WHAT'S WRONG WITH PARTICIPATORY CULTURE?

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.61095/815-0047-2025-1-153-176

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Abstract: The article proposes a systematization of perspectives on participatory culture. The relevance of this research lies in critically examining both the phenomenon of participatory culture itself and its potential for shaping what is commonly referred to as "participatory democracy". The first section explores key concepts such *as collective intelligence*, *convergent culture*, *participatory culture*, *prosumption*, and *produsage*, accumulating positive perspectives on participatory culture. The second section analyzes the creative activity of grassroots communities through the lens of Foucault's microphysics of power and the political-economic critique of digital capitalism, providing some critical perspectives on participation and participatory culture. The analysis of both positive and critical perspectives allows to come to conclusion that participatory culture, as Jenkins envisioned it by studying fan communities, has little in common with participatory democracy for several reasons: (1) Fan communities demonstrate a new form of escapism, directing the creative energy of their members toward immersion in the imaginary worlds of popular culture, exploring and expanding these worlds rather than addressing real social issues. (2) Modern digital culture initiates a symbiosis of humans and technologies, creating a socio-technological ecosystem in which the creative activity of prosumers, if not fully subordinated, is at least significantly dependent on software design. (3) Social media are colonized by corporations for which prosumers are a source of surplus value; therefore, speaking of the participatory nature of social networks consciously or unconsciously supports the ideology of capital.

Keywords: participatory culture, participatory democracy, digital culture, convergence culture, collective intelligence, prosumption, produsage.

The rapid development of digital technologies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries led Charles Gere to discuss the formation of a specific digital culture, in which the term "digital" defines "a particular way of life of a group or groups of people at a certain period in history. Digitality can be thought of as a marker of culture because it encompasses both the artefacts and the systems of signification and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life from others" (Gere 2008: 16).

Noting the emergence of numerous studies on digital culture, cyberculture, electronic culture, and related topics — allowing us to speak of a distinct "discourse of digital culture" — Gere points out that this discourse is based on two interrelated beliefs: that contemporary culture represents a radical break from the past, and that it is determined by the existence of digital technologies (Gere 2008: 17). However, Gere argues that "digital technology is a product of digital culture, rather than vice versa" (Gere 2008: 17). He asserts: "Digital refers not just to the effects and possibilities of a particular technology. It defines and encompasses the ways of thinking and doing that are embodied within that technology, and which make its development possible" (Gere 2008: 17). Moreover, since Gere believes these qualities are inherent in language itself — because language is digital in nature, dealing with discrete units — "almost all human culture may be said to be digital" (Gere 2008: 18). Thus, Gere's perspective can be described as a form of *pan-digitalism*.

In the media sphere, digital culture has contributed to the rise of so-called new media and the emergence of new forms of collaboration between audience members (convergent culture), as well as their active involvement in the creation and dissemination of media content (participatory culture).

At the turn of the 21st century, cultural and media theorists enthusiastically embraced these changes in media audience characteristics, viewing the increasing activity of audiences as a key to the future of real democracy. However, over time, this initial enthusiasm gradually gave way to a more balanced perspective on convergent culture and participatory culture. Eventually, these concepts were subjected to serious revision, particularly within the framework of the political-economic critique of digital capitalism.

The aim of this article is to systematize perspectives on participatory culture in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses. The relevance of this research lies in critically examining both the phenomenon of participatory culture itself and its potential for shaping what is commonly referred to as participatory democracy. The points of view chosen for study in the article form the most authoritative discourses regarding the participatory culture phenomenon.

The first section explores key concepts such as *collective intelligence*, *convergent culture*, *participatory culture*, *prosumption*, and *produsage*. This section presents a positive view of participatory culture, as articulated by Pierre Lévy, Henry Jenkins, and Yochai Benkler.

The second section analyzes the creative activity of grassroots communities through the lens of Michel Foucault's microphysics of power and the political-economic critique of digital capitalism. In relation to the critical perspective on the study of participatory culture, Mirko Tobias Schäfer identifies three directions, all of which are considered in the present article:

- Post-Marxist criticism of labor in media consumption, particularly the tacit use of user-generated content for commercial purposes;
- Privacy violations in online services; and
- The consideration of Web 2.0 platforms as "emerging public spheres" and as sites that exhibit "the new socio-political quality of user-producer relations in governing software applications and their users" (Schäfer 2011: 38–39).

From Collective Intelligence to Participatory Culture: Awakening the Creative Activity of the Media Audience

The modern era is characterized by Jenkins as a time of convergent culture as well as participatory culture. According to Jenkins, cultural convergence represents a situation in which, on the one hand, the economic interests of media producers — owners not of separate, fragmented means of mass communication but of media corporations controlling various media industries — merge with, on the other hand, the cultural demands of media users, who transform from passive audiences into active participants in the process of mass communication.

In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins writes:

> "By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries,

> and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about. [...] In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms". (Jenkins 2006: 2–3).

In the context of convergence, contrary to the old licensing system, significant shifts have recently occurred regarding coordination, integration, and collaboration between licensing partners. William Proctor (Proctor 2019) provides a brief historical overview of the relationship between the comic book and film/television industries, highlighting the inefficiency of the previous licensing system. This system allowed only strictly agreement-framed reproduction of comic book content in other media. Any deviations from the canonical storyline were not permitted, resulting in repetitive plots and the duplication of fictional story worlds. Jenkins also noted this, describing such products as "redundant, diluted, and often sloppy" (Jenkins 2006: 105).

