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DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN ACCESS, INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION¹

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Participation, Access, Interaction, Media technology, Media content, Media organization, Audience, Media producer

ABSTRACT

Participation has regained a remarkable presence in academic debates within Communication and Media Studies, amongst other fields and disciplines. At the same time, the concept of participation has remained vague because of its frequent and diverse usages and its intrinsically political nature, which renders it difficult to use in an academic context. Conceptual clarity is generated through a combination of negative-relationist and interdisciplinary strategies. The former means that an argument is made in favour of a more focussed meaning of participation, on the basis of a comparison with two other concepts, access and interaction. The interdisciplinary strategy consists of a broad theoretical re-reading that focuses on the academic literature in which these distinctions are made, or where the independent nature of one of the three concepts is particularly emphasized. At the end of this text, the different meanings of access, interaction and participation are structured and integrated in a model, which is labelled the AIP model.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the field of communication and media studies, participation has developed into an important concept, making its reappearance to provide meaning to, and a democratic horizon for, the contemporary media configuration and its relations to a variety of other societal spheres. Participation within and through the media has again become one of the normative anchor points to discuss and appreciate future directions of this contemporary media configuration. At the same time, the concept of participation, as will be argued later on, has remained rather vague because of its frequent and diverse usages and its intrinsically political nature. Of course, conceptual vagueness is omnipresent in academia and should not be over-problematized. Moreover, it remains crucial not to ignore the contingency and structural openness of the signifier participation; but at the same time, some form of discursive fixity is required in order to allow for this concept to be analyzed and used.

The research strategy used in this text to clarify the concept of participation is a negative-relationist and interdisciplinary one. Negative-relationist here means that the argument in favour of a more focussed meaning of participation is made on the basis of a comparison with two other concepts, access and interaction, elucidating the differences between these three concepts. The theoretical assumption here is that these notions are still very different – in their theoretical origins and in their respective meanings. Nevertheless, they are often integrated (or conflated) into definitions of participation. One example here is Melucci's (1989: 174) definition, when he says that participation has a double meaning: "It means both taking part, that is, acting so as to promote the interests and the needs of an actor as well as belonging to a system, identifying with the 'general interests' of the community."

With all due respect to these approaches, if we revisit the theoretical discussions on participation (and access and interaction) within a variety of academic fields, we can still find numerous layers of different meanings that can be attributed to the three concepts, fleshing out the distinctions between them. This is why the analysis in this text does not remain limited to the field of communication and media studies, but extends into a wide variety of other fields. This interdisciplinary strategy of theoretical re-reading consequently focuses on the academic literature where these distinctions are made, or where the independent nature of one of the three concepts is particularly emphasized.

In addition, the negative-relationist and interdisciplinary strategy also allows the defining of four areas where access, interaction and participation are seen to be at work: technology, content, people and organizations. These four areas, together with the production/reception dimension, are used to structure the different meanings that are attributed to access, interaction and participation; meanings which are integrated in a model (labelled the AIP model²) at the end of this text.

2 The AIP model has been discussed in earlier publications (see Carpentier, 2011), although the more extensive and explicit elaboration of its three components in this text is new.

ACCESS

As a concept, access is very much part of everyday language, which makes clear definitions rather rare. At the same time, access is utilized conceptually in a wide variety of (academic) fields, which we can use to deepen our understanding of this concept. One area where access is often used is geography, when access to specific spaces is thematized. More historical (spatial) analyses deal with access to land, and the enclosure of common fields (Neeson, 1996), while more contemporary analyses add a focus on access to other resources such as food (Morton, 2008) and water (Wegerich & Warner, 2004). A second area where access is prominently present is disability studies. For instance, Titchkosky (2011: 3) describes access as “a way people have of relating to the ways they are embodied as beings in the particular places where they find themselves.” But as Jaeger and Bowman (2005: 63) remark, access debates in relation to disability have not been limited to physical access (access to objects and places), but also include intellectual access (access to ideas, which in turn includes access to education, for instance); it is “a multifaceted concept with impacts on every part of daily life.” The latter approach links up with a series of usages that deal with access in a more institutional setting. Penchansky and Thomas (1981: 127), for instance, analyze how the concept is used in relation to health services, and distinguish between definitions that “equate access with entry into or use of the system” and definitions that refer to factors which influence this entry or use.

These examples show us the importance of the notion of *presence* for the definition of access, combined with the absence of restrictions towards this presence; whether this is the presence of objects and people, the presence of information (and ideas and knowledge), presence in specific spaces or presence in specific institutions (or organizations).

