Participation, Concluded

She had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box.

CARROLL, *THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS*, 103–4

Participation looked like a doll in 2008. The world was awash in enthusiasm for the power of participation and with people fired up about citizen science projects and free software and hackathons and couch surfing and crowdsourcing. In 2018, it looks like a work-box full of pathologies: alt-right racists, twitter trolls, bullies, Russian hackers, Anglo-American Trumpism, and the failure of democracy.

Take a long enough time to write a book about the contemporary, and the contemporary will change around you. But some things change more slowly, and demand a more patient and less vain pursuit. More than a minute anyway, but I recommend less than a decade, if you can manage it.

I began this project around 2009, immediately after social media exploded in popularity, when smartphones were still new, and when Facebook, Twitter, and their emulators were growing rapidly. Various phenomena related to participation have captured people's attention during this period: crowdsourcing, web 2.0, fan fiction, citizen science, open access and access to knowledge, the "sharing economy," memes and trolls, hacktivism, persistent worlds and massively multiplayer online games, maker cultures, DIY everything, remix culture, peer production, citizen journalism, the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, NSA spying, and many other events and practices.

None of these things is the subject of this book—but each of these phenomena opens up questions about participation that are both new and old. In speaking about new media and technology, digital culture, and so on, we tend to oppose them to political systems. We ask: How one will affect the other? How will social media disrupt democracy? How will the government regulate the internet? How will digital technology change participation?

However, the practices of designing and maintaining our technologies and the practices of designing and maintaining our political systems are not different enough phenomena to justify opposing them to each other. Look closely enough, and these two practices might even start to seem indistinguishable from one another: a large bright thing might be visible just above the shelf you are gazing at.

Participation is not liberated or constrained by technology—or if it is, then it is not clear that we know enough about participation to recognize its liberation or constraint. It is a mistake to assume that the internet, computing devices, apps, or algorithms liberate individuals to participate in something—or that they will render it impossible or ineffective to do so. There is no unformatted participation prior to the ways we end up organizing and arranging it.

For instance, contemporary computing devices—especially smartphones and the apps on them—are designed for isolated individual, *personal* use, and certainly not for use by more than one person at a time, or by any association or collective. This cannot fail to be significant: it encodes a particular meaning of autonomy that isolates decision-making and participation in ways that are difficult to overcome. By doing so, and in order to resist the isolation such a design produces, the power of *contribution* was almost inevitably added in. In the vain pursuit of a collective that can no longer gather in front of a screen, we instead use our devices to contribute freely the data, tasks, information, solutions, labor, money, likes, mentions, and so on to re-create these collectives.

These experiences of contributory autonomy are the result of both designing and critiquing our devices in the name of particular values and expectations; as a result, we transform the meaning of both autonomy and solidarity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the practice of arranging and formatting participation is not itself open to participation by everyone. The practices of design, redesign and engineering, or maintenance of our platforms, devices, infrastructures, and technologies are obviously activities cordoned off from the involvement of just anyone, confined to particular people, corporations, governments. One critique of this confinement is that it is neither neutral nor apolitical, that it is neither prior to nor separate from the design of our political systems, but fundamentally involved in it.

However, the same can be said of critique itself—it is not unformatted, free speech standing apart from that which it critiques, available to just anyone. It, too, is formatted and organized in partic-

ular ways. Indeed, to the extent that critique is itself a form of participation, it will find itself constrained by the procedures—and the types of personhood—that are demanded of participation today.

When participation is formatted, it takes concrete, often technical forms. Certain values, like freedom, autonomy, or collective responsibility, are encoded into institutions and technologies of democracy no less than into devices, algorithms, apps, and platforms, and they subsequently come to revalue those values as a result. The tools encode ideals, and then they provide platforms from which other values and critiques might develop.

So long as this practice of formatting remains the province of a few, rather than the result of the participation of anyone and everyone, it looks like a conventional form of domination. As smartphones proliferate, as networks are networked, as the incessant collection of data proceeds, the sense and meaning of core liberal concepts is revalued—this construction of systems and platforms, this formatting is also a kind of politics. But politics is not just the clash of arguments, but the attempt to make an argument appear as an argument along with the world within which that argument makes sense. The work involved in formatting participation or in creating it is not simply a clash of opinions but a contest of technical, legal, and institutional arrangements. It never stops being a politics in which everyone is involved—even if that politics appears to be accessible only to some.

