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**MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES AND  
DEMOCRACY IN AN ENLARGED EUROPE**

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2007 EUROPEAN MEDIA  
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL



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# Theoretical frameworks for participatory media

Nico Carpentier

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The success of the new generation of media technologies – in combination with their presupposed interactive and even participatory nature – feeds the assumption that we are living another new communication revolution. In order to evaluate and value the contemporary (media) transformations, and the possibilities of the (mass) media to contribute to a participatory-democratic culture, we ironically need to ignore the media and their technologies (at least in a first phase) and to focus on the political-ideological processes which provide the discursive context for these media organisations and technologies. Only by taking this long but inevitable detour, it becomes possible to even begin to understand the democratic role(s) of the media and especially participatory media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The conceptual starting point of this chapter is that participation is a politically-ideologically contested notion, and that the role of (participatory) media is intrinsically linked to these debates. For this reason, this chapter reflects on the participation debate, as a condition of possibility for the analysis the media's role in this debate. The complexity of these participation debates entraps us in a painstaking process of including what is participatory and excluding what is not, a process which is complicated by the fluidity of all key concepts that are involved in this operation. In a second part of this chapter we can use these debates on participation (and access and interaction) to develop a first typology of participatory and semi-participatory organisations, which generates a first matrix to map the field of participatory media. But even after having (temporally) fixated and delineated these concepts (for analytical purposes), the diversity that characterises participatory organisations requires to move beyond the mapping exercise. In order to fully grasp

the identity of these participatory organisations, a second typology is introduced, this time not aimed at delineating concepts but at diversifying and combining them. In this third part, four different theoretical approaches are combined to provide a (hopefully) increased insight in the world of participatory organisations. Given the diversity in this world, it is argued that the identities of specific organisations are always unique combinations of these four different theoretical approaches.

## 2. THE KEY CONCEPT OF PARTICIPATION

The key concept of participation has been used in a variety of ways and domains, and its success has not necessarily been to its advantage. Already in 1970 Carole Pateman wrote that *'the widespread use of the term [...] has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared.'* (1970: 1) There are two ways to deal with this contingency of the notion of participation. A first strategy is based on the expression of regret for the signifiatory chaos, combined with the attempts to undo it by (almost archeologically) unravelling the authentic meaning of the concept of participation. This strategy is relatively old: already in 1969, Arnstein published her ladder of participation, which had the following 8 steps: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. From a slightly different angle, the OECD (2001) developed a three-stage model (information distribution, consultation and active participation), which nevertheless structurally resembled Arnstein's ladder. Considerably less critical and radical than Arnstein's model – as the bottom and top steps of the ladder were eliminated), we are offered the following definition of participation, which is *'a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in the decision- and policy-making process. It acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue – although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government'* (OECD, 2001: 16). This definition carries with it the echoes of one of the classic definitions of participation, developed by Pateman in her 1970 book *Democratic Theory and Participation*. Here, Pateman distinguishes between partial and full participation, where partial participation is defined as *'a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only'* (Pateman, 1970: 70 – my emphasis). Full participation is seen as *'a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions.'* (Pateman, 1970: 71 – my emphasis).



All the definitions and approaches have a common – almost messianic – concern towards the concept of participation: they want to protect and rescue it. The tactics used are relatively similar, because they all consist of creating a difference with ‘other’ practices which are only nominally participatory, and which can then be unmasked as forms of ‘pseudo-participation’. The second strategy to deal with this signifiatory diversity distances itself (at least in a first phase) from the question of differentiating between authentic participation and pseudo-participation, but focuses on the signifiatory process that lies behind the articulation of participation as part of a political-ideological struggle. From this perspective, the definition of participation is one of the many societal fields where a political struggle is waged between the minimalist and the maximalist variations of democracy and politics. It is a struggle between two political-ideological, archetypal models, where on the one hand – in the minimalist model – democracy is confined to processes of representation, where participation is limited to elite selection through elections, and the political to the domain where political elites organise their decision-making processes. On the other hand, in the maximalist model, democracy is seen as a more balanced combination of representation and participation, and the political is articulated as a dimension of the social (Mouffe, 1997; 2000), which can play a role in the sphere of political decision-making, but also in other societal spheres (such as the economy, culture, and media, to name but a few).