Also within media studies, we can find similar usages of the access concept, closely related to presence. One media-related discourse on access can be found in the work on the digital divide. The centrality of (unequal) access to online computer technology plays a crucial role, and functions as a nodal point in the digital divide discourse, as Rice’s (2002: 106) definition of the digital divide – the “differential access to and use of the Internet according to gender, income, race and location” – exemplifies. As I have argued elsewhere (Carpentier, 2003), the core of the digital divide discourse is based on the articulation of three elements: (1) the importance of access to online computers, whose use (2) results in increased levels of information, knowledge, communication or other types of socially valued benefits, which (3) in turn, are so vital that the absence of access and the resulting ‘digibetism’ (or computer illiteracy) will eventually create or maintain a dichotomized society of haves and have-nots.

In the digital divide discourse, the focus is placed on access to media technologies (and more specifically to ICTs – Information and Communication Technologies), which in turn allows people to access media content. In both cases, access implies achieving presence (to technology or to media content). One illustration of the different ways access

is defined and related to presence can be found in Newhagen and Bucy's (2004) introductory chapter *Routes to Media Access*, where they first define technological access and its two components: physical access to a computer and what they call system access. Physical access entails "actually being able to sit down in front of an Internet-ready computer" (Newhagen & Bucy, 2004: 8), while system access refers to the connection to the Internet network. The second main type of access they distinguish is access to content, which also has two components: cognitive and social access. Social access brings in the content-related access of specific groups, and allows differences in access to be emphasized at the societal level. But in the case of cognitive access we can see how easily access moves into the territory of interaction. Cognitive access is seen to describe "the psychological resources the user brings to the computer interface and addresses how individuals orient to the medium, process information, and engage in problem-solving when using information and communication technologies" (Newhagen & Bucy, 2004: 12).

Although Newhagen and Bucy's (2004) use of access to content is conceptually overstretched, their work does allow emphasizing that a reduction of access to physical access, where only the materiality of technology counts, should also be avoided. First, access to content still matters, albeit in a more restrictive version, as in accessing (or gaining a presence to) specific media material. This is in some cases again related to the digital divide, in content-oriented approaches that focus on 'missing content'. For instance, analysis by The Children's Partnership (2000) points to the absence of content of interest to people with an underclass background, with low levels of English literacy and with interests in local politics in culture. In other words, "underserved Americans are seeking the following content on the Internet: practical information focusing on local community; information at a basic literacy level; material in multiple languages; information on ethnic and cultural interests; interfaces and content accessible to people with disabilities; easier searching; and coaches to guide them." Secondly, even though skills to use content are arguably more about interaction with content than about access to content, there is still a need to gain access to (or acquire) these skills required for the interaction with ICTs. Steyaert (2002: 73–74), for instance, argues that psychical access should be complemented with instrumental skills (dealing with the operational manipulation of technology), structural skills (relating to the use, and understanding, of the structure in which the information is contained) and strategic skills (including the basic readiness to pre-actively look for information, information-based decision-making and scanning of the environment for relevant information). This brings us to what Gurstein (2000) calls the "Access Rainbow", a model developed to describe access in community informatics, where the above-mentioned types of access are all integrated³. Gurstein mentions access to (1) carriage,

3 Only Gurstein's 7th level, governance ("How decisions are made concerning the development and operation of the infrastructure" (Gurstein, 2000: 37)) is not included here, giving its strong participatory load.

(2) devices, (3) software tools, (4) content/services, (5) service/access provision, and (6) literacy/social facilitations (skills).

The media access debate is of course not restricted to online media. An older discourse on (media) access can be found in the struggle over the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) within UNESCO. This struggle of the Non-aligned Movement mainly attempted to position participation more prominently on the global political agenda, but the elaborations of the concept of participation were supported by a reflection about access, and a clarification of the difference between access and participation. A key moment in this struggle was the establishment in December 1977 of the sixteen-member International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, headed by Sean MacBride, which in 1980 produced the report, *Many Voices, One World. Towards a New More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*. The report's chapter on the *Democratization of Communication* described four approaches to breaking down the barriers to the democratization of communication, one of which focused on access⁴. This approach called for "broader popular access to the media and the overall communication system, through assertion of the right to reply and criticize, various forms of feedback, and regular contact between communicators and the public" (MacBride Commission, 1980: 169). In one of the meeting reports that led to the final MacBride report, Berrigan (1979: 18-19) provided a clear definition of access:

By definition, access infers the ability of the public to come closer to communication systems, and in concrete terms it can be related to two levels: of choice and of feedback. [...] In summary, access refers to the use of media for public service. It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programmes, and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organizations.