It might be appealing to denounce participation as a broken form of neoliberal individualization; it might similarly be appealing to embrace it as the only solution to neoliberal statism gone awry—but in either case participation does not present itself unformatted to be simply embraced or rejected. Before it can spin, before it can encode our hopes and dreams in some sector of the world, it has to be formatted.

So here are some lessons, drawn from this book, about how I think we ought to format participation in the future.

Make Instances of a Collective, Not Individuals

The stories of this book often chart how schemes for creating participation started as practices of collective-making, but then ended up being formatted for individual, aggregate participation. Examples such as the "social climates" approach of Lewin's students at

the Harwood factory, or the legal instantiation, funding, and technical assistance of the Area Wide Council in Philadelphia are clear examples that participation need not only or always be formatted for the individual.

Many critical uses of the term "neoliberalism" today are intended to capture the overindividualization and overresponsibilization of the individual by systems structured to monitor, incentivize, or nudge people, not only to make good individual choices, but also to contribute to a collective. The stories I tell of contributory autonomy here often reinforce that critique—but it is also clear that other strategies of formatting participation have been tried in the past and continue to be tried in the present. One need not format participation only for the lowest common denominator of contributory autonomy.

The trend toward formatting participation for individuals is always attended by critical experiments in collective-making, however—multiple different experiments are always under way. In some ways, my own interest in participation's dynamics grew out of my experience with hacker collectives that create software—free-software communities such as that around TOR (The Onion Router), groups like Anonymous, or other small hacker collectives.[1] These collectives come into being in ways that are well worth comparing with some of the stories in this book—like the experiments of Harwood or the creation of the AWC. That hacker collectives rest on a complex technological substrate seems to be the most important difference at first—but the question of how participation is configured depends not on the existence of this substrate as such, but on how it is configured.

For instance, contrast a case like free software with similarly technologically dense collective-making things like social media, crowdsourcing, sharing-economy platforms, or the algorithmic processing of big data. Both forms depend on some version of contributory autonomy—but it is not the same kind of personhood in both cases.

At the very least, the scale and intimacy of participation are strikingly different in these two examples: in free software and hacking, participation is formatted as small, close, collaborative experiments—they may produce tools or software used by millions of people (and as the basis of further participatory experiments), but their participatory dynamics are confined to a handful of people who interact intensely with each other, for better or for worse.

The products of free software, or the effects of Anonymous ops have had large-scale effects, but they are not forms of large-scale participation—the core groups that make, maintain, direct, recruit, and sustain are not large. Free software looks more like the *conscientização* of Paulo Freire or the AWC of Philadelphia (though too male and too white, to be sure). But the large-scale platforms of social media are unlikely to be seen as participatory in any way—more like a mass medium, or a stage of capitalism.

Crowdsourcing, social media, or other large-scale participatory platforms format participation very differently. They demand a lowest common denominator of contributory autonomy by making specific tasks and granular contributions obvious and available only to individuals.

The value of this formatting is in its computability: the software, devices, and algorithmic tools of the present necessitate this kind of formatting in order to take advantage of the power they bring. Algorithms and big data are generally pointless in a context of messy, unstructured speech among a handful of people. But if they are given lots of structured data to work with, their power starts to become more obvious. Formatting participation in the present is not just a question of tool kits, scripts, or games, but also of objects like "stacks," "frameworks," and "dashboards" that allow the participation of users to be formatted and made visible. Tool kits remake the world in their own image: scalable, modular, automatic, fast, and mobile. Tool kits ease the conversion of the unstructured mess of social lives into the phantasmatic virtual collectives made of data.

In the context of such large-scale platforms, participation is formatted in complex and precise ways to enable abstraction and extraction. I draw attention in this book to how that kind of formatting has been under way for decades, in different times and places, culminating in things like participatory management schemes, participatory tool kits, or citizen engagement events.

