

# BEYOND THE LADDER OF PARTICIPATION: AN ANALYTICAL TOOLKIT FOR THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPATORY MEDIA PROCESSES

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*Participatory research is facing three challenges—how to deal with the theoretisation and conceptualisation of participation; how to support the research with analytical models; and how to evaluate the research outcomes. This article aims to address these three problems by distinguishing two main approaches (a sociological and a political) in participatory theory and developing a four-level and 12-step analytical model that functions within the political approach. In this analytical model, a series of key concepts are used: process, field, actor, decision-making moment and power. The normative-evaluative problem is addressed by reverting to the critical perspective to evaluate the societal desirability of particular participatory intensities. This critical perspective—potentially—adds a 13th and final normative layer to the analytical model.*

**KEYWORDS** participation; participatory theory; analytical model; the critical; power; process; field; actor; decision-making moment

## Introduction

Media research into participatory practices has become popular again, triggered by the interest in online media and their decentralised nature that beholds the promise of empowerment. This increased interest for participatory practices has also made a series of problems resurface, which are located at three distinct, but still interrelated, levels.

Firstly, there is hardly a consensus on how participation should be theoretised, or even defined. The resulting plurality of approaches towards participation can only be welcomed and embraced, but at the same time there is a need for clarity to ensure that academic dialogues can be organised and academics can build more on each other's work to better understand the role of participation in contemporary societies. Secondly, there is also considerable vagueness on how participation should be researched. All social practices are characterised by complexity, but, in the case of participatory process, this complexity is further enhanced by the discursive and material struggles that are intimately connected with these participatory processes. Analytical models, which might support researchers better in tackling this complexity, are hardly being debated (or developed). Thirdly, there is no sufficient debate on how participation should be evaluated. On some occasions, the impression might arise that any kind of social action can be labelled as participatory, and then celebrated as part of the trajectory towards a democratic nirvana. There is a need to acknowledge the ideological nature of participation, which brings about

normative discussions into the desirability of particular participatory intensities. At this level, the critical perspective provides a normative anchoring point that will facilitate this process of self-positioning.

This article aims to contribute to these three problem areas of participatory research, first by offering a reflection on participatory (media) theory, arguing that two main approaches (a sociological and a political) can be distinguished, offering a fairly simple entry point into the maze of participatory theory. This second, political, approach will be used to develop an analytical model that consists of four levels and 12 steps, guiding researchers who prefer the political approach through the complexities of these power analyses which lie at the heart of the political approach. Moreover, this article will return to the normative discussion, by reverting to the critical perspective, which can be used to evaluate the societal desirability of particular participatory intensities. This critical perspective is closely affiliated to the political approach, as they share a focus on power, but at the same time the critical perspective is different, as it raises the question of social change and, in particular, the “democratization of democracy” (Giddens 2002, 93).

At the same time, there is a need for a series of disclaimers, given the rather ambitious scope of this article. The analytical model that is developed in this article does not discuss research methods in detail, but offers an analytical framework in which a wide variety of methods can be deployed, depending on which level of the analytical model is researched and on the exact nature of the participatory process to be researched. Instead, the article refers to earlier research, using these case studies as examples, but mainly structuring, tightening up and rendering explicit the analytical frameworks that have been used before (see Carpentier 2011). Obviously, the article also does not have the ambition of presenting the ultimate analytical model for the study of media participation (or of participation in other realms of the social), but it still aims to offer a contribution to participatory research, and the very necessary dialogue on how to deal with the complexities of researching participation.

### Approaches to Participation

The literature on participation, including media and participation, has produced many different positions (see, e.g., Jenkins and Carpentier [2013] and Allen et al. [2014] for two recent media-related debates). Arguably, two main approaches to participation can be distinguished in these debates: a sociological approach and a political (studies) approach<sup>1</sup> (see also Lepik 2013). The sociological approach defines participation as taking part in particular social processes, a definition which casts a very wide net. In this approach, participation includes many (if not all) types of human interaction, in combination with interactions with texts and technologies. Power is not excluded from this approach, but remains one of the many secondary concepts to support it. One example of how participation is defined in this approach, is Melucci’s (1989, 174) definition, when he says that participation has a double meaning: “It means both taking part, that is, acting so as to promote the interests and the needs of an actor as well as belonging to a system, identifying with the ‘general interests’ of the community.” In one of the afore-mentioned debates, we can also find an example of this approach, voiced by one of the authors:

The critique of participation sounds a bit like disappointment about its unfulfilled promises, but those were flawed from the beginning. I tried to develop a pragmatic

understanding of participation. The scholar's personal hopes for democratic progress or power balance should not be a part of it. I treat participation more as a technical term, a *modus operandus*, free of political connotation. Participation simply describes how users in one way or another contribute to or participate in using a service or a platform. I refuse any normative connotation of participation. (Schäfer in Allen et al. 2014, 1142)

The sociological approach results, for instance, in labelling consumption as participatory, because consumers are taking part in a consumption culture and are exercising consumer choices (Lury 2011, 12). Also for doing sports, the label of participation is used, as exemplified by Delaney and Madigan's (2009) frequent use of the participation concept in their introduction into the sociology of sports. We can find a similar approach in what is labelled cultural participation, where participation is defined as individual art (or cultural) exposure, attendance or access, in some cases complemented by individual art (or cultural) creation. As Vander Stichle and Laermans (2006, 48) describe it: "In principle, cultural participation behaviour encompasses both public and private receptive practices, as well as active and interactive forms of cultural participation." In practice, this implies that the concept of participation is used for attending a concert or visiting a museum.