Proctor cites the *Star Wars* franchise as an example, where the primary canonical text was George Lucas's film series. Licensing, which permitted only adaptations or novelizations, restricted the expansion of content across platforms. This led to conflict between Lucasfilm and Marvel, which attempted not just to adapt the films but to introduce new content into the canon. In 2014, when Disney acquired the *Star Wars* brand, the company, as Proctor notes, "committed hyperdiegetic genocide by declaring that the old licensing system was dead and buried, and that, from here on out, all transmedia Star Wars elements, including comics and novels, would be considered canonical, official components of a vast transmedia continuity system" (Proctor 2019: 110).

Proctor describes this as a fundamental shift in the transmedia economy of Star Wars: "the concept of seriality — most often used to detail the spreadability of imaginary worlds, whether or not such elements fit into a cohesive continuity system — gives way to 'sequentiality': that is, a transmedia economy developed according to the principle of continuity between and across media" (Proctor 2019: 110).

Concerning convergence on the opposite side of mass communication — i.e., media audiences — we must first distinguish between *convergent culture* and *participatory culture*.

To do so, we turn to the ideas of cyberculture theorist Pierre Lévy and, in particular, his concept of collective intelligence. In the

introduction to his work *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, Lévy speaks of an anthropological space, which he defines as "a system of proximity (space) unique to the world of humanity (anthropological) and thus dependent on human technologies, significations, language, culture, conventions, representations, and emotions" (Lévy 2001: 255).

Lévy identifies three types of anthropological space that have succeeded one another throughout history. The first, called *earth*, is characterized by language, technology, and complex forms of social organization (Lévy 2001: 256). The second, *territorial space*, emerges in the Neolithic period and is defined by the development of agriculture, cities, states, and writing. The third, *commodity space*, begins in the sixteenth century. Finally, Lévy introduces a fourth, still-emerging space: *knowledge space*:

> "Perhaps", he writes, "the current crisis of identity and social forms of identification signifies the dimly perceived and incomplete emergence of a new anthropological space, that of knowledge and collective intelligence, whose arrival is in no way guaranteed by any historical laws. Like the other anthropological spaces, the knowledge space will control preceding spaces rather than eliminate them. From this point forward, the existence of economic networks and territorial power will depend on mankind's capacity for the rapid acquisition of knowledge and the development of a collective imagination…" (Lévy 2001: 257).

According to Lévy, this transformation is possible for three reasons:

1. the accelerated pace of scientific and technological development;
2. the democratization of knowledge, which is no longer reserved for the elite; and
3. the emergence of new communication tools (Lévy 2001: 257).

These new communication tools are highly valued by Lévy in his vision of knowledge space, as they enable the transmission of knowledge and access to it for all interested individuals and groups, fundamentally changing the established relationship between knowledge and power and fostering true democracy.

This optimistic view of new communication technologies, particularly the Internet, was also shared by Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006). Like Lévy, Jenkins considered Internet-enabled access to and exchange of information among fans of popular media franchises as a crucial step toward liberating media audiences — traditionally seen as passive, anonymous, and geographically scattered.

In convergent culture, according to Jenkins, members of a media audience — forming fan communities — actively communicate with one another, help each other find information about their shared interests, and discuss its merits and flaws. This indicates the presence of a full-fledged and, crucially, almost instantaneous feedback loop — something previously absent from traditional mass communication.

This optimism regarding new communication technologies as tools for developing and advancing democratic processes in society is also evident in Yochai Benkler's work *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (Benkler 2006).

Benkler links the rise and spread of digital communication technologies with an increase in non-market, non-property-based information production, arguing that this "enables the emergence of a new information environment, one in which individuals are free to take a more active role than was possible in the industrial information economy of the twentieth century" (Benkler 2006: 2).

This environment, according to Benkler, promotes individual freedom, serves as a platform for democratic participation, and fosters the development of a new culture. The shift in economic focus toward information and the transition to a communication environment based on inexpensive, high-performance processors signal a new stage of the information economy, which Benkler calls the networked information economy (Benkler 2006: 3).

Unlike the traditional economy, where the concept of property was crucial, the networked information economy provides non-market information production in which anyone can participate. This also affects access to and distribution of information, leading to a "flourishing non-market sector of information, knowledge, and cultural production, based in the networked environment, and applied to anything that the many individuals connected to it can imagine" (Benkler 2006: 5).

This new economy significantly alters individual behavior, awakening a desire to act independently or in collaboration with others. Such collaboration is based not on hierarchical, but egalitarian relationships within the collective, and participation in organizations outside the market sphere. Benkler calls this *peer production* (Benkler 2006: 4).

From Benkler's perspective, the networked information economy leads to the emergence of a more critical and self-reflective culture. According to the author, the system of cultural production developed within networked information technology makes culture more transparent and malleable, leading to the revival of folk culture under new conditions:

> "We are seeing the emergence of a new folk culture — a practice that has been largely suppressed in the industrial era of cultural

> production — where many more of us participate actively in making cultural moves and finding meaning in the world around us. [...] we can say that culture is becoming more democratic: self-reflective and participatory" (Benkler 2006: 10).

Culture that blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers — especially in the sphere of mass media — is termed *participatory* by Jenkins. Jenkins does not clearly distinguish between convergent and participatory culture. However, it can be assumed that in the first case, we deal with a convergence of producers on one side and consumers on the other. Consumers cooperate because an individual is no longer able to handle the information flow alone, making consumption a collective process (Jenkins uses Lévy's concept of *collective intelligence* here). While this can be considered a first step toward a qualitative transformation of media audience members, in the case of convergent culture, the consumer remains a consumer. In the second case, when discussing participatory culture, the consumer transforms into a creator of media content. Nevertheless, the terms "convergent culture" and "participatory culture" are often used synonymously.