The workers at the Harwood factory experienced participation in the design of their own jobs (an experience of collaborative innovation not dissimilar to the experience of contributing to free software, even if the content and expertise of the two cases are dramatically different). But later, workers would experience only the standardized "participatory decision-making" formatted in ways that probably feel more like "liking" and "upvoting" for social media users today.

Similarly, the AWC began life in the era of "maximum feasible

participation" as a strong, focused organization representing particular neighborhood constituencies, providing salary to members, and operating a relatively autonomous part of the administration of the city—even though that dream was destroyed in the end. In the wake of that experiment, however, citizen participation was formatted instead as individualized consultation, not as the incorporation of collectives. And the *conscientização* of Paulo Freire, through which collectives become conscious of themselves and their existence, was transformed into a tool kit of games or a clipboard full of tick marks. In the name of making participation big and ubiquitous, it was transformed into something else.

Based on my own work with free-software hackers, I think that people often create "recursive publics"—an experience of participation that aims at sustaining or transforming the very means of association. To experience a collective of this sort is to feel a form of ownership or identity with the collective; not all who participate feel this way, and sometimes the experience is confused with the technology—like an operating system or a tool—that hackers create. But at stake is a sense that members of this collective are in some sense fungible by virtue of their contribution to the collective.

Now, it is obvious to anyone who observes that such collectives are not inclusive or open in any simple way—and often not in the ways they claim to be. Some are hostile and unwelcoming to anyone but middle-aged white men; others see themselves as radical alternatives to mainstream organizations. But my sense is that those who experience this kind of participation are embracing the most highly developed forms of contributory autonomy available, the best that liberalism has to offer, as it were. Compared to the lowest common denominator contributory autonomy of social media, to participate in a free-software project or a collective like Anonymous is to constitute oneself as a person who experiences the collective, collaborative making of things as the very essence of one's freedom and one's being.[2]

In such collectives, contributory autonomy takes a peculiar form: a form of collaborative competition by which the (usually masculine) display of skill or ingenuity is not merely competitive but is itself imagined as a form of contribution to a collective. What makes a recursive public work is the presence of persons who experience participation of this sort as a duty, and as an effective way to constitute social relations through technology. The freedom of free software, for instance, is not a radical libertarian freedom sus-

taining individual choice or negative liberty, but more like a kind of collective republican freedom in which the key goal is maintaining the absence of any arbitrary forms of domination over the collective.[3] Freedom from "lock-in" to a particular system, or freedom from surveillance by corporations or governments, is why people contribute autonomously to such collectives.

In this example, participation in a recursive public is designed to produce people who are *instances of that collective*, not isolated individuals who are aggregated into a whole. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Anonymous, which adopted the mask of the anonymous poster as an identity for the collective, and encouraged everyone to wear that mask equally.

Social media and other winner-take-all platforms are designed to do the opposite: to rigorously isolate individuals from the collective at the same time as providing tools and pathways for the creation of a kind of private collective of friends, followers, or links. The closer we get to a world in which every individual is his or her own private collective, the farther we get from the possibility of individuals living in and through others as instances of real collectives.

Make Participation Visible, Voluntary, and Vibrant

Making participation visible to participants is a necessary, but insufficient condition of its success. Participation can be staged: it can be an experiment, an event, or a game. Such stagings can also produce real experiences of participation in which people feel themselves become an instance of a collective. But participation of this sort also needs to be visible to itself, and available to critique and reformatting as a result.

The case of the Harwood women is a good example: on the one hand, they were guinea pigs subjected to an experiment they were unaware of—no contemporary university institutional review board would approve such an experiment today (and IRBs are a key site for the definition of ethical personhood expected of researchers). But on the other hand, the experiment—the social climate—clearly produced a concrete experience of participation, that of being directly involved in collaborative innovation. Participation was staged, it produced a real experience of becoming a collective, but it was not made visible to the participants; that work fell to the labor unions that could only see the first part of the story, the cooptation

of workers into a managerial experiment that could only be interpreted as exploitation.