Within media studies, the sociological approach can, for instance, be found in how Carey (2009, 15) defines the ritual model of communication in *Communication as Culture*, as the "representation of shared beliefs", where togetherness is created and maintained, without disregarding the many contending forces that characterise the social. For Carey, the ritual model of communication is explicitly linked to notions of "'sharing', 'participation', 'association', 'fellowship' and the 'possession of a common faith'" (2009, 15), where people are (made) part of a culture through their ritualistic participation in that very same culture. (Mass) Media, such as newspapers (used by Carey as an example), play a crucial role by inviting readers to participate in a cultural configuration, interpellating them—to use an Althusserian concept—to become part of society by offering them subject positions or, as Carey puts it, social roles, with which they can identify (or dis-identify):

Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it. (Carey 2009, 21)

This type of ritual participation<sup>2</sup> again defines participation as taking (and becoming) part, through a series of interactions, with—in Carey's case—media texts. Others have also used the ritual participation concept (and the sociological approach to participation it entails), in relationship to media (Real 1996; Dayan and Katz 2009, 120), festivals (Roemer 2007) and the arts (Braddock 2009).

In contrast, the political approach produces a much more restrictive definition of participation, which refers to the equalisation of power inequalities in particular decision-making processes (see Carpentier 2011; Carpentier, Dahlgren, and Pasquali 2014). Participation then becomes defined as the equalisation of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in formal or informal decision-making processes.

For instance, in the field of democratic theory, Pateman's (1970) *Participation and Democratic Theory* is highly instrumental in showing the significance of power in defining participation, and can be seen as a key illustration of the political approach towards

participation. The two definitions of participation that she introduces are those of partial and full participation. Partial participation is defined by Pateman 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” (1970, 70), while 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” (1970, 71). Also in the field of urban planning, Arnstein (1969, 216) in her seminal article “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” (see later) links participation explicitly to power, saying “that citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power”.

The political approach also allows emphasising that participation is an object of struggle, and that different ideological projects (and their proponents) defend different participatory intensities.<sup>3</sup> More minimalist versions of participation tend to protect the power positions of privileged (elite) actors, to the detriment of non-privileged (non-elite) actors, without totally excluding the latter. In contrast, more maximalist versions of participation strive for a full equilibrium between all actors (which protects the non-privileged actors).

The more restrictive use of the notion of participation in the political approach necessitates a more clear demarcation of participation towards a series of related concepts that are, in the sociological approach, often used interchangeably. One key concept is engagement,<sup>4</sup> which Dahlgren (2013, 25) defines as the “subjective disposition that motivates [the] realization [of participation]”, in order to distinguish it from participation. In earlier work, Dahlgren (2009) argues that the feeling of being invited, committed and/or empowered, but also the positive inclination towards the political (and the social), are crucial components of engagement. In his civic cultures circuit, Dahlgren also emphasises (apart from more materialist elements like practices and spaces) the importance of knowledge, trust, identities and values for (enhancing) engagement. Engagement is thus different from participation (in the political approach) as engagement refers to the creation, or existence, of a social connection of individuals or groups with a broader political community, which is aimed at protecting or improving it.

Other related, but still distinct, concepts are access and interaction. In earlier work, I have argued that access refers to the establishment of presence, and interaction to the creation of socio-communicative relations (Carpentier 2011, 130–131). As a concept, access is very much part of everyday language, which makes clear definitions rather rare. At the same time, access—as a concept—is used in a wide variety of (academic) fields, which we can use to deepen our understanding of this concept. One area where access is often used is geography, when the access to specific spaces and places is thematised. More historical (spatial) analyses deal with access to land, and the enclosure of the common fields (Neeson 1996), while more contemporary analyses add a focus on the access to other resources such as food (Morton et al. 2008) and water (Wegerich and Warner 2004). The importance of presence for defining access can also be illustrated through a series of media studies examples: in the case of the digital divide discourse, the focus is, for instance, placed on the access to (online) media technologies, which in turn allows people to access media content. In both cases, access implies achieving presence (to technology or media content). Access also features in the more traditional media feedback discussions, where it has yet another meaning. Here, access implies gaining a presence within media organisations, which generates the opportunity for people to have their voices heard (in providing feedback).

A second concept that needs to be distinguished from participation is interaction. If we look at the work of Argentinean philosopher Bunge (1977, 259), we can find the treacherously simple and general definition of interaction “two different things x and y interact if each acts upon the other”, combined with the following postulate: “Every thing acts on, and is acted upon by, other things.” Interaction also has a long history in sociological theory, where it often refers to the establishment of socio-communicative relationships, as was already mentioned. An example can be found in Giddens’s (2006, 1034) definition of social interaction in the glossary of *Sociology*, where he defines social interaction as “any form of social encounter between individuals”. A more explicit foregrounding of the socio-communicative can be found in Sharma’s (1996, 359) argument that the “two basic conditions of social interaction” are “social contact and communication”. While the social dimension of the definition of interaction can be found in concepts like contact, encounter and reciprocity (but also [social] regulation), the communicative dimension is referred to by concepts such as response, meaning and communication itself.