The definition of participation is an important part of the confrontation between both models, and its specific meaning shifts depending on the specific model that makes use of this concept. As mentioned before, this is not a mere academic debate, but a political-ideological struggle for the taken-for-grantedness of how our political realities are defined and organised. It is also not a mere semantic struggle, but a struggle which is lived and practiced. In other words, we structure our practices at least partially on the basis of the idea of participation. This causes the definition of participation not to be a mere outcome of this political-ideological struggle, but positions it as an integrated and constitutive part of this struggle. To put it slightly too unnuanced: it is the beginning and ending of this struggle, because the definition of participation allows us to think, to name and to communicate the participatory process (as minimalist or as maximalist), and because this definition is simultaneously constituted by our specific (minimalist or maximalist participatory) practices. The definition is partially constructed through practices, and partially constructs and structures these practices.

The second strategy to deal with the signifiatory diversity of the concept of participation is not as disconnected from the first strategy (looking for authentic participation) as might appear at first sight. There are namely three components from the first strategy which are worth salvaging.

- 1/ Taking a closer look at the definitions used in the first strategy, it becomes reasonably easy to distil the core issue in this participation debate (and the political-ideological struggle that lies behind this debate). The concept that features repeatedly in these definitions – in many different forms – is power, and more specifically the way that power is distributed in society. Some prudence is in place here, though, as power is often reduced to the possession of a specific societal group. Authors like Foucault (1978) have argued against this position, claiming that power is an always-present characteristic of social relations. In contemporary societies, the narrations of power are always complex narrations of power strategies, counter-powers and resistance. These power struggles are never limited to one specific societal field (e.g., ‘the’ economy), but are present on all societal fields and levels. Despite (or because) this nuance, the debates on participation can be seen as a struggle for political power (in the broadest sense possible), or better, as a power struggle on who can take on which roles in society. In the minimalist models, power is centralised as much as possible, whilst in the maximalist models the decentralisation of power is preferred. Revisiting the first strategy (based on authenticity) allows us to see the participation debate as a latent conflict (which is sometimes rendered manifest) on who can become involved in societal decision-making processes, in the definition and resolution of societal problems, in the choices regarding which procedures should be followed, and in the societal debates about these definitions, procedures and resolutions. Who is empowered and granted the opportunity (and ‘the’ power) to speak thus becomes an integrated part of the debates about participation and the underlying political-ideological struggle.
- 2/ From the first strategy we can also derive the need to delineate the concept of participation, whilst still maintaining its contingency and structural openness. The above-mentioned debate about participation requires some form of discursive fixity, which obliges us to return to the first approach and the core concepts that are used in this approach. These core concepts are articulated in contingent ways, but also their mere existence is of importance

here. This argument might seem superfluous at first sight, would it not be for the involvement of two other notions – namely access and interaction – in the participation debate. As the relationship between both notions and power is much less stronger and explicit, their inclusion also becomes part of the struggle for the minimalist or maximalist articulation of participation. Although the differences between access, interaction and participation have been dealt with more extensively in other texts (see Carpentier, 2007), it remains crucial to distinguish between these concepts. It suffices here to refer to one example, where the difference between two of these concepts was established, namely the Unesco-debates on access and participation (from a communicative perspective, within the framework of the development of a New Information and Communication World Order – NWICO, also see Hannu Nieminen's chapter in this volume). In the Unesco-debates, access was defined as *'the use of media for public service. It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organisations. Participation implies a higher level of public involvement in communication systems. It includes the involvement of the public in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems. Participation may be no more than representation and consultation of the public in decision-making.'* (Quoted in Servaes, 1999: 85)

Especially when the internet gained its momentum, concepts like access and interaction saw their importance increase. As both concepts are 'only' necessary conditions for participation, the increased importance of access and interaction caused an implicit downgrading of the more radical and maximalist component of the meaning of participation. Exactly the implicit nature of this downgrading complicates the analysis of the political-ideological struggle behind participation, and simultaneously legitimates the delineation of the notions of access, interaction and participation.