Something similar is happening today around the appearance of both big data and artificial intelligence as objects of widespread capital investment, public anxiety, and scholarly analysis. "Big data" is fundamentally produced by a kind of involuntary participation: the automated collection of data generated by the actions of people using connected devices (another experiment no IRB would ever approve). Participation is formatted in a particular way to generate this endless stream of data and the more carefully formatted it is to capture individual actions, the more such data can be collected.

But big data/algorithmic participation relies on the lowest common denominator of contributory autonomy. It need not be autonomous or voluntary in any more than a consumerist sense (one has to buy a phone and sign up for some accounts); it need not be contributory in any more than the simplest sense of using those devices (turning them on and carrying them about) or using those accounts (checking, liking, friending, sharing). What's more—despite the accusation of social media's nonseriousness ("who cares what you ate for breakfast!")—the experience of participating in social media and other participatory platforms is often felt as a responsibility, even a civic duty (one must connect with people, one must express opinions, one must argue, one must contribute to science, one must know one's genome . . .). It feeds into a structure of participation, but it has little to do with establishing the agenda or clarifying the outcomes of that participation. It really should not be surprising to anyone that this system can produce pathologies of participation: manipulation, violence, hatred, bullying, and harassment, up to and including the craven manipulation of an entire voting population.

However, despite what sounds like a failure of participation, these platforms achieve something central to the concept: *they make participation visible*, and therefore render it as something that can be experienced. This is what distinguishes it from mere surveillance, which has been provided on the side for free thanks to corporate capitalism's complicity with the historic ingenuity of the National Security Agency. In the normal operation of social media platforms, your data may be extracted and used for purposes you do not approve of, but those uses are not hidden from you: rather, they are processed for you, displayed, and updated constantly, whether that be tallies of likes and followers, advertisements or recommendation systems, leader boards, or lists. Updates, banners, badges, flags, key-

words, notifications, pings, alarms, and so on—all these give us a partial view of the relations constituted by using the devices. They display the outcomes of participation: they manufacture virtual collectives to which an individual can experience a sense of belonging, however paltry. To participate in something without knowing about it is to be involved in some way—to be watched and surveilled, perhaps. But to participate in something and be given signs and signals of the outcomes of that participation is to activate a kind of contributory autonomy, however diminished. Participation, at the very least, requires seeing oneself participate.

Algorithms, too, play a part in this story. One might be forgiven for seeing an opposition between participation and algorithmic platforms. People participate, algorithms automate. But this is to mistake how algorithms work today, precisely through the formatted participation of billions of people. None of the bad, or the good, outcomes of new arrangements of digital platforms is possible without that participation. This participation is neither quite voluntary nor quite coerced; neither freedom nor hegemony. But the whole thing would not run unless lots of people constantly push the buttons so that algorithms can compute and display our contributions. In the chapter on participatory development, I made the case that even certain kinds of toolkits and sourcebooks produce this quasi-algorithmic arrangement of contributions into a procedure of some sort.

Contemporary algorithms embedded in social media platforms add something new: an unstable, and in some cases unknowable, way of displaying our participation. When we observe what is "trending," we observe a processed version of our own participation that is likely not accessible to anyone as a process that can be adjusted, tweaked, corrected, or critiqued. The embrace of participation—even the lowest common denominator of contributory autonomy—is what gives life to the algorithm. One need not fantasize about artificial intelligence becoming aware of itself like Skynet: it is already as conscious as it needs to be to tyrannize us.[4]

However, the way participation is formatted makes it visible in a much more limited sense than it could be. The claim that algorithms produce, for instance, a "black box society" is related to participation not just in how we contribute to the operation of algorithmic platforms, but also in how we contribute to their design, organization, extension, or critique. Building on the kinds of insights one can draw from a case like free software, contemporary critics are focused on how algorithms exacerbate inequality and support oppression,

how laws and organizations prevent reverse-engineering of systems, and how the unproblematic embrace of big-data analytic tools, algorithmic platforms, or machine-learning systems can obscure the results of participation in new ways.

The work of making participation visible goes far beyond issues like transparency, openness, or legal accessibility—it requires perhaps engaging the most vibrant forms of contributory autonomy, or maybe even very different forms of ethical personhood entirely (cue the contributions of contemporary cultural anthropology), in the effort to make meaningful the results of our participation.