### Participation and the Critical

If we follow the route of the political approach, the next step is to flesh out the similarities between the political approach and the critical perspective, and their differences. Arguably, the political approach is comfortable with an alignment with the critical perspective for two main reasons. Firstly, the political approach to participation and the critical perspective share a strong focus on power; and secondly, a number of key authors of the political approach (e.g. Arnstein and Pateman, see later) also position themselves within the critical tradition.

Obviously, it is necessary to first explain what is meant here by the critical, especially because it is distinct from the way other articles in this special issue use it. In some cases critical theory is used in a more narrow way, to refer to a group of “neo-Marxists who were dissatisfied with the state of Marxian theory” (Ritzer 2008, 144), but also broader usages of the critical<sup>5</sup> exist, which focus on social change and (thus) social struggle. As Calhoun (1995, 290) formulates it, the critical “opens more space for considering the possibility that the world could be different than it is [ ... ]”. This intimate connection with change and struggle renders the critical always ideological, as it uses specific reference points and utopias to engage in these struggles. These “not-places” and “never-to-be-places” provide the critical with its ultimate horizons, whose phantasmagoric realisation serve as its breeding grounds.

Often, these anchorage points are provided by particular values, which almost always have long traditions in being defended by particular groups and resisted by others. One of the most frequently used anchorage points in critical theory is power, where the equality of power relations or the removal of forms of domination are at the heart of the critical. For instance, Kellner (1989, 1) summarises this as follows: “Critical Theory is [ ... ] informed by a critique of domination and a theory of liberation.” In a jointly written article, Dahlgren and myself take a similar position on the critical, expressing a preference for definitions of the critical which have “come to denote a confrontation with unnecessary and illegitimate constraints on human equality, community and freedom. In other words, the adjective ‘critical’ signals a concern with normatively problematic discrepancies in power relations” (Carpentier and Dahlgren 2013, 304).

This implies that, at least in the approaches which foreground power, the critical becomes committed to values such as (radical) democratisation, equality and power sharing, which only further supports the close connection between the critical and the political approach to participation. Moreover, showing the power inequalities through detailed participatory analyses allows for a critical evaluation, and can be seen as a condition of possibility for a critical analysis of participatory processes. At the same time, we should not conflate the critical and the participatory, given the strong normative load of the critical, whose presence is a possibility, but not a requirement in the political approach to participation.

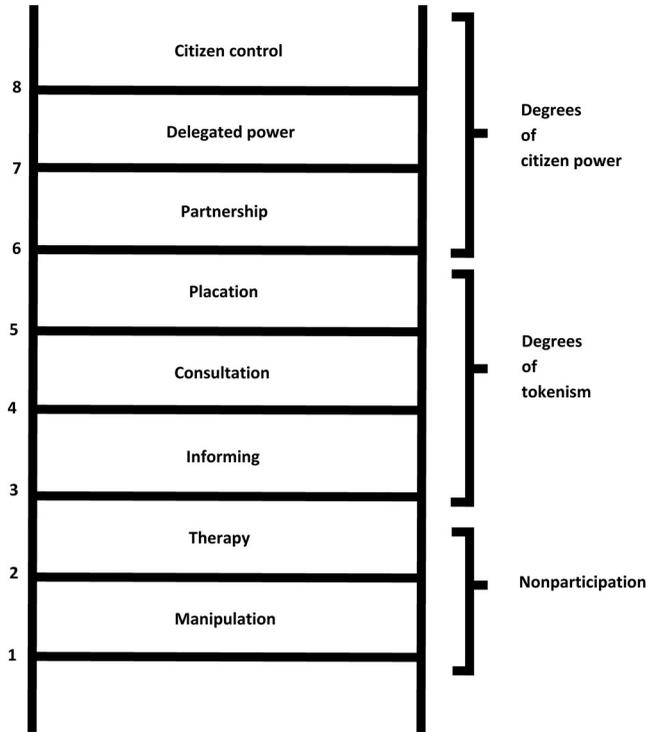
One example that can be used to illustrate the relationship of the critical and the participatory, and the central role of power in the political approach, is Arnstein's (1969) "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" (mentioned earlier). She starts her article by asking the question: "What is citizen participation and what is its relationship to the social imperatives of our time?" (1969, 216; original emphasis). Her answer combines the notion of the critical with power: "My answer to the critical *what* question is that citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power" (1969, 216; original emphasis). She continues:

It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. [...] There is a *critical difference* between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process. (Arnstein 1969, 216; emphasis added)

Arnstein develops a categorisation of participation (the "ladder"—see Figure 1), in which she distinguishes three main categories (citizen power, tokenism, non-participation) and eight levels. The category of non-participation consists of two levels: manipulation and therapy. Here the objective is "not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programs, but to enable power holders to 'educate' or 'cure' the participants" (Arnstein 1969, 217). Tokenism has three levels: informing, consultation and placation. Arnstein defines informing as forms of one-way communication, which although important still allow people little opportunity to influence decisions. Consultation is based on the invitation for people to communicate their opinions, but this level is "still a sham since it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account" (1969, 219). Placation is seen as a higher level of tokenism in which a selection of have-nots are entitled to advice, but power holders still have the right to decide. The last (maximalist) category is citizen power, which has three levels: partnership, delegated power and citizen control. In the case of partnership, the responsibilities of citizens and power holders are shared through "joint policy boards, planning committees and mechanisms for resolving impasses" (1969, 221). In the case of delegated power, citizens achieve dominance in decision-making authority for a particular plan or programme. Finally, citizen control further increases the power position of citizens, although Arnstein warns against faith in a situation of full control.