Again, we can see the logic of presence at work, expressed in a more spatial metaphor of "coming closer". While the emphasis on physical access is only implicit (by the references to communication systems and to choice), we can find here a strong emphasis on access to content (in the form of "varied and relevant programmes"). Strikingly, these reflections on access also focus on the access of audience members to media organizations, in order to provide them with feedback. This is aligned with the role of access in the more traditional media feedback discussions, where this type of feedback is labelled delayed feedback. Here access implies gaining an individual presence within media organizations, by having "commentary and criticism [...] flow from individual members of the audience back to the communicator" (DeFleur & Dennis, 1994: 265). As DeFleur and Dennis (1994: 265) remark, "Sometimes such delayed feedback takes a more organized

4 The other three were the participation of non-professionals in producing and broadcasting programmes, the development of 'alternative' channels of communication, and participation of the community and media users in management and decision-making.

form,” when specific groups or organizations campaign against (or for) specific issues. In addition, more organized forms of feedback exist, allowing for direct or indirect access to controlling bodies of broadcasters and regulatory authorities, to communication platforms that discuss media policies and to press councils and ombudsman systems (Hasebrink, Herzog, & Eilders, 2007).

Finally, if we focus more on media production, access still plays a key role in describing the presence of media (production) technology, and of media organizations and other people to (co-)produce and distribute the content. One relevant area where we can find the use of the access concept is (public) access media, a type of media organization closely related to community media. Stein (2001: 299) describes the US version, which started in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as follows: “By securing inexpensive access to production resources and facilities such as cameras, microphones, studios, and editing equipment, ordinary citizens would be able to construct their own televisual messages and to bypass the framing devices of professional corporate media.” Also in Germany, where they are known as Open Channels (*Offene Kanäle*), similar definitions are used, as exemplified by Hoffmann (2003: 151 – my translation): “All citizens are given free and equal access to these media as means of production and distribution. This differentiates Open Channels from free [or community] radio stations, especially non-commercial local stations, which are also not-for-profit and aimed at providing a service to the community, but which create editorial and other constraints.” In most cases, these access media also include more interactive and participatory components, although in some cases the focus is almost exclusively on access. To give but one example from the world of public service media: in the Belgian access television programme Barometer, which was broadcast by the public television VRT in the early noughties, ordinary people were invited to send in tapes that were then used to produce short video letters; however, closer scrutiny of the programme showed that these ordinary people had an impact on the programme, and that the producers were very involved, even during the filming of the video letters (see Carpentier, 2011).

INTERACTION

A second concept that needs to be distinguished from participation is interaction. If we look at the work of Argentinean philosopher Mario Bunge (1977: 259), we can find the following treacherously simple and general definition of interaction: “two different things x and y interact if each acts upon the other,” combined with the following postulate: “Every thing acts on, and is acted upon by, other things.” In sociological theory, where the notion of social interaction has often been used, we find definitions of interaction and interactivity that are more focussed on human behaviour. But not dissimilarly to access

and participation, these concepts again have highly fluid meanings, leaving them often undefined or under-defined.⁵

An example of conceptual openness can be found in Giddens's (2006: 1034) definition of social interaction in the glossary of *Sociology*. He defines social interaction as "Any form of social encounter between individuals." Some of the older definitions are similarly brief and open: for Gist (1950: 363) social interaction is "the reciprocal influences that human beings exert on each other through interstimulation and response", while Merrill and Eldredge (1957: 32) see social interaction as "the general series of activities whereby two or more persons are in meaningful contact."

But not all definitions are this brief. Garton (1995: 11) suggests the following: "A definition of social interaction states that at a minimum two persons exchanging information are essential. Social interaction further implies some degree of reciprocity and bidirectionality between both (although it must be acknowledged that there are degrees of both)." An even more developed version can be found in De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007: 493), who emphasize the regulated (or social, one could add) nature of social interaction: "Social interaction is the regulated coupling between at least two autonomous agents, where the regulation is aimed at aspects of the coupling itself so that it constitutes an emergent autonomous organization in the domain of relational dynamics, without destroying in the process the autonomy of the agents involved (though the latter's scope can be augmented or reduced)."

Despite the differences (for instance, concerning the role of influence in defining social interaction), these definitions also have quite a lot in common, in emphasizing the *social* and the *communicative* dimensions of interaction. As Sharma (1996: 359) formulates it, the "two basic conditions of social interaction" are "social contact and communication." While the social dimension of the definition can be found in concepts such as contact, encounter and reciprocity (but also (social) regulation), the communicative dimension is referred to by concepts such as response, meaning and communication itself. In this text, I will refer to (social) interaction as the establishment of socio-communicative relationships.

