholding, the acknowledgement that stakeholders have agency and that they 'have power', which is also the reason why they sometimes are seen as a potential risk and threat to the organisation's interests and/or profitability (e.g., Clarkson, 1995). The focus then is placed on the need to manage and channel (and thus limit) the stakeholders' possibilities of action (which is one reason why this literature sometimes refers to 'stakeholder management').

Organisational participation is, of course, not restricted to companies. It also lies in in projects run by non-profit oriented entities, NGOs, etc., which involve societal groups and allow for some degree of participation; yet, the latter are not automatically elevated to more equal power positions. Sometimes, these projects also approach their partners as weak and in need of help (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Miessen, 2010), even if this is sometimes unintentional. In these cases, the projects offer access and interaction, combined with a claim to be empowering their participants, through the skills and knowledge they will acquire through their involvement in the projects. Nonetheless, this potential is structurally limited when the participants are restricted to the recipient's position. For example, a variety of development projects aim to empower groups and communities as it concerns their media literacy capacities. These projects focus on the familiarisation of the target communities with the use of communication technologies, which are expected to enhance their (digital) media literacy and help reduce the digital divides between the (global) North and South. Such projects, while offering the opportunity to the involved communities to develop some skills, are often technologically-centred, even when they do not fall into the trap of technological determinism (Mody, 1988). They bear the traces of modernisation theory which was dominant in 1950s–1970s, based on which the transfer of technology and growth models from the 'developed' world to 'traditional' or 'underdeveloped' societies will bring general prosperity to the 'third-world' (Lerner, 1962; Schramm, 1964). Even if this approach is now considered outdated, and many NGOs have moved towards projects with more intense levels of participation, this 'old' approach has still left a legacy, as it concerns how growth and progress should be perceived, and what the roles and positions of the involved people in these processes should be (for a critical evaluation, see, e.g., Escobar, 1995; Servaes, 1999; Servaes & Liu, 2007).

Participation in knowledge production

In this text, we are interested in how participatory logics can be deployed in academia, as a key location of knowledge production. As Bourdieu (1988) writes, the university field—as he calls it—is 'like any other field, the locus of a struggle to determine the conditions and the criteria of legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy [...].' Even if this renders academia contingent and ultimately unfixed, we can safely argue that the production and communication of knowledge is at the very heart of academia, acting as its master signifier. Knowledge—or, discourses whose truth claims have become hegemonised—is understood in our study as context-specific in its creation, apprehension, (re)appropriation and deconstruction. Knowledge is produced not only by academic actors, but by a diversity of actors involved in the meaning-making process, despite academia's still high levels of status when it comes to the production of what is considered legitimate knowledge. Furthermore, knowledge is produced both materially and immaterially, having both material and discursive implications and manifestations.

While some academic perspectives maintain that it is possible to produce 'neutral' knowledge, our approach to epistemology moves away from this position, without arguing for a radical relativism in science and for the demise of scientific methods of work. Instead, we want to bring attention to the need for an affective, inclusive, respectful to difference and accountable epistemological standpoint, that acknowledges academia as a semi-autonomous field, without granting it a monopoly on knowledge production, or on the criteria for establishing truth. Accountability in affect-oriented science echoes the need of reflexively examining one's positionality, by acknowledging her/his limitations and biases and, in our case, questioning the researcher's practice of knowledge production (Rose, 1997). Haraway (1988, p. 584), laying out the principles of what she calls a feminist objectivity, advocates for partial, situated, embodied and critical knowledges, stressing that

> 'Feminist accountability requires a knowledge tuned to resonance, not dichotomy... Feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning' (Haraway, 1988, p. 588).

These epistemological principles around the construction of—contingent, embodied, ethically driven—knowledge also allow us to think about collaborative trans-field knowledge production. In other words, these epistemologies allow us to consider more maximalist forms of participation of non-academic knowledge producers *in* the field of academia, with its performances of what Ruth (2008) calls authorship, authenticity and authority. As we are interested in participation *in* the academic field, and not so much in participation *through* the academic field—see Carpentier (2011, p. 67) on this distinction in the media field—the question becomes how these core practices (and identity components) are opened up for power sharing.