- 3/ Finally, a third component that needs to be highlighted is the unavoidability of the positioning of any author that intervenes in these debates. Ideology does not stop at the edges of analyses, but it is an integrated part of it. This does not ignore the fact that the debate on the 'correct' definition of participation is too simple: for this exact reason we need the second strategy. But a mere description of the dynamics of power in participatory processes is also too simple. This is yet another area where the first strategy proves to

be helpful. This means more specifically that I subscribe to the call of a number of authors (Giddens (2002) to name but one) to continue deepening democracy, and to include all societal fields (including the media) in this democratisation process. This does not imply that all expert systems should be annihilated mercilessly – this might be a bit of a difficult position for an academic to take – but this does mean that the power equilibriums and the participatory potential in every domain of the social should be analysed carefully, and ways should be discovered to maximise both of them. This plea for an increase of societal power balances has a clearly utopian dimension. Situations of full-participation – as described by Pateman – are utopian non-places (or better: ‘never-to-be-places’) which will always remain unattainable and empty, but which simultaneously remain to play a key role as ultimate anchoring points and horizons for our analyses. Despite the impossibility to fully realise these situations in the social praxis, their fantasmatic realisations serve as breeding grounds for democratic renewal. As the French writer of Irish descent, Samuel Beckett, once put it eloquently<sup>1</sup>: *‘Ever tried. Ever failed. Never mind. Try again. Fail better.’*

### 3. WHAT ABOUT THE 21ST CENTURY (MASS) MEDIA?

Given the ubiquity of contemporary (mass) media and their societal roles, media organisations also become relevant in the discussion about participation. Of course, this diversity is again structured by the above-mentioned minimalist-maximalist debate on democracy and participation. From a minimalist perspective more emphasis is placed on the ritual and symbolic forms of participation, where the media are seen to be contributing to communality. Citizens frequently participate in (semi-)collective mediated rituals and surround themselves with (carriers of) meaning which construct their imagined communities. These meanings are not just communicated through the more obvious examples (like news(papers) and documentaries) but also through literature, soaps, reality tv, cartoons, etc. In most cases, the participatory nature of these receptions (however active they may be) is relatively limited, and one may wonder whether the term (mediated or symbolic) interaction, or even mediated quasi-interaction (Thompson, 1995) is not more appropriate. From a more maximalist perspective, the attention is focused on the more intense forms of media participation, where non-professionals are

effectively involved in the mediated production of meaning (content-related participation) or even in the management and policy-development of content producing organisations (structural participation).

In the history of mediated communication we can find many variations. If we travel back into the early years of communication history, it is not even that farfetched to consider the many pamphlets as forms of media participation. But also the start-up phase of radio knew many examples of non-professional broadcasters. Not surprisingly, it was Bertolt Brecht's radio theory (see Marc Silberman's (2001) collection of Brecht's essays) that provided us with the foundations of the dream of the transformation of radio as a tool of distribution into a tool of communication). But especially from the nineties (of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) – and in some cases earlier, like for instance in the case of Hakim Bey's *TAZ* (1985) – the focus of participatory theoreticians shifted towards the so-called new media. The development of the internet, and especially the web would not only render all information available to all, but would also create a whole new world of communication, with in its slipstream the promise of a structural increase of the level of (media) participation. In the meanwhile, this dream seems to have come true, at least at first sight: while at first people still had to do the effort of constructing their own webpages, the web 2.0 technologies now provide popular<sup>2</sup> and accessible ways to publish texts, images, and audio and video material.