### **An Analytical Model for Choosing the Hard Way—Beyond the Ladder**

However relevant these (older) models are in showing the alignment of the critical with participation, and the importance of power for participatory analyses, these ladder-



**FIGURE 1**  
 Arnstein's ladder of participation  
 Source: Arnstein (1969, 217)

based models also have a series of problems (most of which are acknowledged by Arnstein [1969, 217]). Quite often, these models suggest the existence of easy cut-off points between dichotomised positions. Even when several steps are distinguished, these discrete models still suggest fairly crude categorisations (e.g. citizen power versus tokenism and non-participation) which do not always rest well with the complexities of participatory processes. Secondly, the multi-layeredness of participatory processes also makes them difficult to be captured by the ladder-based approaches. Participatory intensities can change over time, but several components within one process can sometimes also yield differences. In his discussion of participatory (open) ethics, Ward (2011) explains how participation in a specific process might be intense in one component, but minimal in another. For instance, participatory (open) ethics could be open in the discussion of new ethical guidelines, but not in their formal adoption. Often, Ward (2011, 227) argues, we can “only reach a rough, comparative judgment”, especially when “there are forces pulling in opposite directions”. Take for instance YouTube, which allows for participation in publishing videos, but not in the management of YouTube itself. To quote Jenkins (in Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, 275) on this matter: there are “limits to our ability to participate in YouTube—the degree to which participants lack any direct say in the platform’s governance. This is very different from discussing how participatory communities might use YouTube as a distribution channel”. Thirdly,

the ladder-based approaches tend to see participation as the stable outcome of a process, ignoring the struggles over participatory intensities within these processes, within particular fields and within society. Different actors might have different perspectives and interests, and will develop different strategies to see their perspectives realised, entering into conflict with each other. Arguably, this generates a much more dynamical and contingent (or instable) process than the ladder-based approaches seem to suggest. Fourthly, there is the already discussed relation between the participatory and the critical. One of the problems with the ladder-based approaches is that they conflate the participatory and the critical, pushing the existing alignment between these two notions too far, which turns the ladder of participation into a stairways to (political-democratic) heaven. Fifthly, the notion of power becomes frequently black-boxed or under-theorised in ladder-based approaches, despite their focus on power. A more developed theoretical backbone allows not only tackling the problems of contingency, multi-layeredness and complexity that have just been mentioned, but also supports a more sophisticated analysis of the material and discursive struggles that are intrinsically part of the dynamics of power (in particular when a strategic/Foucauldian model is used—see later). In the context of a participatory analysis, getting a better grip on the different aspects of power is crucial for an increased comprehension of participatory processes and their many dimensions.

Moving beyond the ladder-based model, without moving outside the political approach, to do research into participatory processes brings about a series of analytical challenges. If participation is still taken to refer to the equalisation of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors, in formal or informal decision-making processes, within a particular context, then this choice requires these processes (and sub-processes or micro-processes), contexts, actors, decisions and power relations to be theorised and defined, and then to be analysed. The abundance of concepts involved (and invoked) in participatory processes produce a level of analytical complexity that is hard to cope with, also from a researcher's perspective. This part will try to unravel this complexity, by developing a four-level analytical model that positions the many different theoretical and analytical concepts and thus can act as a guide for participatory research applying the political approach.

### *The Process and its Field(s)*

The starting point of the analytical model is to identify the particular media process whose participatory nature will be investigated, and the goals of this process (step one). The notion process refers to a series of related goal-oriented activities, which is close to the ways this concept is defined in organisational (and marketing) theory. For instance, Juran (2003, 358) defines process as "a systematic series of actions directed to the achievement of a goal", while Cummings and Worley (2014, 790) see process as "the way persons are relating to one another as they perform some activity". Without subscribing to the basic principles of systems theory, it should be noted that within organisational theory, systems theory is often used to define process—as, for instance, Hammer and Champy (1993, 53) do when they define the process as a "collection of activities that takes one or more kinds of input and creates an output [ ... ]".

The notion of process is significant here, because it allows restricting the object of analysis to a particular process that can be defined, delineated and analysed. In participatory theory, all too often, we can find general statements about the participatory condition

of a nation, region or world which are difficult to substantiate through research. For this reason, the notion of the process acts as a protective force against overambitious claims and forces researchers back to earth. Moreover, the process notion also allows bringing in the idea that participation is always located in particular processes, with (often) high levels of complexity, which require detailed analysis.