Make Participation Diarchic, Not Simply Dyadic

All the cases of participation I cover in this book start from the basic idea that the participation benefits not only the individual but also the entities that provide or format participation. The study of worker participation focused on the "resistance to change" of the individuals and also on the productivity gains from engaging workers. The Model Cities program focused on the citizens' incorporation into the project and also the improvement of the outcomes of urban planning (in a weak sense) or the actual transfer of power to citizens from administrations (in the strong sense of climbing Arnstein's ladder). And in the case of international participatory development, the implementation of participation was meant to change or improve multiple parties: the poor, the development workers themselves (who in Chambers's sense would "see reality" more clearly) and the process of development itself.

When participation is understood as individual contributory autonomy only, then this dyadic feature can disappear. When participation at work becomes merely "participative decision-making" or when direct collective participation becomes "user involvement" or when participatory development becomes microlending, the sense of there being a simultaneous creation of dyadic benefits disappears. The power differential has always been there—it is why Arnstein needed a ladder to show simply how that differential worked.

In large social media platforms, this differential is stark: they depend on the constant contributions of individuals in order to produce the series of virtual collectives and the data by which they are made visible—but they only grudgingly reveal the benefits that accrue to the platforms themselves under critique or pressure. The chestnut that "when the product is free, you are the product" is

one exemplar of this failure of participation—as clear evidence of a profound inequity between participant and participator. But such failures are also clear in other domains, such as clinical medicine, whenever participation is structured only as the contribution of individual patients to some project or another—and not the mutual or collaborative exploration of alternatives that makes a difference to collectives instead of to either isolated patients or anonymous public health populations.

To make participation *diarchic* instead of dyadic would be to establish that the demand for participation must make the effects of participation equally powerful for both parties. Reformatting participation equitably or inclusively is not just about which types of people get to participate and how, but about this dyadic relation of different and often mutually exclusive benefits being in a relation of actual and risky contention or struggle. Any other approach will eventually end up looking like mere exploitation.

Make Expertise Mobile, but Give Participation Inertia

Do not oppose participation to expertise. Make participation enhance or extend expertise instead. There are countless cases where participation is understood to be a corrective to forms of expertise—and a general discourse in many scholarly disciplines of treating technical expertise and participation or politics as opposites.

This, too, is a question of formatting. In the case of participatory development that I tell here, the expertise of development officials was questioned from within, not simply as a form of domination or refusal of politics, but as a way to extend or enhance the expertise of development officials (as in the case of Robert Chambers "seeing reality clearly" through renewed attention to things on the ground). In other cases, as in that of participatory action research, participation is seen as a way to incorporate radically different forms of expertise into any expert process.

All too often, the opposition of expertise and participation results in attempts to make participation mobile, scalable, or replicable—to increase the amount of participation and to incorporate it everywhere. This is the story of the "tyranny of participation" that resulted from the embrace of participation by the World Bank, the United Nations, and the NGOs of international development. Participation can be formatted to be mobile and replicable—but to do so requires separating it from the accumulated expertise of a par-

ticular collective by attempting to capture or replace it with scripts, tools, or games.

It's hard to argue with the idea that there should be more participation. But perhaps it is not participation that needs to be scaled up and sent everywhere, but expertise? To make expertise mobile and scalable is a different problem, and would require freeing it from structures of accumulation and ownership that so often restrict it to elites and technocrats. A more mobile, scalable expertise might be more valuable than a mobile participation, if only we can figure out how to achieve it.

By contrast, participation ought to be made more inertial—given more stability, mass, permanence in collectives that can persist over time and can incorporate expertise into their work and become more expert by virtue of that. One of the oldest truisms about participation in democracy is that it gives people an "educative dividend"—by virtue of participating, one becomes more expert at the kinds of things one participates in.

To format participation as a supplement to, or as the opposite of, expertise can produce the paradoxical effect of asking the least informed to say the most about an issue. It can produce the pathological search for those who are least expert, or (not the same thing) most excluded from previous participation. When participation is made mobile—for example, when it becomes an industry of engagement experts—an event-driven form of participation is elevated above a more constant, inertial repetition of participation.