These more traditional sociological approaches to social interaction are at the same time too limited for this discussion, as textual and technology-based interaction should also be included, with interaction not restricted to the interaction between individuals (or social groups). With the popularization of ICTs in particular, the concept of interaction (but also interactivity) became frequently used, swiftly accompanied by critiques on its lack of theorization (McMillan, 2002: 164; Rafaeli, 1988: 110). Manovich (2001: 55), for instance, problematizes the newness and broadness of the concept of interactivity. First, he argues that it can be found at work in many older cultural forms and media technologies. Second, he refers to the "myth of interactivity", claiming that its meaning becomes

5 See for instance Turner (1988) for a critique on Parsons's approach to social interaction.

tautological when it is used in relation to computer-based media: “Modern HCI [Human Computer Interaction] is by definition interactive. [...] Therefore, to call computer media ‘interactive’ is meaningless – it simply means stating the most basic facts about computers”. He points to the danger of reducing interaction to physical interaction between a user and a media object, at the expense of what he calls psychological interaction, and which he defines as follows: “the psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links” (Manovich, 2001: 57).

In order to deal with this fluidity and diversity of the media-related definitions of interaction and interactivity, a considerable number of authors (writing about media technologies) reverted to categorizing systems, distinguishing between different forms of interaction (see Jensen, 1998; McMillan, 2002). One group of scholars introduced a distinction between two broad types of interaction: person-to-person interaction and person-to-machine interaction (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Lee, 2000); others identified three levels of interaction. Szuprowicz’s (1995) distinction between user-to-user, user-to-documents and user-to-system is one of the more commonly used threefold systems of categorization (see also Barker & Tucker, 1990; Haeckel, 1998).

The person-to-person (or user-to-user interaction) and user-to-documents interactions are hardly new, and have been analyzed in a diversity of academic fields such as communication studies, sociology, literary theory and cultural studies. The first area, person-to-person (or user-to-user) interaction, is only a slight rephrasing of social interaction. As mentioned before, sociological theory has used this concept extensively – especially subjectivist sociologies, such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology – to highlight the importance of social interaction in the construction of meaning through lived and intersubjective experiences embodied in language. In these sociologies, the social is shaped by actors interacting on the basis of shared interests, purposes and values, or common knowledge.

Within a media context, the element of mediation is (rather predictably) added to this debate, as these forms of person-to-person interaction are often (seen as) mediated, resulting in what Thompson (1995) calls mediated interaction (simultaneously distinguishing it from mediated quasi-interaction; see below). This type of interaction “involves the use of a technical medium (paper, electrical wires, telephone conversations, etc.) which enables information or symbolic content to be transmitted to individuals who are remote in space, in time, or in both,” resulting in “a certain narrowing of the symbolic cues which are available to participants” without losing its dialogical nature and orientation towards specific others (Thompson, 1995: 85).

We should keep in mind here that mediated social interaction is not always located at the individual level, but that in some cases social groups and other collectivities are involved, while in other cases interaction takes place within organizational (or even insti-

tutional) contexts. For instance, forms of media consumption such as family or public viewing (Hartmann, 2008) are collective, not to forget the role that interpretative communities can play (Radway, 1988; Lindlof, 1988). Also, virtual communities (Skog, 2005) and social media (Page, 2011) offer forms of mediated social interaction that are more collective, partially because “just like a producer loses control over who watches a television show once it is aired” (Baym, 2002: 64), the size and nature of the audience is obscured, but partially also because dialogues are – not unlike interpersonal communication in small groups (Festinger & Thibaut, 1951) – trans-individual. Online dialogues often address more than one person, but at the same time they target specific groups and still use a more individualized manner of address. Focussing (even) more on content production, processes of co-design, co-creation, peer production and sharing (see Bauwens, 2009 for a conceptual overview) also requires (more or less) structured interactions between different individuals and groups. Roig (2009: 259ff), for instance, discusses a series of open-source (or open-content) films that have been collectively produced. Casarino and Richter (2008), in their paper on what they call swarm creativity, analyze the peer collaborative production process of one specific open content film, *A Swarm of Angels*, pointing to similarities and differences with the FLOSS (free/libre/open source software) paradigm.

These interactions between different actors are not necessarily participatory. A case study of two online gaming environments (so-called MUDs, or Multi User Domains/Dungeons), published in 2007 (Carpentier & Patyn, 2007), nicely illustrated how interaction can take place in a non-participatory setting controlled by a small group of people that called themselves ‘implementators’ and ‘immortals’, and characterized by very unbalanced power relations. The ‘ordinary’ players became docile virtual bodies that were confronted with a high degree of restrictions, with relatively few options for resistance and with little capacity for generating their own impact on the structure and functioning of the MUD. These restrictions were caused by the rigid hierarchy in the MUDs, and the formalized rules developed and implemented by their ‘implementators’ and ‘immortals’. The only room for ‘real’ resistance that (fortunately) remained was simply to leave the MUD.

