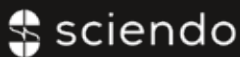# Rethinking Participatory Culture: Introduction

ALESSANDRO NANÌ, Associate Professor of Crossmedia, Tallinn University, nani@tlu.ee
KATRIN TIIDENBERG, Professor of Participatory Culture, Tallinn University, katrin.tiidenberg@tlu.ee

In March 2021, when we opened the call for papers for this special section, our focus was entirely on how the COVID-19 pandemic was shaping interaction, expanding or constraining our opportunities and our willingness to consume news, form opinions, maintain relationships, express sentiment, and participate in politics and culture. Digital, networked communication technologies were deemed ever more central for the enactment of everyday life (Watson et al. 2020; Wold 2020). A myriad of new participatory practices from Zoom karaokes to TikTok symphonies and concerts in Fortnite emerged.

While some individuals, groups, institutions and practices thrived, others suffered. This led us to ask whether participatory culture was changing, and if so, then how? The pandemic pushed innovation within the ecosystem of platformed creation: content creators and legacy media outlets experimented with new forms and genres (Ibrus, Teinemaa 2020); bad actors experimented with the same to spread misinformation and manipulate public opinion (Apuke, Omar 2020); digital app and platform developers created new features for learning, work and surveillance. In this new context, overtaxed individuals re-thought not only their stances on vaccination (Chadwick *et al.* 2021), but also their previous rules regarding family "screen time" (Das 2022), intimacy (Duguay *et al.* 2022) and political engagement (Waterloos *et al.* 2021). A certain return to the 1990s debate of online versus offline could be witnessed in discussions (and research). Are Facetime, Zoom and social media interactions 'as good as,' 'better,' or 'worse' than face to face ones (Qin *et al.* 2022; Newson *et al.* 2021)? Whatever our experiences are with how technologically mediated communication relates to lockdown-era wellbeing, it is clear that as more people spent more time online the few powerful companies already disproportionately data-rich became even more so; amassing power over access, participation, public speech and cultural discourse.

Publishing a special section on participatory culture in a Baltic Sea region focussed journal in spring 2022 represents a whole new challenge. The relationship between media and audiences, platforms and users, competencies and algorithms, practices and meaning should now be interrogated not only in the context of the ongoing pandemic and the overwhelming global fatigue associated with it, but also through the bloody lens of the devastating war Russia has waged on its sovereign neighbour – Ukraine. While this special section was conceived and its contributions written before the war, a number of our articles offer a lot of insight into platforms, practices and phenomena directly linked to it – both in terms of the vicious info-war and the much more hopeful space of civic engagement and solidarity. Broadly speaking, it can be argued that all of the contributions in this special section – while speaking of different phenomena of participatory culture – interrogate participation by focusing on power, resistance and coping. This is perhaps more relevant now, than it has been for years.

The opening article, co-authored by two Ukrainian scholars, Kateryna Boyko and Roman Horbyk, is preceded by the authors' statement on the war in Ukraine. As the editors of this special section, we fully support its message. It seemed untenable to publish anything at this time without taking a clear stance that communicates our unequivocal condemnation of Russia's war and the atrocities its military has committed on Ukrainian soil.

Boyko and Horbyk's article focuses on the reception and use practices of a relatively new, audio-discourse based platform Clubhouse, comparing the participatory practices in Ukraine and Russia. Their fieldwork offers valuable insight into public and political discourse in the two countries, highlighting how power works on and through the creators, audiences and platforms. We also think it is helpful reading for anyone conducting research on Twitter's newish feature Spaces (a feature of audio rooms very similar to Clubhouse in what it affords).

War makes a direct appearance in our second contribution. Jaana Davidjants explores participatory witnessing and participatory journalism in the "goodbye" tweets from the besieged Aleppo, and how they are reframed and responded to by new audiences when published in mainstream legacy media outlets covering the Syrian war. While participatory journalism is often viewed as empowering, Davidjants points out the complications and limitations of the paradigm, inviting the reader to reflect on how in the context of increased and often unbalanced media exposure, typical of war time, specific forms of witnessing or refusal of witnessing emerge, and how those echo, or reproduce existing structural inequalities and workings of power. Whose mobilising calls are met, by which publics, with compassion and action; and who are discredited as faux-sufferers or manipulators?