At the same time, processes are situated within evenly particular contexts that also impact on their nature and development. Here, I would, at least partially, like to make use of Bourdieu's field theory, as the notion of the field points to the existence of domains or spaces that have a relative autonomy, fed by the particular knowledges and interests of its actors. As Bourdieu formulates it:

A field [...] defines itself by (among other things) defining specific stakes and interests, which are irreducible to the stakes and interests specific to other fields [...] and which are not perceived by someone who has not been shaped to enter that field [...] In order for a field to function, there have to be stakes and people prepared to play the game [...]. (Bourdieu 1993, 72)

For Bourdieu (1993, 73; original emphasis), power plays a significant role, as the "structure of the field is a *state* of the power relations among the agents or institutions engaged in the struggle [...]".

Participation is not limited to one specific societal field (e.g. "the" economy or politics) but is present in all societal fields. We can find participatory processes in the political—after all, representative democracies are grounded in the existence of (a degree of) participation—but also in the economical field, the cultural field, the field of the family and the field of media (among many other fields). Simultaneously, the contexts that these different fields bring into the equation are crucial to our understanding of any participatory process. Each field has its own politics, economics, cultures, social relationships and communicational structures. Analysing the basic characteristics of the field (step two), how it is constructed and structured, with which knowledges, positions, interests, stakes, commodities and histories, together with how the exact relationships between the participatory process and the field are organised (step three), thus becomes unavoidable.

One complexity needs to be added, because we should acknowledge the existence of trans-field participation: in some cases, a particular process in one field facilitates participation in another. For instance, an urban art project can offer little participation in the art work itself, but can offer considerable levels of participation in the urban environment, as is evidenced by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Body Movies* projects.<sup>6</sup> Or reader participation in the newspaper organisation might be rare and limited (with some notable exceptions), but, with this mechanism, newspapers allow readers to intervene (to some degree) in the political field. To better understand these trans-field forms of participation, we can build on Wasko and Mosco's (1992, 7) distinction between democratisation *in and through* the media, so that we can distinguish between participation in a particular field, and participation through a particular field in another field. There are—what I would propose to call—transgressive forms of participation (where the participatory process transgresses the boundaries of a particular field and becomes situated in several fields) and transferred forms of participation (where a non-participatory process in a particular field allows for participation in another field), which may require the incorporation of several fields into the analysis.

### *The Actors*

Once the process has been selected, and its position in the relevant field(s) has been analysed, attention can be turned to the actors that are involved in the process which will be studied. As a sociological notion, the actor incorporates both individual human beings and social actors<sup>7</sup>—what Harré (1981, 141ff) has called supra-individuals. These social “organisational” actors can take many forms, and Sibeon’s (2004, 119) list of examples is helpful here to show the richness of this category: “committees, families, small groups, and crucially, organizations in the state, private, or voluntary sectors, including interest groups, political parties, universities, trade unions, professional associations, private firms, central government departments, local authorities, and so on”. Although reification should be avoided, at the same time it should be acknowledged that social actors have decision-making and action-inducing structures, which allow them to function as particular (delineated) entities in the social. This then brings us to Hindess’s (1986, 115) definition of an actor as “a locus of decision and action where the action is in some sense a consequence of the actor’s decisions”.

The second level of the analytical model focuses on these actors. First, all (human and social) actors that are involved in the participatory process need to be identified and their relations need to be mapped (step four). For instance, in the case of a televised audience discussion programme, this would imply identifying the different media professionals and managers, their production and broadcasting companies (and their suppliers), the invited experts, celebrities and ordinary people, the studio audience, and so forth. The labels used in the example immediately bring us to the next step, which consists of the analysis of the material positions, identities and roles of the involved actors (step five). These material positions, identities and roles matter, because they play a structuring role in the participatory process. Material positions are, for instance, grounded in access to particular resources, such as different types of capital. These material positions are part of a discursive-material knot; they are knotted together with the meaning-giving structures of identities, a concept that is approached in this article from a more socio-cultural perspective. This allows defining identity as the positioning of subjects in a discursive structure (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 115). Roles then become seen as translations of these identities into expected and actual behaviour. Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory also allows emphasising that the identities (or subject positions, as Laclau and Mouffe call them) are not necessarily stable, because they may be objects of discursive struggles and attempts at re-articulation. At the same time, these identities become stabilised through hegemonic practices, which create more rigid versions of these identities. Secondly, just as actors are not dominated by material structures, they are not dominated by discursive structures either, as these structures construct, on an individual and collective basis, always-particular identifications with these identities, which produces individuality and freedom.<sup>8</sup> Here too, we should be careful for the equation of identities and identifications, as this would imply a reification of these identities.

For instance, and focusing on identity: in the case of the media professional (as argued previously, see Carpentier 2013), McQuail’s (2008 53) helpful list of characteristics of the professional (but also work more focused on the media professional; Deuze 2005; Carpentier 2005) can be used to distinguish a series of components that construct the subject position of the (modernist) media professional, in an oppositional or sometimes antagonistic relationship with the identity of the audience. The argument here is that the identity

of a media professional consists of a series of building blocks, that—operating together—construct this identity: the notion of expertise, acquired through training and education; the public service that is provided to both specific audiences and society in general; the concept of ethics, which is in turn connected to notions of truth, impartiality, authenticity, integrity and honesty; a certain degree of autonomy; the institutional embedding; and the deployment of management and power. Of course, the contingency and identification arguments should be re-iterated: The media professional's identity described here is the traditional mainstream version, and many re-articulations—sometimes successful, sometimes not—exist (see Carpentier 2005). Moreover, particular media professionals will identify differently with these identities, accepting some parts, changing other parts and rejecting still other parts. Understanding how these identities and identifications function in the participatory process is highly instrumental and necessary.