The organized nature of mediated social interaction not only comes into play when looking at social media, for instance, where a relatively small number of key companies (although some not-for-profit organizations are active in this field too) have a central role in organizing these interactions, but also in the case of co-creation. As Jenkins (2006) and Potts et al. (2008) remark, companies (or other types of organizations) are often involved in these interactive processes. Jenkins (2006) refers to a convergence culture, combining top-down business with bottom-up consumption and production practices, while Potts et al. (2008: 459) label this consumer-producer co-creation, “in which consumers also enter into the process of both production and innovation through the provenance of new web-based technologies that enable devoted microcommunities of consumers to engage

in the process of production and innovation.” Moreover, Romero and Molina (2011) point out that organizations also engage in co-creative processes, labelling them collaborative networked organizations.

In addition, the above-mentioned area of audience feedback has this kind of interactive dimension, where audience members not only gain access to (mainstream) media organizations but also (at least in some cases) interact with their representatives. As Kolodzy (2006: 203) points out, this type of interaction has been facilitated further by new media technologies: “Audience feedback to news has been around since letters to the editor were first printed. But with the Web, feedback can take several different forms and can create a conversation, making news organizations seem less detached from the people that they are trying to reach.”

The second main area, user-to-documents interaction, can be related to more traditional approaches towards interaction in a mediated context, such as Horton and Wohl’s (1956) account of para-social interaction. More recently, Thompson (1995: 84-85) introduced the concept of quasi-interactive mediated communication⁶, which he describes as follows: “it is a structured situation in which some individuals are engaged primarily in producing symbolic forms for others who are not physically present, while others are involved primarily in receiving symbolic forms produced by others to whom they cannot respond, but with whom they can form bonds of friendship, affection and loyalty.” In this structured situation, interaction can be seen as the ways that active audiences select, interpret and use media messages.

The approach to the human subject as an active carrier of meaning is very much present, on the one hand, in Eco’s (1968) aberrant decoding theory and, on the other hand, in Hall’s encoding/decoding model from 1973 and the concept of the active audience (Fiske, 1987) that emanated out of this. Additionally, the uses and gratifications theory by (among others) Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) and the deduced models, as for example the expectancy-value theory of Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985) and the social action model of Renckstorf, McQuail, & Jankowski (1996), rely to a large degree on the concept of the active audience.

Finally, the third area, user-to-system interaction can potentially be seen as rather central to new media, since it focusses on the human–computer relationship. Originally, in this tradition, interaction was used to describe the more user-friendly interfaces that transcended the perceived limitations of batch processing. Later HCI research focussed “analogous to reception studies [...] on the user-technology interaction, rather than the technology per se. It deals with usage of technology, or, to speak in discourse lingua, the pragmatics of technology” (Persson, Höök, & Simsarian, 2000). Persson, Höök, and Simsarian’s formulation also allows broadening the scope to all sorts of (media) tech-

6 Thompson (1995: 85) sees quasi-interactive mediated communication as monological and oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients, while face-to-face and mediated communication is dialogical and oriented towards specific others.

nologies (or (proto-)machines⁷), including interactions with “older” technologies such as the television, the radio, the video-recorder, and the telephone, for instance within the context of the domestic, as Morley and Silverstone (1990) emphasized. Persson, Höök, and Simsarian’s focus also allows me to return to the concept of interactivity, and Jensen’s (1998: 201) definition of interactivity as “a measure of a media’s potential ability to let a user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication”. In this definition, interactivity is seen as a characteristic of specific media technologies (or systems) that incorporate the possibility of user–content and user–user interaction through the interaction between user and technology.

PARTICIPATION

Participation is an even more fluid and contingent notion than access and interaction. Pateman’s (1970: 1) remark that “the widespread use of the term [...] has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; ‘participation’ is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people,” is still valid today. The reason for this conceptual contingency can be found in the fact that concept of participation itself is part of the power struggles in society. Its meaning is part of a “politics of definition” (Fierlbeck, 1998: 177), since its specific articulation shifts depending on the ideological framework that makes use of it. This implies that debates on participation are not mere academic debates, but are part of a political-ideological struggle for how our political realities are to be defined and organized. It is also not a mere semantic struggle, but a struggle that is lived and practised. In other words, our democratic practices are, at least partially, structured and enabled through how we think participation. The definition of participation allows us to think, to name and to communicate the participatory process (as minimalist or as maximalist) and is simultaneously constituted by our specific (minimalist or maximalist participatory) practices. As a consequence, the definition of participation is not merely an outcome of this political-ideological struggle, but an integrated and constitutive part of this struggle.

