

*Participation and Media Production:  
Critical Reflections on Content Creation*  
edited by Nico Carpentier & Benjamin De  
Cleen

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Victoria Payton (University of Glasgow)

*Participation and Media Production: Critical Reflections on Content Creation* was created as the Theme book for the 2007 San Francisco Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA). This 57<sup>th</sup> ICA Conference had the wider theme of Creating Communication: Content, Control and Critique, with this resulting volume narrowing down that focus to participative media.

Edited by Nico Carpentier (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Benjamin De Cleen (VUB), members of the organising panel for the 2007 Conference Theme, and Theme Session Chairs, this book contains chapters both based directly on papers given at the conference and those that focus on other issues of discussion in conference panels and sessions. These collected writings are therefore not simply conference proceedings, but intend to give breadth and depth to the scholarship discussed at the Theme sessions of the conference. This 2007 Conference Theme book is the first in a now continuing series produced by ICA.

Complementing one of the ICA's stated missions to "*facilitate inclusiveness and debate among scholars from diverse national and cultural backgrounds and from multi-disciplinary perspectives*" multi-disciplinary writings are drawn together in *Participation and Media Production* in support of their aim of engaging a wide range of scholars and practitioners.

Constructed in two main parts, *Participation and Media Production* initially sets the scene for the discussion with the first section, *Critiques*, here 3 writers provide an overview of some areas of particular concern in media production: the distance between the promise of voice for the user and the actual voice heard (Nick Couldry p15); corporate appropriation of participatory culture (Mark Deuze p27); and the construction of the consumer through contemporary surveillance (Josh Lauer p41). In the second section, *Image/Sounds/Texts*, seven further chapters deal with specific media technologies in relation to their participants and participatory cultures.

Carpentier and De Cleen clearly and thoroughly set out the context for *Participation and Media Production* in an introduction that draws out some of the key areas for discussion around media participation. While much of the focus has been on the participatory potential of new media technologies and trends, such as blogs, wikis, video and photo sharing and other forms of user generated content, Carpentier and De Cleen remind us in this introductory text that critical discussion of such technologies must move beyond the potential and start examining the realities of how and why users participate in such media.

This evaluation of the way in which the components and value of participation can be unravelled starts with an acknowledgment that communication historians have been looking at these blurred boundaries between production and reception but that it is now, with a critical mass of participatory media forms and a body of users, that it can finally be studied in more detail. Also acknowledged is a rejection of any stable idea of what participation constitutes; existing as it does at such a multidisciplinary crossroads a number of definitions of the term jostle for supremacy. These conflicting ideas

of participation also need to be seen as part of the critique, they are not neutral in themselves but contribute to both the definition and practice of participation.

Carpentier and De Cleen examine the ways in which this contingency of meaning and understanding has in the past been analysed: historically one way has been to approach the chaos with an, 'expression of regret'(p2), and an attempt to unravel the act of participation from its context and separate 'true' participation from 'pseudo-participation', more recently it has been to look more closely at the signifiatory processes that lie beneath it, and how it sits within the ideological and political struggles that frame it. A discussion on increasing participation, and a rise of the presence of the 'audience' in the production process, also inevitably brings these approaches together with the wider issue of power balances and hierarchical and societal power struggles. It asks the question who can be involved in societal decision-making processes, debates and resolutions.

In the editors' choices of chapters and authors for this book another significant component of the discussion around new participative media technologies is engaged with: novelty and newness. In the rush to discuss the participatory potential of new media technologies, 'residual' media and the existing potentials can be ignored. To this end *Inviting Comment: Public Creation of Content in Early Spanish American Newspapers* (Juanita Darling p69), and Isabel Awad's *What does it take for a Newspaper to be Latina/o?* (p83), prompts the reader to question some of the component parts of this new participatory explosion via more traditional media forms, with Darling looking particularly at the impetus the newness and lack of commercial constraints creates in such a participatory culture. As well as the chapters covering 'residual' media such as radio and

newspapers, others look at the impact that traditional media and media structures can have on both the audiences and forms of new participatory media. Deborah Clark Vance (p147) discusses how the visual languages of traditional media are used and expanded on by creators user generated content. The afterword, provided by Jay Rosen (p163), takes the form of an imagined public statement to the media by the *People Formerly Known as the Audience*. While a little contrived, it does take the reader through a series of positions and quotes by prominent individuals in media production, and gives this new audience's reply: although they are the same public that was encountered before they are now, 'made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable.' (p165). It provides an interesting endpoint to the book, reiterating the notion of the centrality of the receiver/creator to the creation of participative media.

The breadth of subject matter selected for *Participation and Media Production*, and the clarity with which the authors write make this a valuable book to those wishing to know more about participatory media. By both providing a clear grounding of the arguments, and then expanding this with writings on a variety of media, this book reinforces the ICA's aims of inclusively and multi-disciplinarity by providing a very clear overview of the current concerns and discussions surrounding participative media which is both easily accessible to those outside of the field, but also a useful guide to the evolving discussion for those within it.

## **References:**

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