In the last step of this second level, the actors' field positions have to be analysed, to see whether these positions are privileged in the (hegemonic part of the) field or not (step six). Here, it is important to emphasise that this step is related to the general societal position of actors, and not to the position of actors in the particular participatory process. The rationale of this step can be found in the idea that participation is always and necessarily corrective: a participatory process corrects a more general societal power imbalance, where actors that have different power positions in society enter into a process where this power imbalance is (partially) addressed and equalised. Participation, as a concept, does not apply to situations where actors that have equal power positions interact and co-decide. To illustrate, a media owner taking part in a meeting of media owners is not involved in a participatory process. A representative of the media companies' staff, attending that very same meeting—most probably finding himself or herself in a different power relation towards these media owners—and being involved in the decision-making process, is indeed participating. A similar argument can be found in democratic theory, where there is always a balance between participation and representation in democracy (Held 1996). Political leaders (as part of government and parliament) have a privileged position in society, as decision-making powers are delegated to them, which is the principle of (political) representation. At the same time, the power imbalance that arises out of this situation is corrected by participatory processes (such as elections) to redress this power imbalance and increase the power position of the people that are ruled by these political elites.

Another way to clarify this notion of privilege is to refer to societal elites and non-elites, although care needs to be taken not to define all privileged actors as part of one societal elite. This is a point that Arnstein (1969, 217) already raised, when she wrote: "In actuality, neither the have-nots nor the powerholders are homogenous blocs." At the same time, these privileged actors do form (partially overlapping) elite clusters that hold stronger power positions compared with individuals that are not part of these elite clusters. Analysing whether actors are privileged within the field (again: in general), and others are not, allows categorising the actors into groups and identifying the (non-)elite clusters they belong to (without conflating all [non-]privileged actors into one [non-]elite category). Having identified groups and clusters (e.g. media professionals, politicians, experts, ordinary people, artists) is a necessary step in order to analyse and compare the decisions these actors groups/clusters make (level three), and eventually their power positions (level four).

### *The Decisions*

The third level of the analytical model first of all charts all decision-making moments within the participatory process and their significance in relation towards the goals of the participatory process (step seven). Again, this step requires that the key concept (the decision) is defined, which is not that easy. In this case I would like to follow Laclau and Mouffe's definition of the decision, as a moment of fixation.<sup>9</sup> This renders it a political process, as Mouffe (2000, 130) formulates it in her call for a "proper reflection on the moment of 'decision' which characterises the field of politics". She adds to this idea that the decision—as a moment of fixation—entails "an element of force and violence" (2000, 130). Another way to understand this is to refer to Deleuze and Guattari's (more materialist) metaphor of the machine, which is "a system of interruptions or breaks" which "is related to a continual material flow [...] that it cuts into" (1984, 36; emphasis removed). For Laclau, the decision is the moment which arrests the continuous flow, bringing it to a (temporal) halt and structuring it in a particular way. This also implies that decisions are the moments where power is exercised (or not), as for instance some of the key authors on theories of power have argued (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1984).

The analysis of the decision-making moments, as micro-processes of the main participatory process, is complicated by their sheer number, but also by their different nature, as decisions can be planned or not planned, formal or informal, explicit or implicit, short term or long term, general or particular, limited in time or not, single or combined, strategic, tactical or operational, and so forth. Attempts to construct general categorisations or typologies are, because of these reasons, highly unlikely to succeed. Nevertheless, a number of areas, in the field of media production, can be mentioned, keeping in mind that this is a non-exhaustive list, and that the areas of decision-making need to be generated through the analysis itself. At the level of access, decisions are made about who has access to the participatory process itself (and who does not) and about who has access to spaces and places, infrastructures, technologies, actors, information, financial resources, and so forth. At the level of interaction, decisions are made about who is allowed to produce content and under which conditions, about the acquisition or improvement of skills and knowledge, about who can represent oneself or others, and in which manner, about how processes are labelled and about who can interact with whom. At the level of participation itself, we can list a number of equally relevant decisions: about who decides on the regulatory frameworks that structure people's actions, about the procedures and goals of the decision-making themselves and about their implementation.

Once the decision-making moments have been identified, we can then zoom in on the actions of the different actors (and their groups/clusters) within these decision-making moments, and the relations with their material positions, identities and role (step eight). The structuring questions for this step appear to be simple: who does what in the different moments of decision-making, and how is this related to, and supported by, their material positions, identities and roles? Yet again, there is quite a lot of complexity involved in mapping the material and discursive practices of all actors that are part of a participatory process, even if the focus is placed on the decision-making moments. This complexity is caused by the diversity of possible actions, where each decision-making moment can incorporate a wide variety of actions, ranging from passive and silent acceptance of a decision, over resistance towards decisions taken by others, to active and collective practices of decision-making. Additional complexity is caused by the multitude of possible

relationships between actions, material positions, roles, identities and identifications. Nevertheless, it remains important to see how the deployment of particular actions is closely connected to how evenly particular identities are interpreted and used by actors.