Several (academic) traditions have translated these epistemologies into practice, being engaged with participatory modes of collaborating with societal groups and communities. These research strands and their related projects, encountered in a variety of fields—including development, media and cultural institutions, and the environment (with the considerable presence of citizen science in the latter case, see Dickinson & Bonney, 2012)—have a critical, engaged and change-oriented agenda (Joosse et al., 2020), involving non-academic partners in the research process, joining forces with local communities and civil society in their efforts for social change (Endres et al., 2009; Kemmis et al., 2014; Raphael, 2019). Their focus allows, under certain conditions, for maximalist forms of participation. These participatory modalities and intensities relate to the degree and forms of partner involvement, the roles and positions of the actors involved, and the decision-making processes and practices.

One such example is (participatory) action research,[1] where knowledge is largely evaluated on the basis of 'whether the resulting action solves problems for the people involved and increases community self-determination' (Kindon et al., 2010, p. 14). Participatory action research brings together different strands of research and theoretical traditions from the social sciences and humanities, ranging from, e.g., Freire's (2018/1970) approach to emancipatory education, based on community-led processes that support people's involvement in knowledge production and social transformation; Fals Borda's (2006) engagement with emancipatory research that fosters social change; and diverse approaches to development that reject a top-down process and argue for people's involvement as agents of their own development (Chambers, 1994). Participatory action research is generally described as

> 'a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes ... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with

others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities' (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 1).

This type of research emphasises the situated and affective nature of knowledge, which becomes the product of an 'embodied and emotional intellectual practice' (Kindon et al., 2010, p. 14). In this process, which nurtures democratic and inclusive practices of knowledge production, knowledge is created collectively by all engaged actors (academic and non-academic), which are involved in the different stages of knowledge production (Lang et al., 2012; Pohl et al., 2010; Voorberg et al., 2015). This practice, apart from acknowledging the societal partners 'as competent and reflexive agents capable of participating in all aspects of the research process' (Kindon et al., 2010, p. 14), allows also for generating knowledge that is socially relevant and meaningful. These values and methods urge for the need to reflexively investigate one's own research practice (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). As Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 7) argue, participatory action research 'asks us to be both situated and reflexive, to be explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research.'

In participatory action research, knowledge derives not only from the products, the outcomes, but also from the processes, which is valued equally, as it allows for participants' skills and capacities, and thus knowledge to be developed through the collaborative experience (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). This approach to knowledge production includes both its material and immaterial dimensions, as, for example, knowledge is produced in material spaces that foster dialogue and exchange of ideas. In this configuration, the contradictions and the contingency of the social are not cleared out from the research process, but the research is flexible and adjustable to accommodate important aspects of this messiness. Furthermore, this research strand, while being change-oriented, at the same time acknowledges that social problems are complex, multi-dimensional and often intractable, and that they 'can only be partially addressed and partially resolved' (Kindon et al., 2010, p. 14).

Participatory action research, therefore argues for the situated nature, not only of the topics and issues that are addressed through the research, but also of the roles and positions of the involved (academic and non-academic) actors, groups and communities, and of how the different parties are understood and how they construct their own subject positions. In this configuration, the notions of stakeholder, participant, partner, researcher, but also of power (sharing), and knowledge (creation and sharing), are constructed in specific settings as the outcome of interactions among the different actors and of the limitations and affordances of their environment, in contingent and dynamic processes.

Unsurprisingly, many of the problems that haunt participation in general also apply here. In particular, the issue of the broader or long-term impact of the participatory activities, taking place in participatory action-oriented projects, has been addressed by a number of scholars that have looked at collaborative knowledge production. For example, as Joosse and her colleagues argue (2020, p. 764), the transformative potential of co-production is far from given, requiring continuous efforts.

Moreover, even if this strand of research generally acknowledges the capacity of societal partners in producing knowledge, the recognition of the latter's—in some areas high—levels of expertise, is also sometimes neglected, or not used to its full potential, and they are prevented from entering the more protected parts of the academic field, such as those related to authorship. What is even less frequently acknowledged is that through such collaborations and this mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, it is not only the societal partners who get empowered, but the academic partners as well, for instance, through being invited—on the basis of reciprocity—to participate in fields outside academia, where academic researchers do not have a privileged status, or even access.

The case of the 'environmental communication in media and art' project

We can illustrate these dynamics through a case study analysis of the work of a particular research team,[2] in which both authors of this article hold key positions. This team is part of a broader four-year research programme on environmental communication,[3] called the MISTRA Environmental Communication (MEC) Research Programme. Funded by the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research (MISTRA), with a total budget of close to 60 million SEK, this programme started in December 2019. The specific project (and research team) that is studied here concerns one of the research programme's work packages.