In 2006, the MacArthur Foundation launched a research project on digital media, in which Jenkins and his colleagues participated (Jenkins et al. 2009).

The creative activities of mass communication audiences (primarily fans of popular culture) led Jenkins to see the potential of participatory culture in democratizing society. This is reflected in his definition of participatory culture, characterized by:

> "1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; 2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others; 3. Some type of informal mentorship, whereby knowledge is passed from experienced members to novices; 4. Members who believe their contributions matter, and 5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care about what others think of their creations). Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute and that their contributions will be valued appropriately" (Jenkins et al. 2009: 5–6).

In this study, Jenkins and his colleagues shift the focus from digital technologies, characterized by interactivity, to the phenomenon of participation, emphasizing that "interactivity is a property of the technology, while participation is a property of culture" (Jenkins et al. 2009: 8). In their view, the concept of participation unites various practices — educational, creative, democratic, and civic.

Indeed, participatory culture radically reorganizes society as a whole and media production in particular. In the latter case, the traditional mass communication model, in which information flowed from relatively few producers to countless consumers, is replaced by a model with potentially infinite producers (mass-to-mass communication). This transformation is captured by the neologisms "prosumers" (producer + consumer) or "produsers" (producer + user). While often used synonymously, these terms are not identical.

The term "prosumer" was introduced by Alvin Toffler in his best-seller *The Third Wave* (Toffler 1980). Dividing human history into agricultural, industrial, and post-industrial periods based on the relationship between production and consumption, Toffler describes the first (agricultural) wave as a form of prosumption, where producers consumed what they produced. Industrialization, by contrast, created a division between producers and consumers while reinforcing three key social institutions — the nuclear family, the factory-style school, and the giant corporation — making them "the defining social institutions of all Second Wave societies" (Toffler 1980: 31).

The third, post-industrial wave is characterized by the rise of intellectual labor. Describing the passing industrial civilization in terms of four spheres ("a techno-sphere", "a socio-sphere", "an info-sphere", and "a power-sphere" (Toffler 1980: 5), Toffler highlights a new stage in eroding the boundary between producer and consumer, leading to a new type of prosumption:

> "Producer and consumer, divorced by the industrial revolution, are reunited in the cycle of wealth creation, with the customer contributing not just the money but market and design information vital for the production process. Buyer and supplier share data, information, and knowledge. Someday, customers may also push buttons that activate remote production processes. Consumer and producer fuse into a 'prosumer'" (Toffler 1980: 239).

This type first emerged within the industrial wave as "self-help"[1] and "self-service"[2] to mark the shift consisting in the involvement of

1 "The self-help movement is thus restructuring the socio-sphere. Smokers, stutterers, suicide-prone people, gamblers, victims of throat disease, parents of twins, overeaters, and other such groupings now form a dense network of organizations that mesh with the emerging Third Wave family and corporate structures. But whatever their significance for social organization, they represent a basic shift from passive consumer to active pro-sumer, and they thus hold economic meaning as well" (Toffler 1980: 269).

2 "Getting the customer to do part of the job — known to economists as "externa-

consumers into production, and thus forming two economic sectors — one producing goods for exchange and another where people produce for themselves. As Toffler notes, "in such a world, conventional distinctions between producer and consumer vanish. The "outsider" becomes an "insider", and even more production shifts from Sector B of the economy to Sector A, where the prosumer reigns" (Toffler 1980: 275).

The rise of the prosumer is accompanied by the formation of a new ethics — that of prosumer — which, unlike market ethics that value people based on their possessions, emphasizes the individual's ability to produce: "The prosumer ethics makes handwork respectable again, after 300 years of being looked down upon" (Toffler 1980: 388). In mass communication, the catalyst for prosumption was interactivity, which disrupted the established sender-receiver relationship by enabling real feedback. The first step in industrial civilization was more individualized media consumption (e.g., video and audio cassettes), allowing consumers to decide what, when, and where to watch or listen, as well as share content.

However, prosumption describes only the moment of transition from the industrial to the post-industrial wave, while Axel Bruns's concept of *produsage* (Bruns 2013) emphasizes information production, reflecting the active use of Web 2.0 to generate and distribute user-generated content.

> "The concept of produsage [...] highlights that within the communities which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge [...], the role of 'consumer' and even that of 'end user' have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance. [...] Users are always already necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of this role — they have become a new, hybrid, produser" (Bruns 2013: 2).

Bruns argues that Toffler's prosumption model does not fully capture the creation of user-generated content in Web 2.0 environments. Wikipedia, often cited as an example, operates free from external control and is constantly updated by users, leading Bruns to describe it as existing in a state of "permanent beta" (Bruns 2013: 71).

While Toffler's prosumer remained under the surveillance of corporations that assessed his contribution to prosumer practices, Bruns's producers, if not on all then at least on many web 2.0 platforms, are

lizing labor cost" — is scarcely new. That's what self-service supermarkets are all about" (Toffler 1980: 270).

able to monitor and assess activity within the community themselves. Thus, according to Bruns, "Toffler's prosumption model was seen for some time as a blueprint that described "Web 2.0" practices in general" (Bruns 2013: 69).