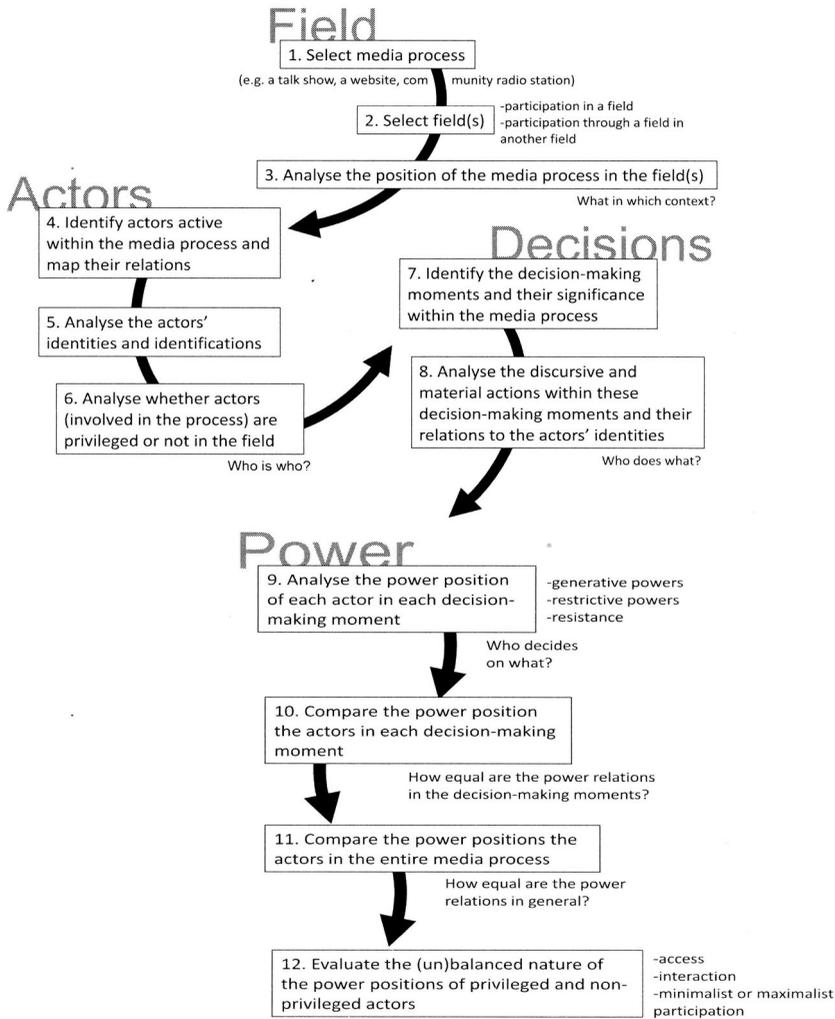
### *Power Relations*

In the fourth and last level of the analytical model, the attention is (finally) turned to the analysis of the power relations. To support this analysis, an in-depth reflection on power is required, which can only be represented in this article in a very sketchy way. In order to deal with the contingency, multi-layeredness and complexity of participatory processes, preference is given to the strategic/Foucauldian (Foucault 1978) power model. In this model, we move away from power as possession, without ignoring the non-egalitarian nature of power relations. Also resistance becomes seen as part of the contingent exercise of power (Kendall and Wickham 1999, 50). As no actor, however privileged, can exercise full and total control over the social, and more dominant positions will often generate resistance, the strategic/Foucauldian model allows us to see a multitude of strategies that form a complex power-game. One way of further operationalising this power model is by using Giddens's (1979, 91) dialectics of control, in which he distinguishes between the transformative capacity of power—treating power in terms of the conduct of agents, exercising their free will—on the one hand, and domination—treating power as a structural quality—on the other. The restrictive component aligns itself quite nicely with Foucault's recognition that power relations can be unbalanced, while the generative component refers to the objectives and achievements of the strategies on which Foucault builds his analytics of power. Resistance intervenes in both the generative and the restrictive component, and thus can be considered the third component of this power model. The overall effect of restrictive, generative and resistant strategies then becomes labelled as the productive dimension of power. Returning to our analytical model for participatory process: this power model is used to perform a power analysis of the material gathered in the previous three levels (and in particular level three).

Step nine applies the distinctions between generative, restrictive and resistant aspects of power to each decision-making moment, remaining focused on these micro-processes of (potential) participation. The questions that are raised here are: what can each actor generate and what is generated for them, what is restricted for each actor and what is restricted by them, and which actions (of which actor) are resisted by which other actor? The structuring question behind this set of questions is who decides on what? Once the different power positions of the actors involved in particular decision-making moments have been inventoried, these power positions can be compared, paying particular attention to the power positions of privileged and non-privileged actors (step 10). For instance, when it concerns the decision of inviting guests for an audience discussion programme which has a regular panel of ordinary participants (see Carpentier [2001] for an extensive discussion of an example called *Jan Publiek*), do the media professionals, as a privileged group of actors, decide on this matter, or do they consult or allow the panel of ordinary participants, as a non-privileged group of actors, to co-decide? Do the ordinary participants resist and attempt to influence this decision, and is their capacity to do so restricted by the media professionals?