This work package has a double focus: firstly, it explores the discursive struggles between the different environmental and sustainability discourses that circulate in media and the arts,[4] in Sweden, and, secondly, it aims to develop strategies to open up existing discursive patterns and constellations for a constructive engagement with alternative perspectives in communicating about the environment.

One of the building blocks of the project is its team—with the term 'team' used to refer to the group of academic researchers and societal partners involved in this work package—working together in a collaborative and participatory fashion throughout all the project's research stages. This collaborative fashion of work is expected to enable the team to jointly build knowledge concerning engaging, and relevant for society, ways of communicating about the environment. Currently, the project team consists of five academic researchers (one of them leading the work package project), one communication officer, one finance officer, and 15 societal partners related to art, media, and organisations and companies active in the areas of nature and the environment.

The participatory dimension is thus an integral part of the project and not a complementary component added to increase its attractiveness. This has been translated into a series of strategic decisions taken during the phase of research design and the initial stage of implementation, in order to protect the project's participatory logics. The first concerns the characterisation of the non-academic collaborators of the project. The term 'societal partner'—over that of, e.g., 'participant'—has been adopted (after using at an early stage, a variety of terms, including 'stakeholder'), in order to better serve the participatory orientation of the project. One term that is also used is 'joint knowledge production partner', given the focus of the project on knowledge production, which is approached not as taken-for-granted, but as a goal to be achieved. The second strategic choice concerned the decision to have resources dedicated to the project's collaborative and participatory activities. One of the academic researchers, and main author of this article, has as her primary area of responsibility the collaboration with the societal partners and the coordination of the participatory activities.

One other decision concerns the level of societal partners' involvement in the academic research process. The four-year work package activities are planned in such a way as to involve the societal partners in all its research stages, from the early beginning of the project. Quite often in participatory processes, most of the elements structuring that process have been put in place before the participants are invited into the process. Here, even if the research programme proposal was written by a small writing team of academics, a (substantial part of) the societal partners were invited in during the programme's development stage. Moreover, once the application was approved, and the financial resources were secured, the team immediately (in the start-up phase) engaged in discussions about the desired participatory intensities, the guiding principles of the participatory process and the tools enabling participation.

In practice, this implied that a participatory process had to be organised to set up the framework that would create the conditions of possibility for the team to work in a participatory fashion. Experience in action- and engaged-oriented projects has shown that participation does not 'just happen' (Joosse, 2020, p. 7). It requires planning, coordination and the investment of resources so that the conditions of possibility are activated. Through these participatory activities, that take all actors' specific interests and preferences into account, a set of opportunities and vehicles have been created, not only for the collective production of knowledge, but also for the participation of non-academics in the academic field, feeding into the theoretical, research-focussed and applied components of the project. One of the crucial outcomes was the idea to provide a structured but diverse range of participatory tools, allowing for different degrees of power sharing to accommodate the team's internal diversity, ranging from consultation to co-production and independent production by the societal partners,[5] or, in other words, ranging from interaction, over minimalist participation to maximalist participation in the academic field.

This participatory process about participation consisted of different stages, where an initial proposal of the guiding principles and the participatory toolkit—a draft prepared by the work package leader and by the participatory activities coordinator—was presented to the team in its first meeting, in January 2020. The results of the discussion were then used to further develop both documents. Given the particular importance of the participatory toolkit, one additional iteration—using a separate note for each tool—was organised, and this newly generated feedback was integrated as well. After further revisions, both documents were returned to the team (together with a contextualising paper), offering its members the opportunity to further engage with these documents using the whole range of tools from the participatory toolbox. Two tools were particularly stressed, linked to two strategies: Providing 'mere' feedback to the documents (the 'sounding board' tool) on the one hand, and becoming one

of their co-authors, implementing changes directly into the documents and negotiating them with the other authors (the 'co-production' tool), on the other. Several team members decided to provide general feedback, which was used to improve and finalise both these two documents, and this article.

Guiding principles

The first document that was produced in this participatory setting contained a set of guiding principles that describe the values and responsibilities that underpin the team's interactions and collaborations, and how knowledge production is apprehended. These principles (see Table 1) operationalise, in a fairly accessible language, the basic ideas of (and behind) maximalist participation.