More particularly, the definition of participation is one of the many societal fields where a political struggle is waged between the minimalist and the maximalist variations of democracy. In the minimalist model, democracy is confined mainly to processes of representation, and participation to elite selection through elections that form the expression of a homogeneous popular will. Participation here, in this minimalist model, exclusively serves the field of institutionalized politics because the political is limited to this field. In the maximalist model, democracy is seen as a more balanced combination of representation and participation, where attempts are made to maximize participation.

7 Guattari (1993: 14) refers to proto-machines to describe “the utensils, the instruments, the simplest tools and, [...] the least structured pieces of a machinery will acquire the status of a proto-machine,” while machines are defined by him more broadly as “material assemblages.”

The political is considered a dimension of the social, which allows for a broad application of participation in many different social fields (including the media), at both micro- and macro-level, and with respect for societal diversity.

A similar logic can be used to describe minimalist and maximalist media participation. In (very) minimalist forms, media professionals retain strong control over process and outcome, often restricting participation to mainly access and interaction; to the degree that one wonders whether the concept of participation is still appropriate. Participation remains articulated as a contribution to *the* public sphere but often mainly serves the needs and interests of the mainstream media system itself, instrumentalizing and incorporating the activities of participating non-professionals. For instance, in the case of reality TV, we can sometimes still find the rhetoric of participation being used by production teams, but as analyses of reality TV programmes such as *Temptation Island* (Carpentier, 2006) have shown, the power base of the ordinary participant is very minimal (see also Andrejevic (2004) for a more general critique).

This media-centred logic leads to a homogenization of the audience and a disconnection of their participatory activities from other societal fields and from the broad definition of the political, resulting in the articulation of media participation as non-political. In contrast, in the maximalist forms, (professional) control and (popular) participation become more balanced, and attempts are made to maximize participation. Here we see the acknowledgement of audience diversity and heterogeneity, and of the political nature of media participation. The maximalist articulation allows for a recognition of the potential of media participation for macro-participation and its multidirectional nature.

Despite its conceptual contingency, participation is still very much defined by the concept of power⁸. In democratic theory, Pateman's (1970) book *Democratic theory and participation* is highly instrumental in showing the significance of power in defining participation. The two definitions of participation that she introduces are the definitions of "partial" and "full participation". Partial participation is defined by her as "a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only" (Pateman, 1970: 70), while full participation is seen as "a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions" (Pateman, 1970: 71). Through reference to urban planning in her seminal article *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, Arnstein (1969: 216) links participation explicitly to power, stating "that citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power."

A similar type of emphasis on power in defining participation can be found in the area of development communication. In *Communication for development*, Servaes (1999:

8 Some prudence is called for here, as power is often reduced to the possession of a specific societal group. Authors such as Foucault (1978) have argued against this position, claiming that power is an always-present characteristic of social relations. In contemporary societies, the narrations of power are complex narrations of power strategies, counter-powers and resistance.

198) writes that participation “directly addresses power and its distribution in society. It touches the very core of power relationships.” White (1994: 17) also emphasizes this central link between power and participation: “it appears that power and control are pivotal subconcepts which contribute to both understanding the diversity of expectations and anticipated outcomes of people’s participation.”

I should add here that some authors have attempted to return some of the key characteristics of participation – namely power – to the discussion of interaction and interactivity. McMillan’s (2002) important contribution to this debate is that she – very explicitly – links interactivity with questions of control (and power). An important argument here is that the relationship between the user and his ‘extension’ remains externally defined and can hardly be questioned. In order to theorize this reduction, Penny (1995) proposes the word interpassivity, and Rokeby (1995: 148) also argues that interactivity is concerned with “encounter rather than control”. He goes on to say that

interactive media have the power to [...] expand the reach of our actions and decisions. We trade subjectivity [...] for the illusion of control; our control may appear absolute, but the domain of that control is externally defined. We are engaged, but exercise no power over the filtering language of interaction embedded in the interface. (Rokeby, 1995: 154)

Apart from stressing that power characterizes every social process (and consequently also access and interaction related processes), the difference between the role of power in access and interaction on the one hand and the role of power in participation on the other, lies in the emphasis on the *equalized power position of privileged and non-privileged actors in particular decision-making processes*, as Pateman’s definition of (full) participation already indicates. Although it is necessary to define these decision-making processes in a broad sense (for instance by also including more informal decision-making processes), this definition of participation, containing two components, namely equalized power positions and particular decision-making processes, implies that participation is situated in invariably particular processes and localities, and always involves specific actors.