Rather than exploring how participation extends, contests, and diversifies existing expertise, it can consolidate that expertise into an ever narrower space of legitimacy, while failing to create the conditions in which participation might sustain, preserve, and ramify the virtues of expert knowledge.

The "crisis" of expertise in contemporary US or EU politics—concerns about the failing legitimacy of expert knowledge or the manufacture and perpetuation of doubt—while real, is exacerbated by scientists and well-meaning liberals who insist that the solution is *more* participation, more education, more literacy. It sounds like an argument for making expertise more widely available—but it translates more commonly into a demand for more people to participate in a particular, often procedural, form of expertise, without making expertise itself more mobile, extensible, contestable, or diverse.

Many cases of participation—like those I explore in this book—start out as small-scale, speech-intensive, *conscientização*-style en-

gagements; but in an effort to replicate and spread that vibrant, lived experience, participation is reformatted in ways that are almost guaranteed to privilege an instrumental outcome over a particular kind of personal experience. They transform participation from an ethical person embedded in collectives, into a set of scripts and games intended to spread participation as widely as possible, while failing to preserve the experience. In the process, expertise can disappear and participation fail.

Create the Possibility for Disagreement, Not the Guarantee of Consensus

Embrace perplexity as a sign of incomplete participation. Look askance at cases where participation produces easy consensus.

The existence of perplexity is not a sign that things are not working, or that some person or group is less rational, less educated, or more ideological than another. The existence of perplexity is one of the best signs we have that different *grammars* are being used to make sense of the world—that different forms of life are confronting one another. Throughout this book, I have pointed to cases where participation is understood differently by those engaged in it: sometimes with enthusiastic fervor, sometimes with suspicious concern.

Often these forms of life index recognizable, small-scale collectives: the neighborhood, the workers vs. the management, the villagers, a professional cadre, and so on. One can be—and perhaps should be—a bit nostalgic for small-scale participation and the intensive communal experience of being an instance of a well-defined collective. But it would be naive to approach the world of large-scale platform capitalism as something that can simply be rejected and replaced with good old-fashioned local, decentralized, participatory self-governance.

Perhaps it is not this alternative—between small- and large-scale participation—that is most important. A form of life is not tied to scale, but to ways of making sense of the world, claims about how it is or how it should be and what kind of person one needs to be in order to inhabit it well. Instead, one might ask: What kinds of ethical personhood are made available by the forms of participation we engage in? How do those forms of personhood allow us to make sense of the worlds we inhabit, as well as those of others who confront us?

The small-scale collective—the workplace, the town meeting, the social movement—is comforting by virtue of the stability it pos-

sesses as an identifiable collective. In them we recognize ourselves through long-established forms of kinship and relation, through transactions and interactions repeated with particular people, over long periods of time.

Under the conditions of social media, cloud computing, big data, and artificial intelligence, something troubling happens to the nature of collectives. At first, one might assume that they simply bring all these small-scale collectives together into one big one—making the world more open and connected, as Facebook would say.

But what these platforms produce through individual participation is not a collective totality; it is not one big collective in which all participate and by which all are dominated; it is neither totalitarianism nor the tyranny of the majority. Rather, what it produces is a constant, unstable, infinite series of collectives; collectives that change constantly in their make-up and relationality; collectives that are unbounded; collectives that are perplexing to experience and difficult to make sense of. Collectives that change obscurely, and often outside of human perceptibility.

The infinite series of collectives that large-scale mediated participation creates means that the personhood of those who inhabit them is similarly unstable. The question of how we relate to such collectives as persons, what we expect them to do, and what we ourselves think we should do in them, has been rendered quite dramatically uncertain.

In this context I think Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation is helpful. Lévy-Bruhl offered participation as a tool to make sense of the existence of immediate, affective, and ethical intuition common to very different collectives, an existence that becomes visible through cases of perplexity. These shared intuitions were part and parcel of, and depended upon, the collective(s) within which they made sense.[5]

The positive experience of successful participation hides the confirmation of an individual's ethical orientation toward the world and others—so much so that it is sometimes not possible to even notice it. But when participation fails, when a person experiences the perplexity of not-participation, that breakdown makes one's ethical orientation visible in a flash. The visibility of these orientations, in that moment of perplexity, does not necessarily amount to a statement about their rightness or wrongness—it simply reveals their contingency. Ethical personhood is at that moment nothing more than a set of intuitions about the collectives of which a person is an

instance—immediately and affectively confronted by the different orientations of another collective.