- *Participation is based on invitations, not on obligations.* This principle reflects the voluntary involvement on the part of societal partners (and academic partners). At the same time, in order to facilitate the process, the project addresses regular invitations for participatory activities, which have a basic structure and are coordinated by one researcher, so as to protect the project's participatory dimension.
- *Equality, respect and transparency matter to all of us.* This principle underpins all interactions and collaborative activities. Building a team of equal partners is tied to respecting each member's position and contribution, avoiding instrumentalising the 'other'. Also, being transparent about research methods, procedures and output is seen as one of the cornerstones of equality.
- *Reciprocity matters, which implies taking each other's interests into account.* The team of academic researchers and societal partners is diverse. There are efforts, to the degree that it is possible, to accommodate each member's interests and preferences in the project's variety of activities. Also, the project's activities are aimed at avoiding harming its members' interests.
- *There are barriers, we should be aware of them, and limit their impact.* Restrictions should not be ignored. The team should not disregard, or try to hide under the carpet, differences and disagreements, but deal with them in dialogical and respectful ways.
- *We are not responsible for each other's activities, unless we decide together to have joint activities and to have collective responsibility for them.* This principle reflects the need of team members to maintain their autonomy. In particular, societal partners shall not be made responsible for the project's activities and output, as these actors might not feel comfortable being engaged in some project tasks and processes.
- *Knowledge is situated and context-dependent.* The project is based on the premise that knowledge is produced in specific settings by all involved actors. It also advocates for an affect-oriented approach to knowledge and knowledge producers, embracing the multiplicity and multidimensionality that knowledge production entails.
- *We are all experts/knowledgeable in our fields, even if we are different, and our knowledges are different.* Academic researchers are not the privileged ones with the qualities of knowledgeability and expertise. Hence, expertise is not restricted to academic knowledge, and specific types of knowledge and expertise are not a priori privileged over others.
- *Our competences may be partially different, but can be used in complementary ways.* The project acknowledges each team member's unique set of competences, experiences and expertise. Difference matters, it is fruitful and constructive and we should profit from it.
- *We'll try for joint knowledge production, something academics are not always really good at.* This principle is reflexive of the academic researchers' positionality and the restrictions and limitations in the academic field, in partnering with non-academic actors in producing knowledge.
- *Hopefully, together, we can give something to society.* This principle is the starting point for reflection on issues of knowledge transferability outside the research setting, to the broader society.

Table 1 *The Guiding Principles*

Participatory tools

The second document that was produced in this participatory setting listed the five tools to be used to structure future interaction and participation. As indicated earlier, the project is structured in such a way that it includes a variety of participatory and collaborative activities (with varying participatory intensities—including more minimalist approaches), to be deployed throughout all the research stages and during each of the four years of the project, coordinated by a designated researcher. This participatory toolkit consists of the tools mentioned in Table 2.

- **Sounding board group**: The project team acts as a 'sounding board' providing feedback on documents generated by the academic researchers (sometimes in collaboration with societal partners). These documents may concern notes on research methods, procedure and implementation, collected and analysed data, but also drafts of reports of research findings and (academic) articles.
- **Unconferences:** Informal, not tightly structured meetings around a jointly agreed topic, usually suggested by the societal partners, on issues of shared concern (about the environment and/or communication) among the team. Unconferences combine short presentations and devoted time for discussion among the participants.
- **(Video) letters** are meant to instigate intellectual dialogue and reflection about issues of common concern. A letter can be sent through a video, audio or text format from one member of the team to another member, addressing a question, or inviting for a comment or reflection. The recipient is then requested to respond to the letter, using the format of her/his preference.
- **Public lectures** will be offered by the team's societal partners. The publics (including the other team members) will have the opportunity to profit from the societal partners' expertise, as they share their practice- and experience-related knowledge, which has been developed in their field of activity.
- **Co-production:** The set of activities that relate to the collective production and communication of knowledge is broad, and connects to different societal fields (including academia). It involves, for example, the joint production of videos, co-authorship of texts and academic articles, and the co-curation of an arts exhibition, with the latter one scheduled to be organised during the last year of the project.

Table 2 *Participatory Tools*

These five tools can be mapped using the AIP model, as they intentionally range from forms of interaction to maximalist participation, to facilitate the transformation of stakeholders into knowledge production partners. Furthermore, these tools allow for both material (e.g., co-authored texts) and immaterial (e.g., dialogue and conversation during the unconferences) knowledge production. Moreover, Figure 1 also shows how some tools have a more individual dimension, while other tools involve multiple actors.