In order to understand participation, and the many different participatory practices with their sometimes very different participatory intensities, these characteristics, power positions and contexts of specific processes, localities and actors have to be taken into account. Participation is not limited to one specific societal field (e.g., ‘the’ economy) but is present in all societal fields and at all levels. The contexts that these different fields and levels bring into the equation are crucial to our understanding of any participatory process. For instance, in the theoretical debates on participation, we can see that at the macro-level they deal with the degree to which people could and should be empowered to (co)decide on political, symbolic-cultural and communicative matters. At the micro-level, they deal with the always-located power relations between privileged and

non-privileged actors⁹, between politicians and media professionals on the one hand and (ordinary) people who do not hold these positions on the other. Debates about participation focus precisely on the legitimization or the questioning and critiquing of the power (in-)equilibrium that structures these social relationships.

In the context of media studies, participation has featured in different approaches and areas. Firstly, Marxist and anarchist studies have expressed concern for the workings of the cultural industry, and the weak power positions of its audiences. The approaches inspired by the critical project, such as political economy and cultural studies, have also been concerned by the colonization of public spaces, and the limitations created towards emancipation and participation; although, in the case of cultural studies, hope was placed on the emancipatory potential of popular culture (Fiske, 1989). Secondly, as mentioned previously, the role of participation was also emphasized in the UNESCO debates (which were inspired by the critique of the political economy). Berrigan's (1979: 19) MacBride meeting report also contained – apart from the above-mentioned definition of access – the following definition of media participation:

Participation implies a higher level of public involvement in communication systems [than access]. It includes the involvement of the public in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems. [...] Participation may be no more than representation and consultation of the public in decision making. On the other hand, self-management is the most advanced form of participation. In this case, the public exercises the power of decision-making within communication enterprises and is also fully involved in the formulation of communication policies and plans.

A third area where participation featured prominently in relation to media and communication is deliberative and public sphere theory. Participation in the public sphere is seen as an important component, since it relates to the basic assumptions that characterize the communicative action taking place within the public sphere, and where “participants enter into interpersonal relationships by taking positions on mutual speech-act offers and assuming illocutionary obligations” (Habermas, 1996: 361). However, in Habermas's two-track model of deliberative politics, there is also a strong emphasis on the connection of the public sphere to realities external to it, and on participation through the public sphere. After all, as Habermas (1996: 359 – emphasis in original) put it, “The capacity of the public sphere to solve problems *on its own* is limited”.

Fourthly, a series of more specific parts of the media sphere have received particular attention in relation to their participatory capacities (see Carpentier (2011) for a more elaborate discussion). Community and alternative media (but also access media) have a long history of organizing (maximalist forms of) participation. Although there are many definitions, Tabing's (2002: 9) definition of a community radio station – as “one that is

9 Although it would be too much of a simplification to define all privileged actors as part of one societal elite, these privileged actors do form (partially overlapping) elite clusters, that hold stronger power positions compared to individuals not part of these elite clusters.

operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community” – makes clear that participation in this type of media organization is not only situated at the level of content production, but is also related to management and ownership. As the many case studies show – for instance, those published in *Understanding Alternative Media* (Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpentier, 2007) – community and alternative media provide ordinary people with media settings where the more maximalist forms of participation can thrive, even in areas rife with conflict (see Rodríguez, 2011; Carpentier & Doudaki, 2013), although not without facing a multitude of problems.

A series of genres and formats within mainstream media such as talk shows and reality TV programmes (but also letters to the editor) have allowed for a certain degree of participation by ordinary people. It should be emphasized immediately that participation in this context is structurally limited, as mainstream media only rarely allow for structural participation (or participation within the media organization’s decision-making structures themselves), and also the power positions of participants in specific programmes is limited. Illustrations of these more minimally participatory practices can be found in the analyses of audience discussion formats such as the British programme *Kilroy* (Livingstone & Lunt, 1996) and the Belgian programme *Jan Publiek* (Carpentier, 2011). Moreover, mainstream media have a variety of objectives, and the organization of societal participation and audience empowerment are not always part of their primary objectives.

From the 1990s onwards in particular, and in some cases earlier – for instance, Bey’s *TAZ* (1985) – the focus of theoreticians of participation and audience activity shifted towards so-called new media. Ordinary users are seen to be enabled (or empowered) to avoid the mediating role of the ‘old’ media organizations, and publish their content (almost) directly on the web. Moreover, a series of e-concepts (such as e-democracy) was used to point to the possibilities for increased participation in institutionalized politics, but also to discuss the increased possibilities for political actors to reach out to the political community. Here the deliberative turn also strongly affected new media studies.