But the discourse of novelty that accompanies these evolutions, brings along a number of substantial problems. Our attention has become focused on the participatory potential of new media, which brings us to ignore the capacities of 'old' – Acland (2007) calls them residual – media. Suddenly, the newspaper, the radio and the television appear to be media from the past century, not relevant enough to be incorporated in the debates on participation. This causes three crucial mistakes to be made. First, the cultural importance of the old media is tremendously underestimated. These old media still play an important role in the everyday lives of many people. Blinded by the futurist megalomania, and by the hope for a better future, the taken-for-granted presence of the old media is often forgotten. Secondly, the institutional nature of the present-day media worlds are equally often ignored. A vast number of media products is still produced by media companies, which are old top-down systems based on capitalist logics and not always in favour of the maximalist approaches towards participation and democracy. In this dazzling techno-optimism, it is often forgotten that the routines, identities, practices, conventions and representations that circulate in the old media system have not been lost, but still co-structure the

'new' media system. Thirdly, the discourse of novelty feeds into the technological-determinist model, assuming that specific media technologies are per definition more participatory than others. Without wanting to underestimate the specificity of technologies, or without positioning them as '*determined technologies*' (Williams, 1974: 7), the participatory potential of media technologies remains dependant on the way that they are used. In practice, this means that web 2.0 technologies can perfectly be used in top-down non-participatory ways.

The caution expressed in the previous paragraph does not bear witness of my blindness for the participatory potential of old and new media (technologies), nor for the increased diversity of these participatory practices. It would be hard not to mention blogging, vlogging, web-zines, internet radio (and television), podcasting, digital storytelling and wikis here (see Gangadharan et al. (2007) for an alternative media perspective on these technologies). But even in this enumeration, it is difficult to escape the technological angle, as all labels refers to specific technologies. Because of this focus, we tend to decrease the importance of media producers and consumers. Ultimately, networks consist of humans and non-humans, of organisms, humans and machines. To put this differently, for every cyberspace there is a cyberplace inhabited by media users that work and live in these places. In their own daily lives, within specific social contexts, they make use of specific media technologies. Secondly, these participatory processes (as mentioned before) are not guaranteed by these specific technologies. Each technology can be used in a wide variety of ways, and its participatory nature is often (still) dependant of the power (im)balance between a professional media elite and the non-professionals that become involved, and not by the technology as such. Thirdly, the use of these technologies, and their participatory potential cannot be detached from their organisational component. Participation is organised, and is in many cases produced by the operations of formal (or sometimes informal) organisations. Even in the blogosphere, the existence of the individual writer-publisher (the Author as Barthes (1984) would call him or her) is a romantic illusion, because the blog-infrastructure is provided by a variety of organisations and companies. This organisational context is to a high degree - as Henry Jenkins (2006) argues in *Convergence Culture* - a commercial and commodified context, which results in a combination of top-down business processes with bottom-up consumption and production processes. The existence of YouTube, with Google as its owner - is a case in point here.