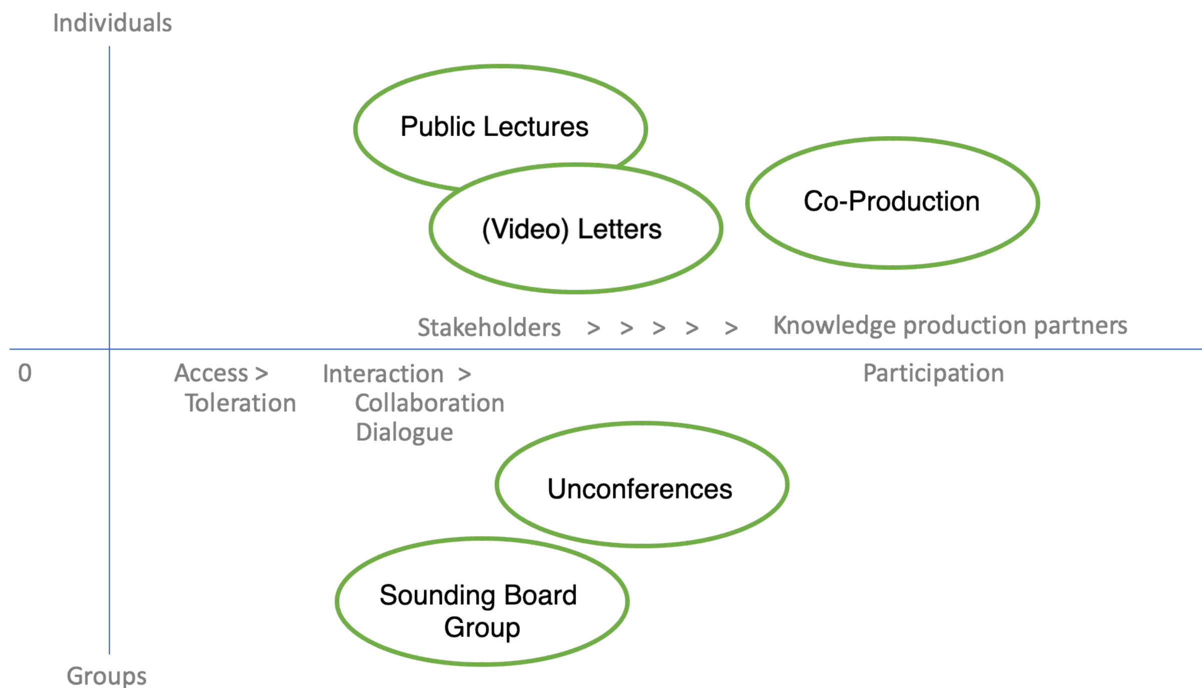

Figure 1 *The five tools and their participatory intensities*

Based on a participatory activities plan, these activities are planned to be initiated through invitation by the participatory activities coordinator, or by the other team members, depending on the activity. As it regards their frequency, unconferences, public lectures and (video) letter invitations will each be organised minimally twice a year. As it regards the activation of the sounding board group, its frequency will vary, depending on the needs and research stages, but the principle is that the team's time investment (for providing feedback) remains reasonable to guarantee sustainability. Similarly, the activation of knowledge co-production activities will vary in frequency, intensity and modes, depending on opportunities and active interest.

Evaluating the challenges in a participatory start-up phase

The participatory dynamics of the project offer many possibilities for societal partner engagement in ways that foster enhanced and maximalist forms of participation. But the encountered limitations also need to be acknowledged; not to reject them, or to allow them to block the participatory potential of the project, but by raising awareness around them with transparency and honesty, to later work with them in an enabling fashion. In this part, we will evaluate this start-up phase, deploying an academic perspective with the inclusion of self-reflexive moments. Methodologically, this evaluation[6] is driven by an (auto)ethnographic analysis of the process (Bruner, 1993; Ellis et al., 2011), led by one of the team's researchers, strengthened by a discourse analysis (Titscher et al., 2000) of fieldnotes and the team's output during the first seven months of its operations (December 2019 – June 2020). It is worth stressing here that autoethnography 'involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing' (Maréchal, 2010, p. 43), and connects 'the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Engaging with this method allows us to pay attention and do justice to the self-reflexive dimension of the project.