If one follows out this logic about the nature of ethical personhood, then perhaps it makes sense of why the contemporary embrace of new digital media is so perplexing: social media place us not in any particular collective (that of "white people" or "Facebook," say), but in something like an infinite or unbounded collective, by virtue of its constant change. It is not a collective of "everyone," but nor is it ever a specific collective of relations, save possibly for those brief moments when a keyword temporarily stabilizes a collective into a movement or an organization, such as Black Lives Matter.[6] Similarly, the advent of the algorithmic constitution of these collective relations, and their "improvement" by machine learning or artificial intelligence, introduces new levels of unseeability and unpredictability into those collectives. If participation depends on the ability to apprehend and experience participation as a seeing-oneself-participate, or knowing that one's voice has been heard, this implies the capacity to know the contours of these relations and their extent. If that is lacking, the only available experience will be that of perplexity.

It does not seem to be an accident, therefore, that today's social media environments are filled with violent attacks by perplexed people. In the face of an infinitely changing set of judgments about the world, it becomes trivial to attribute all kinds of beliefs and opinions to anyone. Angry Gamergaters see "social justice warriors" everywhere as a threat to their very existence; angry scientists and doctors see climate change deniers and antivaxers everywhere, and everywhere in need of reeducation. The dramatic rise of fake news, the creation of alternative facts, the apparent collapse of public truth-telling: all these seem to me to be pathological effects of the kind of formatted participation we have downloaded to our collective mobile phone. We are not incapable of agreeing, we have instead become *incapable of disagreeing*.

When one is incapable of disagreeing, then participation is not occurring. The perplexity we face today is driven by false forms of disagreement: outrage-driven partisanship and "equal time" fantasies of journalistic neutrality. Constant outrage is a sign of perplexity—a sign that we are not capable of making our arguments appear as arguments in a world that makes sense of them. Because our collectives keep shifting as a result of their infinite and unbounded variation, the inertia of participation approaches zero. The work of

making things less outrageous involves recasting issues in terms that allow real disagreement to take place.

The formatted participation of the present is not that of the individual person who quaintly joins a community, lives in a neighborhood, or has social relations with friends, family, and coworkers. Nor is it possible to imagine a nostalgic return to it.

The formatted participation of today is different because it is automated and delegated. Participation today unleashes processes that continue long after the moment of a person's contribution, and without the necessity of any continuing judgments. "Contributions" are no longer singular events, but ongoing, if tapering or attenuating, events that can be reused, reformatted, circulated; they haunt us in more ways than simply being an invasion of our privacy. This automation of our contributions is accomplished in the name of convenience, but its effects reach much further. Once contributed, our contributions are also delegated (and not always by the person doing the participating). People today can delegate their autonomy far beyond their immediate relations and sphere of influence.

However, this automated and delegated contributory autonomy is mediated by structures just outside the view, or understanding, of most people. The opacity of the platforms and technologies today means that the context of any contribution is illegible—both impossible to access because secret or hidden, but also impossible to interpret because of the complexity implied by constantly changing platforms and technologies. The way participation is automated and delegated is not fundamentally impossible to understand—but it occurs in a situation in which all but a few are prevented from reverse-engineering an understanding, and so cannot act or contribute in ways that are creative, critical, or transformative.

Because it is impossible to interpret the effects of contributions, it is impossible to control those contributions. Something as simple as having one's actions broadcast and reviewed by an unknown set of observers (to say nothing of being actively surveilled) produces a subjective instability—far worse than paranoia, since it is not just about the judgment of others, but about being fundamentally unable to observe the boundaries of the collective one is contributing to.

And this means, finally, that it becomes impossible to *experience* participation. We are perpetually on the verge of understanding how to create ourselves as collectives, only to forget as soon as we become individuals.