#### 4. MAPPING (SEMI-)PARTICIPATORY MEDIA ORGANISATIONS

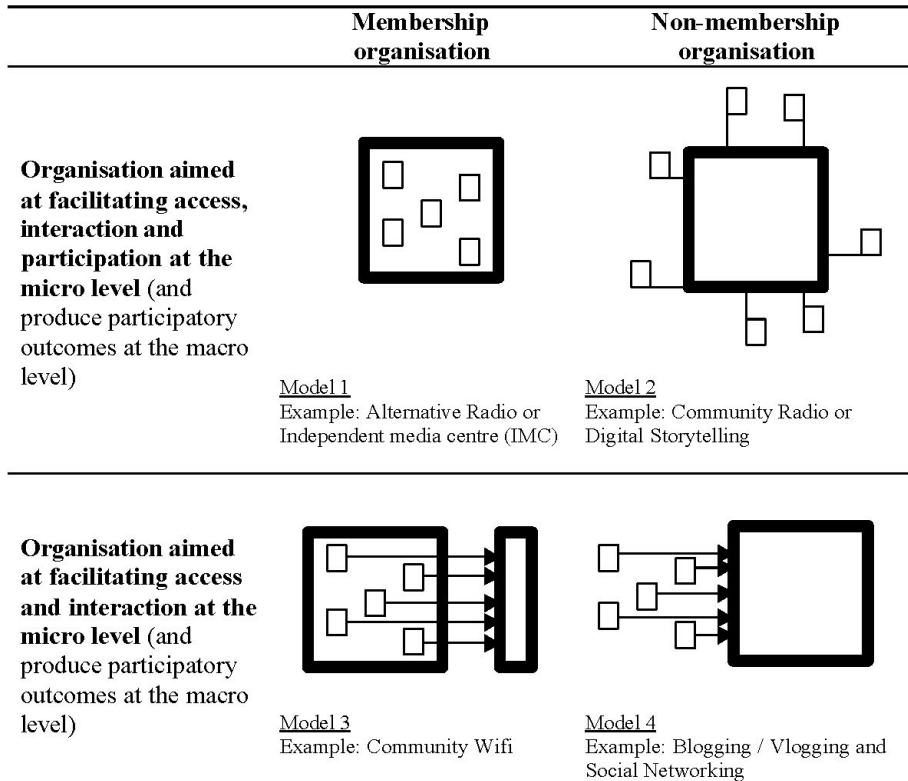
In order to deal with the participatory diversity, a first typology to structure the field of participatory organisations is developed. Building on the importance of the organisational logics in facilitating participation, the organisation of participation can be synthesised in four ideal-typical models. These four models are constructed on the basis of two dimensions: the (formal or informal) membership of the participants of the organisation (versus the absence of a membership structure), and the facilitation of access, interaction and participation (versus the emphasis on access and interaction only). Arguably, only the first two models deal with organisations that facilitate participation at the micro-level, in the other two cases the label semi-participation is preferred, which semantically excludes them from the sphere of (micro-)participation in the strict sense.

The first model deals with organisations that facilitate the participation of its members. These participatory processes concern people that organise their own participation. Classic examples are alternative radio stations (often linked to Amarc<sup>3</sup>) and the so-called IMCs, where Indymedia<sup>4</sup> is the most famous example. Although in both cases different types of membership (with varying degrees of involvement) exist, this model presupposes an explicit link between the participants and the organisation. In the second model the members of the organisations take on a more facilitating role, which implies that the objectives of these organisations is to have others (meaning non-members) participate. Examples can (at least partially) be found in the sector of community media, as these media organisations are often oriented towards the facilitation of the participation of members of a specific community, where these members remain relatively detached from the actual organisation. Another example is the British Video Nation project (see Carpentier (2003), and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/>), where the BBC – already in the early nineties – organised a participatory television (and later web) project. Thirdly, also the sector of digital storytelling produces a number of examples, when organisations like the Center for Digital Storytelling<sup>5</sup> support ‘their’ participants in the creation of digital narrations (see Lambert (2002)).

In the second group of models the aim of the organisation is not to allow for or support participatory processes; these organisations focus on access and/or interaction. In a relatively rare number of cases this concerns organisations that have a membership structure (model 3). Examples can be found in the sector of community wifi, where these organi-

sation aim to provide access to the internet for their members. Organisations that facilitate access and interaction (model 4) can frequently be found, in many different forms. Examples are organisations that provide blog or vlog facilities, like Ourmedia and YouTube<sup>6</sup>, and websites aimed at social networking like Facebook en MySpace<sup>7</sup>. Also instances of what is now often called citizen journalism, where non-professionals provide raw materials to newsrooms, can be included in this fourth model.