The fieldnotes were produced during three meetings among the team members (two in-person, in January 2020 and one online, in June 2020). The output includes both the final documents (of the guiding principles and the participatory toolkit), and the feedback and contributions communicated among the team members during the stages of drafting, revising and finalising the two documents, shared via online collaborative documents and emails. The collected material was coded and analysed

using the principles and methods of qualitative content analysis (Saldaña, 2009). The discourse analysis, used to identify main themes (challenges), was guided by a macro-textual approach to discourse, focussing on meaning (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007). The analysis of the material was then shared with the team members, and their input allowed for the analysis' further enrichment and improvement.

It should be taken into consideration that during the (second half of) the project's start-up phase, many interactions had to be organised through distant and asynchronous modes of communication, within the context of the 'pandemic conditions' of COVID-19, which has not been highly inviting and supportive of engagement and commitment. It is worth mentioning that the team's first meeting was an unofficial get-together, in January 2020, in the form of a party, to celebrate the start of the project. This face-to-face get-together was followed by a more formal two-day kick-off event of the entire research programme with the participation of the programme's numerous project teams. Even if some of the team members were meeting for the first time in these encounters, the physical settings did allow for discussions and interaction, on more egalitarian terms, not necessarily at the level of decision-making, but at the performative level of communication which allows for spaces of dialogue and respect to be created. Later in that year, when physical meetings became more difficult, a switch to online meetings, email communication and online collaborative writing had to be made.

This participatory project-start-up process effectively resulted in a series of collective decisions, on the guidelines and toolkit, but this was not an easy process, and a number of challenges occurred. These are discussed in the following part.

Access: The project application was written by a small writing team of academics, but from the very beginning societal partners were brought in. They engaged in dialogues with the writing team (as all contributions to the project had to be made explicit). Nevertheless, in this initial phase, the writing team had a strong power position, coordinating the six university partners, ten public authorities and agencies, eight companies, and ten NGOs. More organisations joined later, after the project application was approved. One of the challenges, for the research team of the work package we are focussing on in this article, was to invite societal partners from diverse fields to join the project application. The media-related actors were the most reluctant and most difficult to engage—either on an institutional or individual basis. In contrast, the art-related actors were the most enthusiastic. Furthermore, the research team was glad to receive fairly positive responses by a diverse group of associations, ranging from art museums to hunters' associations, that would not necessarily collaborate automatically in other contexts. Among the reasons of non-involvement, the lack of time and/or resources was stated frequently. Another reason, not always explicitly mentioned, seemed to be a reluctance by institutional actors to be associated with the project's initiatives, fearing that some of these initiatives might not align with their organisations' remit and activities, thus jeopardising their independence.

Recourses: The need for resources for the project's activities was also an issue of concern for some of the societal partners that actually joined the project. As one of the societal partners who does not have a project budget put it: 'I wonder how it looks when it comes to the issue of budget for all these participatory activities and tools. This would help a lot to orient ourselves in what is doable and not doable for both [the research programme and our organisation]' (personal communication between societal partner and participatory activities coordinator, April 2020). The financial structure of the project is highly complex, with all university partners having a project budget, a number of NGOs also having their own project budget, a number of non-academic partners contributing to the project budget, and a number of non-academic partners not being financed by, and not financing, the project. A short version is that the access of non-academics to the project's financial resources is less straightforward and structural in comparison to the academic researchers. A major challenge of the project is to deal with these structural differences in a fair and transparent way. At the same time, some of the most active societal partners are not guaranteed any resources support,[7] while on the contrary, partners who are entitled to project resources, based on the partnership agreements that are part of the research programme,[8] have not been active.

Familiarity: Engagement, initiative and agency, as processes and practices, were not automatic, but took time to develop, both when it concerned societal partners and academic researchers. This was especially true for the societal partners and academic researchers who joined after the project actually started, but it also applied to the representatives of societal partners

that replaced those who were involved in the initial project development stage. Hence, possible reluctance to take initiative at the early stages of the project is not surprising, given some team members' unfamiliarity with the project and with each other.

Flexibility and adjustability: Yet another difficulty encountered related to the need to maintain ongoing activities, while at the same time keeping a flexible format, allowing the partners to engage at their own pace and capacity. This is connected with the challenge to maintain the balance in offering a broad variety of participatory activities and not overwhelming any of the team members by asking them to invest too much of their time. This effort to be participatory *and* efficient was experienced sometimes as a tension by the team. The strive for maximalist forms of participation that often require considerable time investment felt as being at odds with the need to respect deadlines and the demands for productivity. One way to address this tension was for academic researchers and societal partners to work together in performing an affective logic of efficiency—not only caring for each other's perspectives, but also for each other's time and energy investment—that balanced the provision of adequate time for the participatory activities and the cultivation of a sense of responsibility towards the project's requirements.