Participatory culture should not be viewed exclusively as a product of digital technologies. Forms of audience interaction, particularly in entertainment industries, predate the Internet. For instance, in "Textual Poachers" Jenkins traces fandom's genealogy, noting that the term "fan" was first used by journalists in the late 19th century to describe baseball enthusiasts before quickly spreading to other sports and the entertainment industry (Jenkins 1992: 12). However, digital technologies have most fully realized the potential of participatory culture.

Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer J. Henderson identify four stages of participatory culture development:

> 1. Emergence (1985–1993). This stage is associated with the appearance of personal computers and the first networks, as well as the phenomenon of hacking, and most importantly, the "hacker ethics", which justifies not only unauthorized access to information and data but also underpins fan writing that ignores copyright and intellectual property.
> 2. Transition to the Web (1994–1998). The emergence of the Internet and the ability for users to create their own websites.
> 3. Push-button Publishing (1999–2004). The emergence of publishing web systems – LifeJournal, Blogger, as well as the first social networks (Second Life (2003), MySpace (2003), Flickr (2004), Yelp (2004), and Facebook (2004)).
> 4. Ubiquitous Connections (2005–2011). The appearance of YouTube (2005), smartphones, and tablets. The transition from single-medium (audio, video) to transmedia digital content (Delwiche & Henderson 2013: 4–7).

Collective intelligence, prosumption, peer production, and produsage — all these terms in one way or another reflect a positive view of participatory culture, seeing it as an alternative to the economic (and, in the future, to the political) logic of the industrial age. According to Jenkins, Benkler, Levy, and others, participatory culture assumed the possibility of free creative self-expression by any member of society in various spheres of public life. Perhaps this is why the first wave of theorists evaluated the emerging culture of participation so uncritically, viewing it as an alternative to market-driven cultural production, to the imbalance between media producers and media audiences, and, in the long term, as full participation by citizens in political decision-making.

Creative Activity of Grassroots Creative Communities[3] in a Critical Perspective: Microphysics of Power, Implicit and Explicit Participation, Political-Economic Critique

Quoting a passage from L. Carroll as an epigraph[4], Christopher M. Kelty observes:

> "Participation looked like a doll in 2008. The world was awash in enthusiasm for the power of participation and with people fired up about citizen science projects and free software and hackathons and couch surfing and crowdsourcing. In 2018, it looks like a work-box full of pathologies: alt-right racists, twitter trolls, bullies, Russian hackers, Anglo-American Trumpism, and the failure of democracy" (Kelty 2019: 248).

Optimism, especially regarding the potential destruction of the power/knowledge constellation through the increased activity of media audiences, turned out to be premature: fan communities demonstrate Foucault's thesis on the microphysics of power just like any other communities. Thus, Jenkins himself pointed out that in fan communities, experts emerge who help neophytes obtain information about the fictional universe of a particular media franchise, instantly forming an opposition between expert and neophyte based on the

3 Grassroot (movements/communities): first use of this expression relates to the political domain. As Robert Longley marks, "a grassroots movement is an organized effort undertaken by groups of individuals in a given geographic area to bring about changes in social policy or influence an outcome, often of a political issue. By harnessing spontaneous support at local levels to bring about policy changes at local, regional, national, or international levels, grassroots movements are considered bottom-up, rather than top-down efforts — much in the way grass grows" (Longley 2022). In their turn, speaking about convergence media culture, Jenkins and Deuze used the expression "grassroot *creative* communities": "it may no longer be of value to talk about personalized media; perhaps, we might better discuss socialized media. We might see YouTube, Second Life, Wikipedia, Flickr, and MySpace, to cite just a few examples, as meeting spaces between a range of grassroots creative communities, each pursuing their own goals, but each helping to shape the total media environment" (Jenkins & Deuse 2008: 5–6). The authors point out, that there are two counter movements: (1) the individuals and grassroot communities get the opportunity of telling the stories, presenting arguments, sharing information, while (2) the media companies try to keep and enlarge their influence "by merging, co-opting, converging and synergizing their brands and intellectual properties across all of these channels" (Jenkins & Deuse 2008: 6).

4 "She had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box. Carroll, Through the Looking Glass" (Kelty 2019: 249)

uneven distribution of knowledge. Of course, compared to traditional media, this distribution of knowledge is at least not set once and for all, and it may be balanced in the near future. However, the very fact of such an opposition indicates that the elimination of the power/knowledge constellation is still far away, if it is possible at all. Returning to the idea of knowledge space by Lévy, one may also interrogate, considering that this space is something like the fourth age in the history of the anthropological space: what will replace this knowledge space, or is it a kind of incarnation of communism, and thus the final historical goal? Collective intelligence should not be viewed as a homogenized form of collectivity, as it demonstrates the same power relations and the same competition for the right to truth/the right to discourse between experts and neophytes, as was mentioned above. The idea of collective intelligence, on one hand, is certainly capable of realizing itself in the digital environment, which, in a certain sense, removes spatial and temporal barriers to communication. On the other hand, seeing collective intelligence as a prototype for a future "pastoral" knowledge space, conflict-free and cloudless, seems somewhat naive, partly because it is precisely power relations, paradoxically, that initiate the emergence of new knowledge as such. Moreover, if, as Jenkins does, we view the grassroots convergent culture as the embodiment of collective intelligence (which, in fact, is quite reasonable), we must not forget that in the entertainment industry, informal groups like fandoms arise quite spontaneously from a shared interest in a particular work — be it a film, a TV show, a comic, or an entire (trans)media franchise — and easily disappear when interest in the work fades.