**Figure 1:** Models of (semi-)participatory organisations

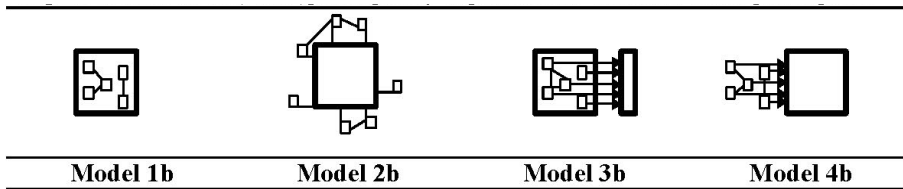


The four models mentioned above assume only limited internal organisational interaction. This will often match with the actual situation of these organisations, where participants are often individualised (as is the case of blogging, which is not coincidentally referred to as a narcissistic practice – see Carr (2006)). In other cases participants have a direct and exclusive relationship to the nuclear group that is (in practice) managing the organisation. Nevertheless, it might be possible that



participants actually do collaborate (in other words: interact with each other). For this reason, Figure 2 offers an alternative version of these four models, visualising practices of cooperation and co-creation.

**Figure 2:** Models of (semi-)participatory organisations with networked participants



## 5. WHAT ARE PARTICIPATORY ORGANISATIONS? COMBINING FOUR THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The objective of the previous part was to generate a distinction between participatory and semi-participatory organisations. However relevant these semi-participatory organisations are, their lack of focus on micro-participation – and on the reduction of power imbalances at the organisational level – renders them different from participatory organisations (*sensu stricto*). This argument does not ignore the potential participatory outcome of the activities of semi-participatory organisations at the macro-level, facilitating the participation of citizens in public spaces. But my argument does emphasise the difference between organisations that facilitate participation at both the micro- and macro-level, and organisations that only indirectly allow for macro-participation. This at first sight simple difference is complicated by the fluidity of the frontiers between participation, interaction and access, and by the discourses from organisations that claim to be participatory but revert to highly minimalist forms of participation and are characterised by strong internal power imbalances. These confluences – where everything and everyone become participatory – threaten both the analytical and political capacity of the signifier participation, and can thus be seen as a form of semantic reductionism (or even as the discursive erasure of the more radical forms of participation).

This first mapping exercise does not suffice to generate an understanding of the (potential) role of participatory media. For that reason we need to look at the diversity of approaches that structure their identities and activities. But as the multiplicity of participatory media

organisations<sup>8</sup> has caused most mono-theoretical approaches to focus on certain characteristics, while ignoring other aspects, it is necessary to use a complementary set of different approaches towards the definition of participatory media. In a previously published article (Carpentier et al. (2003)), four different approaches were distinguished: community media, alternative media, civil society media and rhizomatic media. The combination of these approaches provides us with the second typology to theorise participatory media.

Traditional participatory media theory is built on media-centred models as it tries to describe the functioning of community media (approach 1) and alternative media (approach 2). The first approach uses a more essentialist theoretical framework, stressing the importance of the community the media organisation is serving, while the alternative media models focus on the relationship between alternative and mainstream media, putting more emphasis on the discursive relation of interdependency between two antagonistic sets of identities. These traditional models for theorising the identity of participatory media are complemented here with two more society-centred approaches<sup>9</sup>. The third approach defines participatory media as part of civil society. In order to incorporate the more relationist aspects of civil society theory - articulated by for instance Walzer (1998) - they are combined with Downing's (2001) and Rodriguez' (2001) critiques on alternative media, and radicalised and unified in the fourth approach, which builds on the Deleuzian metaphor of participatory media as rhizome. This approach allows (even more) incorporating aspects of contingency, fluidity and elusiveness in the analysis of participatory media.