Comfort: An additional challenge, and responsibility, in particular for the coordinators (but in principle for all) was to protect the shared space where all team members were comfortable in maintaining the conversation. Creating this affective, safe space of trust, respect and appreciation, required time, but also self-awareness, for instance, regarding the use of academic language in the interactions with the societal partners. This alertness did not reflect the belief that 'non-academics' have trouble understanding, but the need to nurture a space that does not create exclusions, or cements the division of academics vs non-academics. Academic jargon, as all forms of communication, makes sense in specific contexts, while in others it becomes irrelevant. Caution was needed at all times, avoiding, for instance, the use of a language that legitimises the academic authority over and above the authority of other actors.

Differences in motivations and expectations: The main reason for becoming involved, that united all team members, was the interest for the environment, which was then associated with a diverse set of motivations. Some partners apprehended the engagement with such initiatives as a form of societal responsibility. Some others saw a direct relation with their professional activity, and were interested in exploring new ways of communicating about the environment for professional purposes. Also, some were disappointed with, or frustrated by, the ways that environmental issues are being communicated and discussed upon in the public arena, and wished to engage in alternative and/or more efficient ways of communication. This diversity of motivations and expectations needed to be addressed; that is, inquired, discussed, acknowledged and be respected. During the kick-off meeting of the project, the societal partners were asked to talk about their motivations in engaging with the project, and their expectations. This was done informally, as the idea was that a formal process at the beginning would not work, since partners need some time to digest what the project is about and how it works, and decide if they want to get involved and what their preferred ways of engagement would be.

Cohesion: The varied nature of the group's composition posed challenges in the effort to create coherence among the group, and to cultivate and maintain the sense of relevance, and some sense of community. Thus, apart from the challenge of long-term engagement, the different expectations by the different members, which also changed over time, that needed to be balanced, had to be taken into consideration and dealt with. The difficulty of balancing different expectations was also related to responding to enthusiastic societal partners and academic researchers who want to engage in activities not pertinent to the project while not demotivating them. Honesty and clarity about the project's limitations, in terms of focus, priorities and available resources, turned out to be important in this regard.

Responsiveness: The degree and forms of responsiveness by the partners, during the discussions regarding the participatory activities of the project, varied, including general positive support, open and indirect suggestions, as well as specific suggestions and volunteering to be actively engaged and/or organise some of the activities. Some societal partners could relate to the suggested participatory activities, and communicated their preferences and information about their time availability.

Unsurprisingly, at the very start of the process, the lack of familiarity placed all except the team coordinators in a 'listening' position, not defining themselves as acting partners. As one of the societal partners mentioned, '[our organisation] will be more of a listening partner at this stage, and hopefully we can be one of the "stages" for future [events]' (personal communication between societal partner and participatory activities coordinator, May 2020). The transfer and/or sharing of ownership, resulting in the (non-coordinating) academic researchers and societal partners also taking leading roles, took time. Eventually, the academic and societal partners collaborated on the construction of the guidelines and toolkit, and did volunteer to use the tools they co-designed and act as organisers of activities, to lead an unconference, or host a public lecture (all settings where they decide themselves on the topics and the speakers, setting the agenda of environmental issues of public concern).

Loss of interest or enthusiasm: As (almost) all projects that involve a number of members on a voluntary basis, this project also faced challenges related to the partners' potential loss of interest or enthusiasm in the process, lack of time, or changing priorities, even in the start-up phase. In particular one societal partner (from the artistic field) went silent, and informally withdrew after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe hard, stating that it was difficult for them to be engaged in what was not seen as one of its core tasks. As one of the academic researchers of the research programme mentioned, after getting in touch with the organisation's representative, 'they had been overwhelmed by the COVID-19 situation and not had time to respond properly' (personal communication between academic researchers, including the participatory activities coordinator, June 2020).