THE AIP MODEL

The different meanings attributed to access, interaction and participation are structured in the AIP model (see Figure 1) on the bases of the four areas of their application, in combination with a production/reception dimension¹⁰. Access is seen here as presence, while interaction is seen as the construction of socio-communicative relationships, and participation is linked to power and decision-making. By providing a brief description of each component, the AIP model provides a summary of the discussion in the previous part of this text, and shows the different meanings of access, interaction and participation in the four areas of application.

10 In the case of participation the production and reception dimensions are combined, given the strong overlap of the co-decision making processes in both dimensions.

Figure 1: Access, interaction and participation—The AIP model.

	ACCESS (PRESENCE)			
	TECHNOLOGY	CONTENT	PEOPLE	ORGANIZATIONS
Production	Presence of (proto-) machines to produce and distribute content	Presence of previously produced content (e.g., archives)	Presence of people to co-create	Presence of organizational structures and facilities to produce and distribute content
Reception	Presence of (proto-) machines to receive (relevant) content	Presence of (relevant) content	Presence (of sites) of joint media consumption	Presence of organizational structures to provide feedback to

	INTERACTION (SOCIO-COMMUNICATIVE RELATIONSHIPS)			
	TECHNOLOGY	CONTENT	PEOPLE	ORGANIZATIONS
Production	Using (proto-) machines to produce content	Producing content	Co-producing content as group or community	Co-producing content in an organizational context
Reception	Using (proto-) machines to receive content	Selecting and interpreting content	Consuming media together as group or community	Discussing content in an organizational context (feedback)

	PARTICIPATION (CO-DECIDING)			
	TECHNOLOGY	CONTENT	PEOPLE	ORGANIZATIONS
Production (and reception)	Co-deciding on/ with technology	Co-deciding on/ with content	Co-deciding on/ with people	Co-deciding on/ with organizational policy

The AIP model of course remains a theoretical model, albeit with strong analytical capacities. This implies that in social practice, many of the components co-exist and overlap. For instance, the mere switching on of a television set implies having access to the (proto-)machine (the television set) and interacting with it (pressing the button). As the on/off button also has a textual dimension, one could even argue that there is a (rather

modest) form of interaction with content, although the main objective is to gain the presence of (relevant) television content, and interacting with it (selecting and interpreting it). This rather simple example shows that different components can often become activated with one action, but it also announces the complexity of participatory processes, where many of these components also become activated simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

This text set out to further clarify the concept of participation by distinguishing it from access and interaction. The main argument made in the text is that this negative-relationist (and interdisciplinary) strategy allows emphasizing the importance of equal power positions in decision-making processes for the definition of participation. Although conceptual clarifications (and discussions about them) are always relevant, there is another reason why there is a need to clarify the meaning of participation, and to distinguish it from access and interaction. Obscuring the link with the main defining component of participation, namely power, also obscures the more radical (maximalist) versions of participation and hegemonizes the more minimalist forms of participation. From this perspective, the conflation of access, interaction and participation is actually part of the struggle between the minimalist and maximalist articulations of participation.

When, for instance, visiting an arts museum and looking at a painting is labelled (cultural) participation then the privileged position of the artist in generating the artwork, and the absence of any decision-making in relation to the production of the artwork is normalized, even when approaches such as community arts (see Debruyne & Gielen, 2011) offer more maximalist participatory models. When pressing the red button to launch interactive television is labelled participation, or when minimalist forms of participation such as commenting upon unchangeable online newspaper articles is seen as the only possible form of participation, we lose part of the theoretical and analytical strength of the notion of participation and ignore the utopian nature of what Pateman (1970) called “full participation”.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that access and interaction remain ultimately relevant for our societies and democracies with their strong media logics. Moreover, access and interaction are conditions of the possibility of participation. In other words, access to and interaction within a participatory process are necessary requirements for the participatory process to exist. This text also aims to show that access and interaction are necessary but not sufficient conditions, as the power-driven, decision-making element renders participation different from access and interaction.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that there are also grey areas; for instance, when forms of interaction slowly but surely turn into (minimalist) forms of participation. In the first interactive film, the Czechoslovak *Kinoautomat. A man and his house* (1967), audience members could decide on which pre-prepared segments would be screened (see

Carpentier, 2011) – is this interactive or participatory? That is not an easy discussion. Labelling this interaction or minimalist participation becomes an analytical decision that needs to be argued from the specificity of the case and its context. Yet there are many clear cases where there is access and interaction, but where participation is lacking (again, see Carpentier, 2011), and these cases are particularly telling in providing evidence for the difference between access and interaction on the one hand and participation on the other. In turn, this distinction allows for a better anchoring of theoretical, analytical and normative discussions about contemporary media configuration.

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