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PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

“Participatory” – it’s a tricky word, but by the time you’ve learned how to pronounce it, you’ve probably also begun to understand what it means. On an informal level, the phenomenon has likely existed since the first groups of Homo sapiens wandered along the shores of the African continent. Humans are social creatures, and various forms of collaboration, ownership, and collectivism are deeply rooted in our DNA (just like less flattering traits such as egoism, racism, and a propensity for violence…). That said, the term participatory culture is a more recent invention.

In the 1990s, the internet began to take shape. What started as white on black, text-based documents exchanged between tech-savvy researchers across global universities soon evolved into a public forum for the many. “Surfing” the web became a popular pastime, and encyclopedias, phone books, and instruction manuals were replaced by the open, accessible commons of the new digital information society.

GRUMPY OLD TIM

Because people are not only social but curious, more and more began exploring the language behind this new world. HTML, developed in academic environments, was open-source to allow for broad participation. British inventor Tim Berners-Lee, often credited as the “father” of the World Wide Web, was reportedly dismayed to see his academic tool used for entertainment and leisure.

Despite this, hobbyist programmers began spending evenings and weekends creating small tools that allowed users to publish content online in various ways. Initially, these centered on discussions about how to publish online (suprise?) - but they soon expanded to cover every imaginable topic. The addition of images, and later video, made it increasingly clear that the internet would not remain a one-way channel of information but would become a platform where users also produced and shaped the content. This shift is known as Web 2.0: the user-driven internet.

THE PARTICIPATORY THING.

Back in 1992, media scholar Henry Jenkins published *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, exploring how fans of popular culture (like Star Trek) didn't just consume media, but also created, remixed, and reinterpreted it - actively challenging passive media consumption. The book didn't receive huge attention at the time but later became foundational in the field.

Jenkins continued studying the phenomenon, and in 2006 he published **Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century,** which marked a turning point. The concept of participatory culture gained academic and practical traction - not just within digital media but more broadly in how people engage with culture.

By then, the shift was well underway: Wikipedia, YouTube, blogs, and early social platforms were thriving. Within frameworks that had few but clear rules, content was developed almost entirely by users. For a few golden years, the internet was a wild, diverse, and unpredictable garden of user-generated content - of wildly varying quality, to be honest.

While today's internet has become consolidated into platform-based ecosystems dominated by giants like Meta and Google, and shadowed by dark corners of the web, participatory culture has increasingly taken root in physical space - challenging notions of representation, top-down design, and modernist idéa of the (male) genius.

THE FEAR OF WHITE SUGAR

Unsurprisingly, the advertising industry was quick to adapt the participatory ethos. One early example often cited is Coca-Cola's 2011 "Share a Coke" campaign in Australia. Faced with declining sales in a market where sugar had become a public health villain, the company printed popular first names on bottles. Internally, expectations were low. But the outcome was a 7% increase in sales within months.

People loved taking selfies with personalized Coke bottles and posting them online. It was a marketing dream: consumers not only paid for the product - they voluntarily and enthusiastically promoted it with their own faces. For free.

THE YELLOW ROOM

In the arts, participatory approaches have also gained traction. A prime example is Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson's work Room for One Colour (1997). In a Netflix documentary, Eliasson describes how his Berlin gallerist despaired: "It's just a room!" he protested, suggesting perhaps adding a red rose on the floor.

Eliasson refused. The work wasn't about a rose; it was about what people experienced in the room. Bathed in a single wavelength of light, visitors perceive only yellow and grey. Deeply rooted in phenomenological philosophy, the work isn't something to merely view - it must be felt with the body. Importantly, it doesn't exist without its visitors - who are not passive spectators but active participants, part of the artwork itself.

AND THE PARTY IN THE DESERT

Perhaps the most overused - but still illuminating - example of participatory culture is the city of 70,000 people that appears each year in Nevada's desert: the Burning Man Festival. It arises and vanishes without a trace. No headliners, no scheduled artists - the visitors are the artists. They co-create the experience in a massive collective performance.

What's most remarkable, beyond its scale, is its framework - distilled into just ten principles, all listed on a single sheet of A4:

1. **Radical Inclusion**
   Everyone is welcome. There are no prerequisites for participation.

2. **Gifting**
   Burning Man is a gift economy. Gifts are given freely, without expectation of return.

3. **Decommodification**
   Commercial sponsorships, advertising, and transactions are avoided.

4. **Radical Self-Reliance**
   Participants are responsible for their own needs: food, shelter, water.

5. **Radical Self-Expression**
   Individual creativity is encouraged, as long as it respects others.

