

Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, Danah Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era. A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce and Politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, 214 pages

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Internet and digital technologies have transformed our lives, changing social relationships, from the labor market and how to do business, to interpersonal relations and those with political environment and state institutions. A whole literature exploring how internet and digital networks could help the development of social capital and civic activism has emerged in recent decades and the book review here, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era. A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce and Politics*, is part of it.

Conceived as a conversation between the three authors, Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito and Danah Boyd, without losing by this the scientific rigor, the book introduces us to the universe of participatory practices in this digital age. The book is organized into seven chapters, each of them beginning with an introductory essay by one of the authors, followed by a conversation between all three on the topic under discussion. As stated in the preface, the goal of the book is to critically examine the concept of "participatory culture", tracing the ways the authors' thinking has evolved through the years in response to a changing media environment and to the shifting stakes in policy debates surrounding digital media.

The first chapter, *Defining participatory culture*, introduces the core concept framing the book: "a participatory culture is one which embraces the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions which other- one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and that we should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices" (p. 2). It is one in which members

believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another. The chapter makes conceptual clarifications, such as distinction between participation and interactivity: we participate *in* something, we interact *with* something. Social media platforms like Facebook or YouTube are not necessarily participatory cultures, they are rather tools often used as means of maintaining social contact. Participation refers to the property of the culture where groups collectively or individually make decisions that have an impact on their shared experiences. Another notion, “networked individualism” refers to the fact that many social networking platforms promote a form of egocentrism and narcissism. Even if it is difficult in practice, we have to find a balance between the individual and the community, between “personalization” and “socialization”.

The second chapter, *Youth culture, youth practices*, discusses how the “digital natives” experience technology. For many teenagers the internet is a form to escape from their home context, a way to connect to some kind of larger community beyond their schools and local community. For parents, an additional source of concern is that digital and mobile technologies have created more autonomous zones, exposing their children to risks. But, on the other hand, the social lives of youth are more visible to parents than even before, being the various forms of adult surveillance over young people’s online lives.

The next chapter, *Gaps and genres in participation*, explores the diversity in forms of participation in relation to the issues of equity. The authors discuss the efforts made by public institutions like schools and universities, taking on cultural identity and social networks directly, to open up traditional pathways to opportunity for kids who do not otherwise have access. Chapter following, *Learning and literacy*, investigates the implications of participatory culture for education and media literacy, the authors concluding that “if we can find ways to broker the peace between the cultures of education, entertainment, and youth peer engagement, new media and networked culture can have a huge role to play in expanding these opportunities” (p. 119).

The chapter *Democracy, civic engagement and activism* consider the intersection between these topics and participation and networked culture. Most of the research trying to understand the routes young people take towards greater civic engagement accentuate that they become invested in politics as a consequence of the role models provided by their parents, their teachers (especially in civic classes which deal with controversial issues or field trips to see



government at work), their school communities (extra-curricular activities, community service) and their informal learning communities (including those around fandom and gaming). Today we have a much more dispersed and decentralized notion of what activism looks like in a networked culture. As the authors emphasizes, “the new style of participatory politics tap into what young people already know as fans, consumers and participants within social networks and deploy this popular cultural capital as starting point for political action” (p. 157). And the hope is that this new model could help people who have felt excluded from politics to find their way into fuller participation. But these “advanced practices” are more likely to be performed by those with high educational, economic, cultural and social capital than by those who are more disadvantaged. So, while participatory politics hopes for a more democratic culture, it cannot in and of itself to overcome structural inequalities that have historically blocked many from participating in civic and political life.

The concluding chapter, *Remaining participatory culture*, reflects on some of shared values, perspective and commitments, emphasizing that participatory culture is by its very nature a work in progress. It can be used both as a descriptive model and as an aspirational one: “as a descriptive model, it indicates a set of practices that have centered on accessible and communal forms of cultural production and sharing. As an aspirational model, it embodies a set of ideals for how these social practices can facilitate learning, empowerment, civic action and capacity building” (p. 183). Participatory culture requires an ethos of “doing it together” in addition to “doing it yourself”; it is about collectively engaging in an aspirational project that constantly challenges us to expand opportunities for meaningful participation.