Regarding Benkler's thesis on the non-market nature of knowledge production in the networked information economy, we are currently witnessing a widespread trend toward monetization: so-called grassroots creative individuals and communities on Instagram, Telegram, YouTube channels are actively making money from their content, which once again confirms the impossibility of being outside the market and capitalist logic. If, in the past, blogging on LiveJournal was explained by the fact that, as Victor Pelevin ironically put it in 2006, "when a person is fed with advertising, expertise, and the events of the day for a long time, they have a desire to be a brand, an expert, and the news themselves" (Pelevin 2006: 187), nowadays the focus is primarily on economic gain.

In the 2009 study Jenkins and his colleagues highlighted several challenges facing participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2009: 12–18):

– Participatory Gap: This gap is related to the uneven spread of digital technologies and access to them, and, most importantly, the varying levels of digital skills. It also includes differences in the

political situation in different countries, which result in restrictions on internet services imposed by state legislation.

– Transparency Issue: This concerns a younger audience's ability (or inability) to critically evaluate the information they receive. In the context of participatory culture, where we all, to some extent, act as producers of information, the issue of trust in information sources not only remains relevant but becomes even more pressing. Because, in a situation where anyone can become a "brand, expert, and news" in their own right, the diversity of viewpoints may, in practice, turn into the addition of many small ideological apparatuses supporting the interests of relatively small groups — rather than the provision of factual information. The problem here is not so much the quality of the information provided, but the loss (at least partially) of sensitivity to falseness by recipients. This is evidenced by, among other things, the spread of fake news, particularly those using AI-generated images.

– Ethical Issues: Essentially, this is another side of the coin: participatory culture implies freedom of self-expression, but the question is how far this freedom can extend. As Jenkins and his colleagues point out, "in the short run, we may have to accept that cyberspace's ethical norms are in flux: we are taking part in a prolonged experiment in what happens when barriers of entry into a communication landscape become lower" (Jenkins et al. 2009: 26).

In addition to the above issues, there is another point to consider: in a situation where any individual can potentially become a producer and, therefore, create his/her own content or redistribute content created by others, recontextualizing it for his/her own purposes, the information growth rate significantly exceeds the capacity for its consumption, leading to its devaluation. Moreover, it should be noted that social media are controlled by corporations, which creates asymmetry regarding content visibility and popularity[5]. The increase in content producers does not negate, but rather makes even more apparent, the connection between power and knowledge that Foucault wrote about:

5 In his study of social media, Christian Fuchs cites data from an analysis of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Google search in 2013, which demonstrates a higher level of popularity of content offered by corporations compared to public organizations: "Analysis of the ten most viewed videos on YouTube <…> shows that transnational media corporations, the organized exploiters of surplus value-generating labor, control YouTube's political attention economy. Entertainment and music are very popular on YouTube and Facebook <…>, whereas politics is a minority interest. An analysis of Facebook groups shows that the most popular groups are about IT and entertainment, whereas politics is of minor interest" (See Fuchs 2014: 99).

> "Truth <…> is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media) <…>" (Foucault 1980: 131–132).

Optimism regarding the creative activity of grassroots communities, characteristic of the 2006 work, is soon replaced by a more balanced view of this phenomenon in Jenkins' later writings, as evidenced by the preface to the "Convergence" journal issue, co-authored with Mark Deuze (Jenkins & Deuze 2008).

According to the authors, the combination of media industry studies with the study of media audiences demonstrates that "media can be seen as the key drivers and accelerators of a growing integration between culture and commerce" (Jenkins & Deuze 2008: 5). In contrast to the classical model of mass communication, which involves a polarization of senders (the relatively few media industries, producers) and receivers (the limitless number of individuals, consumers), new media offer access to content production for individuals and groups who were previously only consumers/users (mass-to-mass communication). This leads to a radical transformation of the media landscape, where grassroots creative communities have gained the right to be heard. However, such a transformation has merely added a new player in the competitive struggle for power/knowledge: the transformation of users into producers has forced traditional producers to expand their influence. As the authors remark:

> "Convergence therefore must be understood as both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. <…> Sometimes, these two forces reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes the two forces conflict, resulting in constant renegotiations of power between these competing pressures on the new media ecology" (Jenkins & Deuze 2008: 6).

This conflict is a perfect illustration of Foucault's thesis on power/knowledge in relation to media[6]: here, the right to truth/right to dis-

6 "Discourse is not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire — it is also the object of desire; and since, as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which

course is contested not only by competing media but also by media industries and their audiences. In the mentioned above conflict between Lucasfilm and comic book publishers, we can see a localized example of the struggle for truth: Lucas' films = canon = truth. Consequently, anything that contradicted the canon was not considered truth. In Foucault's perspective, the transition of the "Star Wars" brand to Disney's control only marked a change in the configuration of power/knowledge: from this point on, the right to truth was contested between the official franchise and fan-fiction. The same can be said for Lévy's collective intelligence: the digital form of collectivity represents not only a new focal point of resistance to the existing power of media industries but also a new player in the struggle for the right to discourse.

From the perspective of the media industries, this opposition to the spontaneous surge of collective intelligence also takes on a new form, suited to the specifics of digital culture. In his work *What is Web* 2.0, O'Reilly argues that "The central principle behind the success of the giants born in the Web 1.0 era who have survived to lead the Web 2.0 era appears to be this, that they have embraced the power of the web to harness collective intelligence" (O'Reilly 2005). Jenkins and Deuze also point this out: "The phrase "harnessing collective intelligence" seems emblematic of the contradictory relations between consumers and producers during this transitional moment in the history of the media ecology" (Jenkins & Deuze 2008: 7).