6. **Communal Effort**
   Cooperation and collaboration are central. Much of the art is co-created.

7. **Civic Responsibility**
   Participants are responsible and follow laws and guidelines.

8. **Leave No Trace**
   Nothing is left behind—not even micro-trash. Nature must be preserved.

9. **Participation**
   This is not an event to consume; you are the event.

10. **Immediacy**
    Be present. Embrace direct experience and human connection.

Before dismissing this as post-hippie idealism, consider this: 70,000 people, minimal crime or assault, and no visible waste left behind. The principles work - at least until the weather has its say, as it did recently when the entire festival was bogged down in mud after unexpected rains.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

So, what defines participatory culture, and how does it differ from traditional civic participation or representative democracy? First, participatory culture isn't especially democratic in the one-person-one-vote sense. It more closely resembles a cooperative or startup, where influence correlates with activity and engagement - not seniority or mandate.

Henry Jenkins defined five key characteristics of participatory culture:

1. **Low Barriers to Entry**
   Participation is easy. Technical or social obstacles are minimal.
   (Anyone can make a YouTube video, edit Wikipedia, or write fanfiction.)

2. **Strong Support for Creation and Sharing**
   Participants help and encourage each other.

Communities provide feedback, resources, and motivation.

3. **Informal and Formal Mentorship**
   Learning happens among peers and from experienced participants.
   (Forums, tutorials, feedback loops.)

4. **Participants' Contributions Matter**
   What people create has value for others and shapes the collective.
   People feel that their input makes a difference.

5. **A Sense of Belonging**
   People feel part of something larger than themselves.

The benefits are clear: more participation means more gets done. More perspectives lead to better decisions. Feeling empowered in small contexts builds confidence for larger-scale change.

HOW TO GO?

But how is participatory culture built? One thing is certain: it cannot be designed at a desk and imposed top-down. Like any cultural development, it requires time, trust, and patience. The principles above can offer guidance - particularly as signposts to tell if you're on the right path.

Let's revisit Jenkins' first point: **low barriers to entry.** In the digital world, this means non-programmers can participate. In the physical world, it translates into safe and permissive spaces. Early mistakes are not only acceptable - they're part of the process. People should feel free to observe until they're ready to engage more fully.

This ties into the third point: **mentorship**. Norms and values are often passed from seasoned participants to newcomers. This dynamic fosters respectful, human-scale communication - illustrated by places like Absalon community house in central Copenhagen, where most signs have been removed. Want to know where the dishes go? Ask. Where's the bathroom? Ask. What time do they close? Ask. (Fire exits and safety notices remain posted, of course.)

The fourth principle - that **contributions matter** - can be reframed as: "People feel their contributions matter." And they do, especially when they can redefine the mission. In participatory settings, ideas rarely get voted down. If a few people support your vision, you're often free to pursue it - so long as it aligns with the group's overarching values. As a result,

these cultures can seem scattered and hard to define from the outside. But that's the nature of movements: they move.

For traditional organizations - nonprofits, government agencies, or businesses - this can be hard to manage. Participatory initiatives don't always fit existing frameworks. Their outcomes may be unmeasurable - or even unpredictable. That can be unsettling.

FACILITATE VS. MANAGE

Another challenge: watching mistakes unfold without stepping in. But that's precisely where participatory processes shine - they're inherently educational. Participants can evolve from observers to contributors to initiators to leaders (if all goes well). The pace is self-determined. Learning is both formal and informal, and this is often where knowledge becomes real skill.

If you want to facilitate participatory processes, you'll need to step back. Sit down - preferably on your hands - and let time do its work. It may sound like a Zen koan or a Winnie-the-Pooh quote, but it can't be overstated: as a facilitator, you are not the leader. Leaders emerge from the group - and change from day to day.

Your role is to ensure the framework remains intact, that no single alpha-type dominates, and that core values are not abandoned without discussion. Participatory spaces thrive on simple guiding principles - not rulebooks, manuals, or system design.

CURIOUS TO TRY IT OUT?

Start small; small enough to withstand failure, but large enough to yield insight. It might be a workplace project, a neighborhood initiative, or an effort to involve citizens in your city's green transition.

If so, consider these guiding questions (best discussed with others):

- *Why would people want to participate? What makes them care?*
- *Do we allow for slow, meaningful engagement?*
- *Where does participation take place—and who has access?*

- *How do we support leaders who facilitate, rather than dominate?*
- *How do we show that participation leads to real change, not just symbolism?*
- *How do we lower the threshold from observer to participant?*
- *What values are shaped by what we do—not just what we say?*