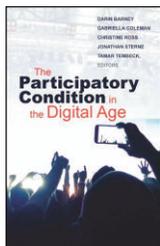


Review



The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age. Edited by Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, & Tamar Tembeck. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 352 pp. ISBN: 9780816697717.

In early 2018, journalists working at *The Observer* and *The Guardian* newspapers announced that a small firm called Cambridge Analytica had harvested the data of millions of Facebook users. Cambridge Analytica had done this in order to develop models that would allow them to manipulate the voting behaviour of those users and, hopefully, their “friends” on Facebook. At present, the extent to which this project was successful and to which it is a portent of things to come in social media circles is a matter of debate. What is not uncertain, however, is that the active element of Cambridge Analytica’s project was the willing participation in online information sharing we normally call “social media.” Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other online interaction tools have become integral elements of contemporary culture and, to a greater or lesser extent, all of these tools are voluntary. They require our participation in order to be viable and, eventually, significant (and profitable) projects. This question of participation, then, is one that has real and immediate consequences to our political and social futures.

The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age is an attempt to evaluate, from as many angles as possible, what the condition of participation is. Broadly speaking, the key element from the title is the issue of “participation,” which, as Barney, Coleman, Ross, Sterne, and Tembeck point out, is central to the Aristotelian definition of citizenship (p. xi). The approach, then, is to work through the neoliberal overtures to participation *through* technology and into a conceptualization of how technology has become intertwined with our fundamental understanding of participation.

The text is a collection of chapters from different theorists. The arguments, while generally observing the focus set up in the introduction, vary with each author. To quote the introduction: “An interdisciplinary assessment of the participatory condition is essential insofar as participatory culture has expanded across all societal fields”

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(p. xxii). The text then attempts to cover what is an admittedly complex issue from as many perspectives as possible, and it does this well.

Alessandro Delfanti and Salvatore Iaconesi's chapter on biodigital sharing is particularly compelling. In 2012 Iaconesi was diagnosed with brain cancer. He decided to share all of the information related to his disease online and attempt to crowdsource information in hope of finding a cure. The chapter is a fascinating look at participation in an immensely personal and objectively public context. Of particular interest is the authors' analysis of the disappearance of the individual in the event of being diagnosed and the emancipatory process of reclaiming individuality by recoding the medical data and distributing it online. In this case, the overture to participation is a means of reclaiming one's personhood and focusing attention back on the patient rather than on the disease.

Kate Crawford's chapter is also a high point. The focus is a clandestine police project carried out during the Boston Calling music festival in May of 2013. The argument covers issues of privacy, conceptualizations of citizenship, and concerns regarding the safety and security of large crowds (particularly in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings). Crawford's work is careful and raises a number of pertinent questions relative to consent in the digital age—namely, that consent is something that must be given consciously and to what extent that would make consent incompatible with emerging surveillance practices.

A more general, but no less focused, perspective is available in Julie Cohen's chapter on the "surveillance innovation complex." This chapter would be of particular interest for anyone working on surveillance studies with an overture to social media and provides a solid introduction to the structural concerns regarding private data production and capture and individual privacy. The discussion of crowdsourcing as a component of this larger matrix is also welcome and pertinent to a number of current discussions regarding online communities.

Bernard Stiegler somehow manages to find a more forward-looking perspective by outlining historical perspectives on participation. In light of current debates regarding freedom of speech on university campuses and concerns regarding language and grammar, his chapter feels particularly significant. That said, it seems like a rough fit for a text focused on the "digital age" (much of the subject matter is Socratic and Platonic theory). The fact that it is fundamentally concerned with the conditions of a "true society of knowledge," however, keeps it within the contextual parameters of the book. And, of course, the chapter is an excellent piece of thinking in its own right.

Chapters from Mark Andrejevic, Jason Edward Lewis, and Jillian York are also going to be of interest to anyone investigating the subject matter. It is possible that the reader will sift through the table of contents, focusing on chapters that deal directly with their immediate area of interest. This would not be wrong—it is difficult to imagine a single narrative that would or could incorporate all of the perspectives included in this book—but it is important to note that this text does offer some surprising and rewarding perspectives on unexpected avenues of the subject of participation. As a survey of potential inquiries into participation in a world that no longer requires long-term commitment nor physical proximity in order to generate participatory circum-

stances, *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age* attempts to cover a nearly impossible amount of ground. In light of that, the reader may find that there are blind spots or that some areas of focus appear to be trivial, archaic, or simply disconnected from the supposed subject of the book. That said, there is enough here to recommend it to anyone who is approaching the subject matter from a broad lens and would need help in narrowing the frame of their own argument. There is an exploratory feel to the book (and this is meant as a compliment). While the reader may have more questions than answers left after they have closed the back cover, they will be sharper questions than they would have had prior to reading *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*.

Jeff Heydon, Wilfrid Laurier University