Examples of harnessing collective intelligence include Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr, various social networks, fandom sites, and so on. These platforms implement what O'Reilly refers to as *folksonomy* — a collective folk categorization of information, for example, about a media franchise through tagging, etc., in contrast to taxonomy (O'Reilly 2005).

As mentioned earlier, convergent culture demonstrates a significant qualitative transformation of the recipient in the traditional model of mass communication: it is no longer a passive, anonymous audience, as it once was. The recipient transforms from a content consumer — an indistinct unit in the mass of the audience — to an active participant in a collaborative network, which, on the one hand, promotes content created by media producers, and on the other hand, produces its own content. Jenkins and Deuze argue that this qualitative transformation of consumers/recipients leads to the fact that "consumers are now demanding the right to participate and this becomes another

and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which to be seized" (Foucault 1981: 52–53).

destabilizing force that threatens consolidation, standardization, and rationalization" (Jenkins & Deuze 2008: 9).

In addition to the fact that convergent culture reveals, though in new forms, the same power relations and the same power/knowledge constellation, media convergence is not, in fact, the only trend defining the modern media landscape. Alongside the formation of large media corporations, there is the opposite trend, a sort of divergence: "At the same time, we are seeing a push towards outsourcing, subcontracting, and offshoring, which further decentralizes the media industry" (Jenkins & Deuze 2008: 8). However, this second trend is unable to radically change the media landscape because corporate power over communication is strong enough. Jenkins and Deuze conclude, "we now live in a reality somewhere between the stark fears of media reformers who imagine our brains being subdivided by a cabal of corporations and the idealistic aspirations of digital revolutionaries who foresee mass media being totally displaced by a more participatory culture" (Jenkins & Deuze 2008: 8).

In his book *Bastard Culture!*, Schäfer also critically reconsiders participatory culture. The title of the book, he explains, refers to the close interaction between users and corporations, between the market and media practices, which creates what he calls "bastard culture", to highlight "how the most heterogeneous participants and practices are blended together" (Schäfer 2011: 11).

From his perspective, evaluating participatory culture solely in positive terms is problematic because, first, it ignores the fact that calls for participation and belief in social progress through technological development have a long tradition, and are not something that has emerged recently (Schäfer 2011: 13). Secondly, and more important, this evaluation overlooks a significant shift within cultural production: "the transformation of media corporations from content producers to platform providers for user-created content" (Schäfer 2011: 14).

According to Schäfer, what is commonly referred to as participatory culture is a combination of the following discourses:

– Rhetoric in defense of social progress through technological development.

– Cultural criticism calling for a transformation of power relations.

– The characteristics of relevant technologies and how these characteristics are used for the appropriation of design and users.

– Socio-political dynamics related to the use of technologies (Schäfer 2011: 14).

Thus, Schäfer argues that the analysis of participatory culture requires a comprehensive examination of discourses, media practices, and technologies, allowing participation "as a legend, as a political

claim, as an actual media practice and as a design solution that either stimulates and even channels certain users or represses various practices" (Schäfer 2011: 15).

Schäfer's study is based on three theoretical components (Schäfer 2011: 15–18):

1. Foucauldian concept of the dispositif, which demonstrates how power structures, knowledge of technology, and mastery of its design connect the discursive and non-discursive, human and non-human. This dispositif links three areas: the discourse, technology, and social use.
2. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) — a revision of the concept of "community" in information systems and the role of non-human agents in constituting participatory culture. ANT emphasizes the disappearing division between culture and technology, not distinguishing between human and non-human actors, replacing the notion of community with networks.
3. The concept of the socio-technical ecosystem, which describes "an environment based on information technology that facilitates and cultivates the performance of a great number of users" (Schäfer 2011: 18). In such an ecosystem, technology (non-human) and social (human) are closely intertwined and mutually dependent .

Tracing the shift in public rhetoric regarding digital technologies and the idea of participation, Schäfer notes that from 1991 to 2001, participation was understood as "access and connectivity" (Schäfer 2011: 31), but with the advent of Web 2.0, there was a shift "from emphasizing access to emphasizing collaboration and collective action" (Schäfer 2011: 35).

An important point for critically reflecting on the phenomenon of participatory culture is Schäfer's distinction between explicit and implicit participation. In the case of explicit participation, we deal with relatively innocent practices, as described by Jenkins (fan community activity), as well as through the concept of produsage by Bruns. Explicit participation, according to Schäfer, includes fan-culture, activism, writing blogs, contributing to Wikipedia, cooperating in software development (Schäfer, 2011, p. 52). All these practices explicitly demonstrate the participation of media audience members in the production and distribution of content.

A more serious problem arises with what Schäfer calls implicit participation, which, in fact, is not consciously recognized by the produsers: social interaction and user activity are controlled by design. Implicit participation, according to Schäfer, includes uploading content to user platforms, creating tags, using rating platforms, watching, and rating videos (Schäfer 2011: 52). As Schäfer points out, the analysis of

implicit participation reveals the key role of software design, "assigning agency in participation to information technology as well, rather than confining it to user activity" (Schäfer 2011: 45).

