

Call for Papers

Techno-Collectivities

International Conference, University of Konstanz

Organized by the DFG-Research Group “Media and Participation. Between Demand and Entitlement” (University of Konstanz)

and the Graduate School “Loose Couplings: Collectivity at the intersection of digital and urban space” (University of Hamburg)

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The international conference “Techno-collectivities” will bring together leading scholars to tackle fundamental questions regarding new forms and paradigms of participation, of emerging and dissolving collectivities in media-historical contexts, as well as current technological developments and their increasing environmentalisation. In the first line of inquiry, the conference questions the way in which technological infrastructures, including datafication, algorithmic automation, and economic interests configured by them shape perceptions and forms of participation. In light of these analyses, the conference will scrutinize some of the crucial flip sides of participation and their alternatives. It will seek forms of participation that escape categorisation and critically explore the concept of non-categorical participation in their media-historical, technological and epistemological dimensions by focusing on parameters such as the apersonal, anonymity and affect. The conference further pushes forward a theorisation of non-participation and its strategical and tactical importance in the techno-participation, which effectively subverts the clear distinction between inclusion and exclusion. In so doing, the conference aims to re-open the question of participation in all its forms, and hence re-conceptualise it within the framework of media-technological ecologies.

Panel 1: Infrastructure and Automatic Participation
Chair: Yuk Hui (Lüneburg)

The current development of network technologies and economy has largely transformed the question of participation into discourses of social networks, platforms and, social innovations. These new forms of participation centre on the efforts of developing new technological infrastructures of social interactions facilitated by algorithms, databases, sensors, etc. across private (e.g. commercial social networks) and public domains (e.g. smart government), which consequently produce new forms and perceptions of collectivity. From the technological side, these infrastructures effectively render social relations into storable data and calculable entities, and submit them to calculations and predictions, hence promote an automatising of participation and the revalorisation of social relations for marketing, administrative, and surveillance uses; from the economical side, they promote an economy of participation that exploits the low marginal cost of the self-organisation among users (e.g. Airbnb, Uber, etc., or more precisely what is called a zero marginal cost society) largely relied on the infrastructures of electronic communication and sensor networks. This panel "Infrastructure and Automatic Participation" poses questions such as: what are the media-historical (of social, cultural and technological aspects) trajectories of these forms of participation? What kind of technological, ecological paradigms and problematics are entailed in these models? We look for contributions that elucidate these infrastructures and their modes of automatic participation through critical lenses, as well as contributions that suggest alternative or experimental modes of participation by reintegrating the current network technologies.

Panel 2: Non-Categorical Participation
Chair: Erich Hörl (Lüneburg)

Participation consists of relations that resist categorization. This is at least a main feature of the radical philosophical rethinking of participation that takes place during the 20th century. For example, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who is without any doubt a crucial relay if not the starting point of a fundamental anti-Platonist transvaluation of participation that traverses the century, questions all categories that seem to be inevitable from Aristotle to Kant as conditions of experience, and describes an experience beyond causality, substance, Euclidian space and time; instead he affirms a non-representational relation of communication between entities, an affective relation of a felt partition, of a bi- and multi-presence, a consubstantiality, a shared essence etc. In this sense, participation can be apersonal, anonymous, and affective. Affect (and not language) constitutes the core of a non-categorical thinking that develops around the relation of participation and in which condenses the passage from a logocentric to a machinocentric world, as Lazzarato recently put it. The panel focuses on the history and theory of non-categorical participation as well as actual practices, e.g. research in anonymity, robotics; it particularly interrogates the role of technology as bracketing or abolition of categorical thinking and seeks to trace the role of participation for a non-categorical image of thinking. And what does this mean for the constitution of techno-collectivities?

Panel 3 Non-Participation and Decollectivization
Chair: Urs Stäheli (Hamburg)

Recent debates on participation point to the underside of an overly optimistic concept of participation. One of the starting points of our research group “Media and Participation. Between Demand and Entitlement” is precisely the observation that participation comes along with a number of impositions and disciplinary effects, thus questioning the idea of an automatically emancipatory concept of participation. Supplementing this critical analysis of practices of participation, an account of non-participation becomes necessary. Classically, non-participation is seen as the result of unsuccessful strategies of participation, as a left-over, or sometimes simply as something which can be neglected in the light of the huge success of strategies and programs of participation. What we want to suggest is to take non-participation seriously as a practice of its own: How can we grasp the ‘doing’ of not participating? Which tactics and strategies do arise for ‘organizing’ non-participation?

Taking seriously non-participation might also alter our understanding of collectivities. Think, for example, of Latour’s concept of collectivity which is primarily defined by the process of assembling a heterogeneous set of entities. What would this mean for the status of non-participation – be it non-participation as the ‘capacity’ of not being assembled, be it non-participation as the loosening of links within an already constituted collectivity? Assuming that non-participation is not only a leftover, the question arises which technologies of non-participation are in use and which media-technological ecologies make non-participation possible. Although non-participation might not necessarily mean that collectivities are being dissolved, it still points at the problem of how it relates to the potential dissolution or the undoing of collectivities. Theories of collectivities often focus on their constitution and emergence; in contrast, this panel focuses on how the de-collectivization works.

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