**Figure 3:** Positioning the four theoretical approaches

	<b>Media-centred</b>	<b>Society-centred</b>
<b>Autonomous identity of CM (Essentialist)</b>	<u>Approach I:</u> Serving the community	
<b>Identity of CM in relation to other identities (Relationalist)</b>	<u>Approach II:</u> An alternative to mainstream	<u>Approach III:</u> Part of civil society
		<u>Approach IV:</u> Rhizome

Source: Carpentier et al., 2003: 53

These four approaches are of course theoretical (and ideological) discourses, which might materialise in practice (or not). But they do contain all core concepts that structure (in always unique ways) the participatory media's identities. In the first approach the participatory media's role towards the community is emphasised. Community media serve a specific – often geographically defined<sup>10</sup> – community, and thus validate and strengthen that community. Secondly, access by the community and participation of the community (and its constituent subgroups) are to be considered key-defining factors. 'Ordinary people'<sup>11</sup> are given the opportunity to have their voices heard. Topics that are considered relevant for the community can be discussed by members of that community, thus empowering those people by signifying that their statements are considered important enough to be published or broadcast.

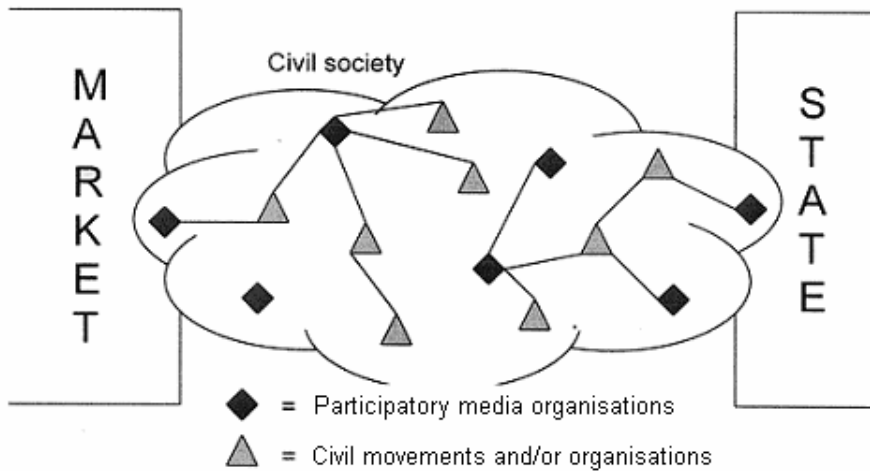
The second approach to defining participatory media is based on the concept of alternative media, where it is emphasised that being a '*third voice*' (Servaes, 1999: 260) or the '*third type*' (Girard, 1992: 2) is still a viable option for media organisations. This concept is built on a distinction between mainstream (public and commercial) media on the one hand and alternative media on the other, where alternative media are defined in a negative relationship towards mainstream media. This approach allows stressing that participatory media have alternative ways of organising (often using a more horizontal structure), carry alternative discourses and representations, and make use of alternative formats and genres. Participation also plays a crucial role here, as through the mechanism of self-representation this multiplicity of alternative voices is accomplished.

In the third (society-centred) approach participatory media organisations are seen as part of civil society, a societal segment considered crucial for the viability of democracy. Participatory media can firstly be seen as an 'ordinary' part of civil society, as one of the many types of organisations active in the field of civil society. The democratisation *of* media, as Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) call this, allows citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life and to exert their rights to communicate. Participatory media also contribute to what Wasko and Mosco (1992: 13) call the democratisation *through* media, as they can offer different societal groups and communities the opportunity for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in public spaces, thus entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation.

The rhizomatic approach to participatory media uses Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) metaphor to radicalise approach 2 and 3, by focusing on three aspects: their role as a crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness,

and their interconnections and linkages with market and state. Participatory media are often part of large civil society networks, and act as meeting points and catalysts for a variety of organisations and movements. Both their embeddedness in a fluid civil society (as part of a larger network) and their antagonistic relationship towards the state and the market (as alternatives to mainstream public and commercial media) make the identity of participatory media highly elusive and fluid. In this approach it is argued that this elusiveness and contingency, which are 'typical' for a rhizome, are their main defining elements. And like rhizomes, participatory media tend to cut across borders and build linkages between pre-existing gaps. In the case of participatory media, these connections apply not only to the pivotal role participatory media (can) play in civil society. They also apply to the linkages alternative media (and other civil organisations) can establish with (segments of) the state and the market, without losing their proper identity and becoming incorporated and/or assimilated.