Empowerment is often argued to emerge from individuals' and groups' strategies for coping with, or resisting forms of hegemonic power, for example, when their rejection of mainstream media messages turns into grassroot participation. The effectiveness of such participation, however, relies on collective accountability. This is explored in our third contribution; a shorter article conceptualising the role of misinformation in times of social unrest based on the example of QAnon. The participatory culture paradigm has arguably always struggled with the overly positive connotations of the notion of participation, which is often – because of its links to agential citizenship – preemptively considered pro-social, positive and desirable. Jaigris Hodson and Chandell Gosse analyse expressions and enactments of participation that many would consider harmful, and through that propose moving from thinking of ourselves as 'networked individuals' towards a framework of 'networked responsibility.'

Participation as a form of coping or resistance does not have to take expressly political action oriented forms. For many people, as highlighted in the fourth article, it takes the form of humorous, self-reflex-ive creation, curation and circulation via memes. Andrea Marsili and Anya Shchetvina analyse Russian and Italian users' COVID-19-meme related participatory practices on VKontakte and Facebook, finding that the memetic remediation practices help people deal with times of deep ontological uncertainty. For others yet, disengagement is what allows them to cope, or resist. This is well described in our eighth contribution – Elisabet M. Nilsson, Magnus Eriksson and Jörgen Lundälv explore the COVID-19 lockdown era crisis communication from the perspective of a Swedish disability organisation. They find that information overload, which was arguably the daily reality for many during the earlier stages of the global pandemic and is now again with the war in Ukraine, results in what the authors refer to as 'information fatigue' that constrains citizens' willingness to participate. Here, of course, it is pertinent to ask, for whom participation is disproportionately beneficial – allowing it as a form of coping, as in the article by Marsili and Shchetvina; and who are disproportionately vulnerable to its drawbacks in the form of, for example, participation as misinformation tribalism or participation as overwhelming and fatigue inducing, as in the article by Hodson and Gosse as well as the article by Nilsson, Eriksson and Lundälv. Finally, we can see a blurring of coping and resistance, as wehen physical artefacts are remediated into digital commodities in museum settings as explored by Hassan Taher, Giuseppina Addo, Pille Pruulmann Vengerfeldt, Maria Engberg and Åsa Harvard Maare in our seventh contribution.

As in much of foucaultian work on power, in this special section too, power is not only seen as that which constrains and limits, but also that which produces. Our sixth contribution by Camilla Holm Soelseth focuses on the practice of using a social media platform – Instagram – for poetry. While the practice to a large extent emulates all practices of self-expression and self-presentation on social media, it is worth noting that Instagram is a predominantly visual platform with a vernacular

of templatability (Leaver *et al.* 2020). The 'instapoets' Holm Soelseth studies are arguably repurposing a space that primarily affords visuality-centred and attention-oriented expression, for text-centred artistic expression. Our ninth article – by Alexander Rihl and Claudia Wegener – explores the power of participation to enhance knowledge in the case of YouTube videos as tools for teaching youth about money management and economics. Finally, Daniel Nielsen – in the fifth article – explores how moderators in gaming Reddits experience and exercise their power and cope with their lack o fit. Motivated by their interests and passion, the moderators find themselves in a complicated position of having to balance their perceived privilege, power and responsibility.

To conclude, we suggest that this special section aptly demonstrates that continuing work on how people, groups, citizens and users understand participation, and how we, as researchers, make sense of it, is today more relevant and timely than it has perhaps been since the advent of participatory culture research via the pioneering work of Henry Jenkins and others. The latest events – from the global COVID-19 pandemic to the storming of the Capitol in the US to the still ongoing war on Ukraine, indicate that publics are engaged with media, moving fluidly between gaining awareness and engaging in actions (Corner 2011; 2017). Participation is a coping reaction to times of uncertainty, a way of speaking back to power, a way of enacting power, and all that for either individual and collective better, or for its worse.

Note: This special section on participation is complemented by an article and a book review that together make the Baltic Screen Media Review 2022 volume 1. The first contribution is an article by Dirk Hoyer focusing on the social stratification in contemporary Estonian cinema. The second contribution is Ragne Kõuts' book review of Hagi Šein's book "The TV Book for the Digital Era: Digital Television in Estonia 2000–2020" (Digiajastu teleraamat: Digiajastu televisioon Eestis 2000–2020).

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