

Review

Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito & danah boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics*, Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016. ISBN-13: 9780745660714.

In his 1992 book, *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins (building upon the work of Raymond Williams and Michel de Certeau) first used the term 'participatory culture' to repudiate the heretofore common conceptualisation of the audience as passive recipients of broadcast material. Instead, Jenkins sought to demonstrate that fans are active and collaborative in their consumption of media content and use/appropriate it in meaningful ways; something which has since become one of the more productive approaches within Media Studies and, indeed, has been similarly integrated into pedagogical practice through the adoption of experiential or situated learning strategies. This book (*Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics*) endeavours to expand this foundation further by discussing the ways in which our understandings of participatory culture and media/pedagogical practice has (or has not) changed over the past twenty-five years congruent with communicative and technological innovations.

Chapter 1 of this book (also the project's introduction) briefly details the historic and contemporary uses of participatory culture. Of particular interest is this chapter's discussion of the differences between participation and interactivity and the ways in which such strategies have been co-opted by commercial interests. This chapter also productively addresses the potential barriers to online participation and the hierarchies that exist within the supposedly democratised space of the internet; something developed further in Chapter 2 which, while valorising young people's strategic use of social media, looks at the ways in which those who are denied cultural/institutional power use participatory communities as a way to negate their real-life disenfranchisement. This chapter then makes one of the book's most persuasive arguments: that, following their containment within systems over which they have limited control, young people use technological platforms (such as mobile phones or social media) to acquire a sense of freedom and empowerment while their physical bodies, social circumstances and hierarchical positions are tightly regulated. It is their frustration at this containment that leads young people to create (online) participatory communities as a way of asserting their autonomy (pp. 46-7).

Chapter 3, which is less focused and substantive than the other chapters, looks at ‘genres of participation’ (the different ways of accessing online spaces) along with the barriers which might block entry for some individuals (‘gaps in participation’). Convincingly, these authors demonstrate that unequal participation in online spaces doesn’t simply arise from restricted access to technology but instead traces its roots to deeper societal issues. As such, online cultural activities reflect real world inequalities; a theme extrapolated in Chapter 4 which is concerned with the integration of networks of participation within the learning environment. Here, active collaboration marks a re-conceptualisation of the user as no longer a consumer of content/information but, instead, as an active contributor to knowledge and social systems. This reciprocal exchange or ‘gift economy’ (free creation and circulation of content/information) is also considered in Chapter 5 which explores the commercialisation of networked communities. Although losing its impetus towards the end, this chapter engagingly outlines the development of Web 2.0 and its (mostly commercial) differences and similarities to grassroots or participatory cultural practices. Here, the authors offer a stimulating discussion about the ways in which Web 2.0 and fan/participatory communities may, in many cases, have shared ideals and goals. However, over time, the commercial interests of Web 2.0 companies supersede the more philanthropic orientations of participatory communities as the free labour of fans becomes monetised and exploited. Interestingly, rather than solely taking a narrow view on the problems of such commodified fan labour, the authors argue that we should view such capitalistic practices as the backdrop to which participatory culture takes place. Finally, before Chapter 7 summarises the key points raised throughout the book, Chapter 6 returns to the uses of participatory culture within the learning environment and links the reciprocal exchange of knowledge to social engagement wherein youth groups or participatory cultures use online networks to mobilise and participate in political activism.

Commencing as a conversation between researchers, or a “dialogic and interactive process” (p. ix), each of these seven chapters are structured as a transcribed debate among the authors who discuss their own experiences while researching participatory culture. This format is, the authors acknowledge, certainly unconventional for academic writing. However, it proves to be especially engaging and productive as it foregrounds the collaborative nature of academic research while, at the same time, allowing three accomplished researchers from diverse (albeit interconnected) backgrounds to articulate their own perspectives. Moreover, linking methodology to content, this approach is perfectly suited to the themes explored in this book: those pertaining to the interactive and dialectical opportunities offered by collaborative participation which enables the expression of diverse and pluralistic opinions. Using this dialectical approach, the authors raise some stimulating and thought-provoking ideas. For example, Chapter 4 perceptively argues that we need to stop thinking about the media as doing something to us but, instead, acknowledge our own responsibilities for the content that we create and/or circulate among our peer communities. Emphasising our obligations to be responsible participants in today’s media cultures/learning environments (p. 104) links back to Chapter 1’s discussion

concerning the potentially negative consequences of circulating misinformation which can manipulate or induce fear (p. 23); a particularly prescient concern in an epoch increasingly characterised by “alternative facts” and fake news websites.

However, as effective as this dialectical format may be, the conversational and anecdotal tone does mean that this book is not as academically rigorous as some readers might wish for (although this is not to say that the broader discussions on offer are inconsequential). Also, some of the strategies described by the authors are only practiced by a minority of people and, consequently, this book reflects an idealised vision of online participatory culture which cannot always be accurately extrapolated to everyday use. Having said this, this book is not designed to be a complete analysis but instead is intended to ignite a discussion concerning the topics raised. As such, by drawing together online participatory networks, equitable education and social/political engagement in (mostly in America), this book should be seen as a useful scaffold on which to build further research and others would benefit from expanding the material offered here to account for other geographical and generational contexts and case studies.

To conclude, this is a provocative and accessible book that has been designed for a range of readerships (as is evident by the language and conversational tone used) and seeks to understand a social landscape increasingly characterised by crowd-funded media content, digital distribution, peer-to-peer file sharing, online-driven political activism and asynchronous learning strategies; practices which were once peripheral but have since become mainstream. Consequently, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* is an instructive resource for students, researchers and academics alike while casual readers will also find it informative and engaging (although it will particularly appeal to those with an interest in fandom, media consumption, social activism, convergence/participatory culture and pedagogical practice).

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Biographical note:

Ryan Taylor is a PhD student at The University of Portsmouth. His doctoral project explores the ways in which violent White men on American TV use preventative violence to maintain symbolic authority and subjugate competing identities in a way which mirrors the ‘War on Terror’ discourse; but also the ways that such strategies are challenged by the opportunities offered by fan practices and transmedia storytelling. Contact: ryan.taylor.home@gmail.com.