**Figure 4:** Civil society and participatory media as rhizome



Source: Carpentier et al., 2003: 62

## 6. CONCLUSION

One of the many witticisms from the world of participatory media is that participation and efficiency are each other's opposites. This is of course 'only' a witticism, which means that we can count on some degree of truthfulness, but also need to recognise the exaggeration. There is little

point in being naïve about this issue: the delegation of power is often the easiest and most efficient solution for many problems, especially at the short term. But from a historical perspective, looking back at the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can hardly remain blind for the enormous price that has been paid for evolving towards strong forms of power delegation. Slightly less dramatic, but still relevant for this discussion, is the argument that participation is not just a technique, but also an important societal value, that needs more cherishing than is the case at this point in time. Possibly, the lack of efficiency is a reasonable price to pay, when we in return can achieve more impact on our own lives and on the (mediated) meanings that surround us.

This chapter also shows that participation is a complex notion that has not stabilised yet. Given its intimate connection to the struggle between minimalist and maximalist democratic models, it is unlikely to ever stabilise. As participation is an intrinsic part of a political-ideological struggle, these participatory media, their discourses and practices unavoidably become part of it. In defending more equal power relationships within the media worlds, their position is far from accepted. The workings of power in contemporary societies often remains invisible (because of reasons of complexity, not of conspiracy), and most of the time we can only see the vague traces of existing power imbalances and abuses. This provides support for the illusion of the obsolescence of a continued equalising of power relations, and has cornered maximalist (aka radical) participatory media, articulating them as reminders of a past long gone. The success of web 2.0 technologies (and the discourses about these technologies) are one of the many opportunities to enhance the level of (media) democracy, but at the same time the threat of the incorporation of market and state is more than real. For exactly this reason, the organisations that use (and defend) the more maximalist approaches of participation and democracy, remain important assets.

Despite their many constraints and their many failures (of which some are permanent, others temporal) participatory media organisations help to propagate discourses on more just and democratic societies. The dreams behind these discourses are often utopian, but at the same time they do contribute to defining the horizon, and show the possibilities and advantages of a continued deepening of democracy.

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## NOTES

- 1 In order to do history not too much injustice: Samuel Beckett wrote these often quoted words in relationship to the impossibility of art, and not in relationship to democracy.
- 2 The Technorati website (<http://technorati.com/about/>) was tracking 103,7 million websites on 10 September 2007.
- 3 See <http://www.amarc.org/>
- 4 <http://www.indymedia.org/>
- 5 See <http://www.storycenter.org/>
- 6 See <http://www.ourmedia.org/> and <http://www.youtube.com/>
- 7 See <http://www.facebook.com/> and <http://www.myspace.com/>
- 8 Selecting an overarching label for participatory / community / alternative / civil society / rhizomatic media organisations poses an insolvable semantic problem. But as in this approach of combining the four different models, they all become structurally incorporated, the question of the

appropriate label becomes relatively irrelevant. In this chapter, given the focus on participation, participatory media is chosen as the overarching label.

- 9 The object of this article – participatory media – of course complicates an unequivocal society-centred approach. In stead this type of approach should be interpreted as the societal contextualisation of (participatory) media.
- 10 In for instance Amarc-Europe's (1994) definition of community radio, the geographical aspect is explicitly highlighted: *'a "non-profit" station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio'*. Nevertheless, also other types of relationships between medium and community are implied when Amarc-Europe uses the phrase *'to which it broadcasts'*.
- 11 In other words: people who are not part of a societal elite (including politicians, academics, captains of industry, and media professionals) and those not considered being celebrities.