Thus, implicit participation involves both the activity of human beings and the activity of non-human agents (technologies), which is reflected in the concept of the socio-technical ecosystem mentioned above. From this, Schäfer concludes that when analyzing participatory culture, two points must be taken into account. First, user activity in the cultural industry must be regarded as heterogeneous in terms of motivation for participation and forms of social organization. Second, it is necessary to distinguish between explicit and implicit participation, "to differentiate to what extent user activities and software design affect cultural production" (Schäfer 2011: 46).

Another author, Fuchs, presents one of the most radical critical perspectives on participatory culture in his works (Fuchs 2014). In his critique of Jenkins writings, he argues that in their collective study "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture", Jenkins and his colleagues, by viewing participation through a cultural lens as the interaction of individuals in networks for creating and disseminating content, present a reduced version of participatory culture. According to Fuchs, the authors completely ignore the concept of participatory democracy: "Jenkins' definition and use of the term "participatory culture" ignores aspects of participatory democracy; it ignores questions about the ownership of platforms/companies, collective decision-making, profit, class, and the distribution of material benefits" (Fuchs 2014: 56).

Another significant critique that Fuchs directs at Jenkins is the characterization of participatory culture as relative, due to the impossibility of achieving full participation from all members of society. For Fuchs, this "essentializes exclusion, as if it were a natural feature of every type of society" (Fuchs 2014: 56), thereby rejecting the historicity of exclusion. On the contrary, Fuchs believes that "participation means that humans have the right and reality to be part of decisions and to govern and control the structures that affect them. [...] Participation is a universal political demand, not a relative category" (Fuchs 2014: 57).

Regarding fan communities, which Jenkins viewed as an exemplary model of participatory culture[7] and which were supposed to evolve

7 In the conversation with Mizuko Ito and Danah Boyd Jenkins insisted: "I was not wrong to see fandom as one important element shaping contemporary participatory culture. Fans were often early adopters of new media platforms and practices and experimenters with modes of media–making. They were

into participatory democracy, Fuchs believes it is a mistake to automatically associate participation in fandom with political protest, as Jenkins does. Indeed, fandom seems to be more appropriately understood as a new form of escapism — a new form because, unlike traditional, passive, and mostly individualized ways of escaping reality into the world of fantasy through popular culture products, members of fan communities engage in collective and yet creative escapism, generating new content and sharing information with each other (such as in case of fan writing). However, as Fuchs notes, "fandom as such is not a problem, if the researcher, who is also a fan of his object of study, manages to maintain critical reflexivity" (Fuchs 2014: 59).

A more serious problem concerning internet communities, according to Fuchs, is that not all such communities are politically progressive or politically neutral. What is genuinely dangerous are extremist, fascist, and terrorist internet communities:

> "The concept of participatory culture has a focus on "community involvement" [...]. However, it idealizes community and fan culture as progressive and ignores the fact that the collective intelligence and activity of cultural communities and fandom can easily turn into a fascist mob, especially in situations of capitalist crisis that are prone to advance the growth and radicalization of right-wing extremism" (Fuchs 2014: 60).

In this context, it is important to mention the proliferation of so-called "death groups" in the Russian-speaking segment of social media, which became the subject of public discussions in 2016.

When considering social media through the lens of a political economy critique of capitalism, Fuchs emphasizes that as long as the internet, with few exceptions, is under the control of corporations that accumulate capital by exploiting and commodifying users, it cannot be considered participatory. Fuchs categorically disagrees with Jenkins and others, who believe that users benefit because they voluntarily participate in online communities, motivating their participation by social and communicative needs and desires. Fuchs argues that, firstly, "the profit orientation is inherent in capitalism, not in users or audiences, who are confronted with the commodity form in their everyday

> historically among the first to interact within geographically dispersed communities of interest. But they were simply one among many different kinds of communities that had been struggling throughout the twentieth century to gain greater access to the means of cultural production and circulation" (Jenkins et al. 2016: 3).

lives"; and secondly, "the fact that they love these activities does not make them less exploited" (Fuchs 2014: 64). Thus, the exploitation that individuals voluntarily subject themselves to does not cease to be exploitation, but rather demonstrates "the contradictions of culture in capitalism" (Fuchs 2014: 64).

Corporations, in Fuchs' words, "colonize the internet", and social media are neither a public sphere nor a participatory democratic space. The view of the Internet as participatory and democratic "facilitates an ideology that celebrates capitalism and does not see how capitalist interests predominantly shape the Internet" (Fuchs 2014: 102). Social media are presented as "stratified, non-participatory spaces and an alternative, non-corporate internet is needed" (Fuchs 2014: 102). In considering the concept of social media participation as an ideology, Fuchs argues that in theorizing Web 2.0, we should abandon the idea of a participatory system and instead use terms like class, exploitation, and surplus value (Fuchs 2014: 103).

In this view, surplus value can be seen as targeted advertising, while Toffler's prosumption "is an inherent feature of McDonaldization" (Fuchs 2014: 107). However, Fuchs emphasizes that prosumption is just one of the dimensions of capitalism. The author uses the concepts of consumption work and internet prosumer labour to underscore "how the boundaries between leisure and work, as well as production and consumption, have become liquid in contemporary capitalism", and that "in the case of corporate social media the audience commodity is an internet prosumer commodity" (Fuchs 2014: 107). Social media, colonized by corporations, conduct economic surveillance over users, selling them to advertisers as commodities. Fuchs uses the concept of panoptic sorting to describe this form of surveillance, which is carried out by social media to identify, classify, and assess consumers' interests and behaviors, in order to then offer them targeted advertising. Thus, Fuchs concludes:

> "exploited surplus value producers are not merely those who are employed by Web 2.0 corporations for programming, updating and maintaining the soft- and hardware, performing marketing activities, etc., but are also the users and prosumers who engage in the production of user-generated content. [...] No product is sold to the users, but the users are sold as a commodity to advertisers" (Fuchs 2014: 110).