At the end of this start-up phase, which consisted of structuring the participatory activities in a participatory way, the first opportunities revealed themselves. A number of new ideas developed by the societal partners, for activities both within the structured participatory framework and for activities outside this framework, indicate that there is considerable potential for initiative, creativity and agency to be deployed. One such example comes out of the organisation of the first unconference, which was around a topic suggested by one of the societal partners, with the participation of partners as speakers (discussing issues related to the temporal dimensions of the environment). Furthermore, some of the activities suggested by the societal partners remain within the research project's aims and focus, but are at the same time broader, and connect and intersect with societal spheres and activities outside the project. One example is a project consisting out of the organisation of a symposium for museum professionals communicating on issues of sustainability, which will also be co-financed by the research programme. The second one is a workshop on 'Silencing/Unsilencing Nature', using participatory photography methods to sensitise youngsters to better understand what Barad (2007, p. 246) calls 'agential matter'. Of course, these are early examples, but they show the rhizomatic dynamics of the project, enabled by the guiding principles and the participatory toolkit.

Conclusion

When research foundations suggest—or require—to include what is still often referred to as stakeholder participation in large-scale academic research projects, this is often easier said than done. Even if participatory theory is well developed, a considerable part of the literature (on organisational and/or stakeholder participation) tends to equate interaction and participation, and tends to be satisfied when minimalist participation is achieved. Or, to use Bonney et al.'s (2009) categorisation, there is a tendency towards contributory projects, and less towards collaborative and co-created projects. Moreover, there is a considerable literature on participatory principles and tools, but these are not always well adjusted towards participation in knowledge production, and participation in the academic field. There are, of course, exceptions, and this project has no claim on absolute novelty. For instance, participatory action research has played a vital role in restructuring the relations between academics and non-academics, but even participatory action research, with its appreciated focus on collaborative societal change, talks less about academic change.

While academic research does have the ability to create spaces for participation, which nurture the conditions for decentralising and rebalancing power, still, maximalist participation in itself is not easy to achieve, as the project we discussed here also shows. Empowerment, co-production and participation can easily become empty shells, concealing the maintenance and consolidation of power imbalances. At the same time, cultivating and achieving conditions and practices of power sharing on

equal terms, at the levels of self-determination, of co-decision and co-action, is valuable, but requires a constant and energy-consuming effort.

Opening up the doors of academia a bit more, and validating the knowledge production capacities of non-academics, is still valuable, precious and potentially beneficial for all involved. But this requires careful manoeuvring, to prevent structural imbalances becoming—consciously or unconsciously—engrained into the process. It necessitates particular skills from the side of the academic researchers, who still need to act as guides, navigating all team members through the mazes of academia, and who need to be willing and capable of moving out of their own comfort zone—the academic field—in other to perform reciprocity and actively engage in other societal fields. Equally important are the skills of non-academics, for instance, in relation to better understanding—or at least tolerating—the ritualistic practices, linguistic repertoires and systematicity that characterise academia.

Moreover, it is crucial to pay attention to the early stages of these kinds of participatory processes, where they need to be organised in order to collectively decide how participation will be organised. As our project evaluation showed, this is again far from easy. At the same time, having this first (and intense) phase of 'participation about participation' remains necessary, and this project has managed to successfully complete—albeit not without problems—this first phase, which has produced a series of guidelines and a participatory toolkit that will continue to provide support during the remaining part of the project and that are—we believe—easily transferable sources of inspiration for other (knowledge production) projects.

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Endnotes

1 Participatory action research is a subset of action research. The literature we use here sometimes refers to action research in general, and to participatory action research in particular. To facilitate text legibitily, we will use participatory action research consistently.

2 See https://www.slu.se/en/subweb/mistra-ec/focus-areas/media--arts/ and https://mistra.fsv.cuni.cz

3 See https://www.slu.se/mistraec

4 The work package focuses on the study of audio-visual media, social media, and the arts (television series/serials, documentary films, blogs, YouTube channels, Facebook groups, art projects and exhibitions), keeping their cross-sections in mind.

5 The project is designed in such a way that there is space for societal partners to engage in collaboration and dialogues among themselves, without the academic researchers' 'intervention', to channel their energy and creativity in activities and topics of their preference.

6 All project team members (societal partners and academic researchers) have given their consent to study this process, and to collect and analyse the material needed for this purpose (record meetings, take notes, collect and analyse reports and other output). A note has also been added in the team's intranet space describing the logics of consent, as well as the members' right to revoke consent any time they wish, or to ask for specific material (or activity) not to be used for these research purposes. Team members whose communication was cited in this article provided explicit consent for having these citations included.

7 Societal partner-initiated activities can receive additional financial support by the research programme.

8 The research programme includes a number of societal partners that participate in the programme through in-kind contribution. Some of them receive compensation for the time they invest in the programme's activities.