Fuchs proposes an alternative to both the participatory culture and the corporate colonization of social media by advocating for the development of participatory democracy theory. This, in his view, should, first, include, alongside voting access, issues related to economics and

culture, and second, question the compatibility of participatory democracy and capitalism (Fuchs 2014: 98). By considering modern participatory culture as subordinated to the logic of capital, rather than as a precursor to participatory democracy, Fuchs concludes: "Participatory democracy is a demand that speaks against such problems, whereas participatory culture is a rather harmless concept mainly created by white boys with toys who love their toys" (Fuchs 2014: 58). Furthermore, Fuchs argues that those (not only managers and marketing agencies but also academic scholars) who claim social media to be participatory, capable of being tools for revolutions, democracy, and expanding the public sphere, "facilitate an ideology that celebrates capitalism and does not see how capitalist interests predominantly shape the Internet" (Fuchs 2014: 102).

This statement can seem too harsh and even radical, but from our point of view it also seems to be useful, helping us to get rid of some illusions which tend to exaggerate the emancipative power of participatory culture.

This also forces a reconsideration not only of the concept of participatory culture but also of the very notion of participation.

Thus, in his turn, Kelty (see Kelty 2019) characterizes participation in a threefold manner: (1) as an important but insufficiently defined concept in political philosophy, meaning "both more and less than 'democracy'" (Kelty 2019: 3), which thus presents a problem; (2) as a practical procedure designed to resolve this problem — "a set of rules, techniques, and tactics for organizing people, issues, and things in the service of collective and equitable decision-making" (Kelty 2019: 3); and finally, (3) as a particular kind of experience — "the experience of becoming a collective" (Kelty 2019: 3).

Kelty's study of participation is implemented through the analysis of three main concepts (Kelty 2019: 9–10):

1. The contributory autonomy, which simultaneously implies individual autonomy and the idea of collectivity as a result of individual contributions.

2. The experience of participation — viewing participation as a special experience that "differs from, and creates tensions or difficulties with, the instrumental and formatted expressions that are most familiar" (Kelty 2019: 10).

3. The grammar of participation. If individuals share a common way of life, participation does not pose a problem. If there are conflicting forms of life, participation becomes problematic.

In the digital age, Kelty suggests that participation is delegated and automated, meaning our contributions "are no longer singular events, but ongoing, if tapering or attenuating, events that can be reused,

reformatted, circulated" (Kelty 2019: 264). The inability to manage the effects of contributions leads to the inability to control the contributions themselves, which, in turn, makes it impossible to experience participation. Today, participation is structured by algorithms and digital platforms, creating an endless stream of unstable collectives. This results in an inability for meaningful disagreement and transforms society into fragmented, individualized groups, undermining the very possibility of collective action.

What does Kelty envision for the future of participation based on the lessons of the present? He proposes the following (Kelty 2019: 251–264):

– Create collective forms of participation, not individualized ones.
– Make participation visible, voluntary, and meaningful.
– Ensure equality for all parties in the participation process.
– Avoid opposing participation to expertise.
– Create space for disagreements, rather than striving for unanimity.

Conclusion

In the article we presented the analysis of some cultural aspects of contemporary media landscape among which the phenomenon of participatory culture plays a significant role. These aspects can be conditionally described as a constellation of three cultures — digital, convergent, and participatory. Digital culture is characterized by the introduction of digital technologies, although it is not limited to them, and also serves as a favorable environment for the convergence of media industries, on the one hand, and members of media audiences, on the other. In turn, thanks to digital technologies, members of media audiences are increasingly involved in the process of production and dissemination of information, which allows us to speak of participatory culture. This participatory culture, instead of the traditional linear and one-way model of mass communication, offers a "mass-to-mass communication" model.

However, this constellation of three cultures should not be viewed as a full realization of democratic freedoms or the emergence of a "space of knowledge", as mentioned by Lévy. Neither the space of knowledge nor participatory culture, at least at present, have managed to break the tandem of power/knowledge: the struggle for the right to discourse/right to truth involves new players, and today we see not only the activation of media audience members but also the proliferation of ideological apparatuses that are no longer state-run

but private, as well as the monetization of what in the early 2000s was considered by Benkler as the non-market sector of information production and dissemination.

The participatory culture, as Jenkins envisioned it by studying fan communities, is not synonymous with participatory democracy because:

1. Fan communities demonstrate a new form of escapism, directing the creative energy of their members toward immersion in the imaginary worlds of popular culture, exploring and expanding these worlds rather than addressing real social issues.

2. Modern digital culture initiates a symbiosis of humans and technologies, creating a socio-technological ecosystem in which the creative activity of prosumers, if not fully subordinated, is at least significantly dependent on software design.

3. Social media are colonized by corporations, for which prosumers are a source of surplus value, so speaking of the participatory nature of social networks consciously or unconsciously supports the ideology of capital.

Finally, if we try to give a short answer to the question put as the title of present article, it is possible to say, that the expectations regarding participatory culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s turned out to be illusory: media platform owners turned prosumers' creative efforts to their profit. That doesn't mean that participatory culture failed or have to be cancelled: on the contrary, the criticism in relation to the grassroots creative communities' activity not only reveals the vulnerability of their initiatives, but also shows the possible ways of resistance to the digital capitalism.

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