Once these micro-processes of power, within the main participatory process, have been analysed, an aggregative strategy needs to be applied, which consists of comparing the power positions of the actors (and their groups/clusters), again mainly focusing on the

power positions of privileged and non-privileged actors but this time for the entire participatory process (step 11). The structuring question is how equal the power relations are in the entire participatory process. This step can result, for instance, in the identification of a general power imbalance, or the identification of particular areas of power-sharing while other decisions are taken by privileged actors (which we can label “participatory pockets”), where these areas may, or may not, be significant within the entire process. Other possible outcomes are throughout a balanced set of power relations, or a very dispersed combination of power balances and imbalances. In the last step of the analytical model, the aggregation of power balances and imbalances for the entire participatory



**FIGURE 2**  
An analytical model for the study of media participatory processes in the political approach

process needs to be evaluated (step 12). This brings us back to the Foucauldian dimension of productive power and the overall effect: what kind of participation is being produced within the participatory process under scrutiny?

For this evaluation, firstly, the distinction between access, interaction and participation can be used. This returns us to the basic idea of the political approach, where participation is seen as power-sharing, not limiting participation to merely taking part in a process (which is typical for the sociological approach). In order to evaluate the participatory nature of a process, it is necessary to ask the question of whether there is any power-sharing present at all. In some cases, following very much the ladder-based approaches, we have to concede that a process which is labelled participatory simply is not what it claims to be. But once the existence of particular levels of power-sharing has been established, the question about the participatory intensity has to be raised. The dimension of minimalist and maximalist participation is a helpful tool for establishing participatory intensities, where in the more minimalist forms of media participation, media professionals retain strong control over process and outcome, and in the maximalist forms the power relations of media professionals and non-privileged groups are balanced. In evaluating these participatory intensities it remains important to integrate the critiques on the ladder-based approaches, and to pay attention to the contingencies (e.g. in space and time), multi-layeredness and complexities of participation, resulting in more qualified evaluations of the participatory intensity of a particular process.

Figure 2 renders an overview of the analytical model, representing the four levels and 12 steps to study (media) participatory processes in the political approach.

## Conclusion

Although the sociological approach has its merits, this article advocates the use of a more restrictive use of the notion of participation. This does not imply that studying (mediated) social interaction, which is what the sociological approach does—if we accept the vocabulary of the political approach—is irrelevant, and nor does it mean that social interaction, as a societal process, is less relevant than participation. What the political approach argues is that the logics of power, in relation to particular decision-making, matters and that this component of the social is important enough to be kept distinct from social interaction, and to have a particular term reserved to it. Given the focus of political theory traditions (and in particular democratic theory) on decision-making and power, participation is the obvious term to be used here.

What this article has also shown is the complexity of participatory processes, which even the already sophisticated ladder-based approaches are not capturing sufficiently. Moreover, many of the political approaches to participation have shied away from the translation of their theoretical postulates into an analytical model. Once this black box is opened, it becomes clear that the many free-floating theoretical concepts need to find their place, and that there is a need to (analytically) structure and prioritise the enormous level of detail through a number of key concepts. In this analytical model, a choice for process, field, actor, decision-making moment and power has been made. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain a high degree of analytical (and methodological) openness towards the complexity of participatory processes, in order to avoid that the analyst becomes blinded by one particular (sub-)process and to avoid that the always present contingencies and contradictions are excluded for the sake of analytical elegance.

This finally brings us back to the critical. Focusing on the societal division of power, and on the existence of power balances and imbalances, aligns well with the critical perspective, because of the shared interest and vocabulary. But simultaneously it should be emphasised that the political approach towards participation and the critical perspective are still different, because of their differences in normativity. The political approach towards participation aims to analyse the levels of (power) equality in participatory processes, and it ends at the moment where the critical can start, by analysing how intense participatory processes are; or in other words, how equal or unequal they are. The critical perspective can—if desired—add a 13th and final normative layer to this analysis, by evaluating the societal desirability of these equal or unequal power relations. If the conclusion of a participatory analysis is that a particular process is minimalist, then different normative evaluations remain possible. One could, for instance, defend the minimalist nature of the participatory process as appropriate and desirable, or one could critique it for “only” being minimalist. This issue can only be resolved by reverting to the normative, and, here, the critical—with its emphasis on social change through increased levels of power sharing—serves as a reference point to enable this evaluation. Although I, myself, would be comfortable with adding this final layer, and defending a more equal society, it is not a requirement of the political approach towards participation itself, but a choice.

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## NOTES

1. These two labels refer to the dominant use of participation in these academic fields. This does not imply that this dominant use is exclusive, and that these fields are homogeneous. The political studies approach towards participation will be abbreviated as the political approach, for reasons of brevity.
2. Interestingly, Carey (2009) does not use the concept of ritual participation in *Communication as Culture*. He does use “ritual of participation” (2009, 177), which refers to a very different process; namely, the emptying of the signifier participation as an elitist strategy. This use of the participation concept, mainly to be found in Chapter Seven of *Communication as Culture* (‘The History of the Future’, co-authored with John J. Quirk), is much more aligned with the political approach towards participation.
3. One complication is that the concept of participation itself is part of these power struggles, which renders it highly contingent. The signification of participation is part of a “politics of definition” (Fierlbeck 1998, 177), since its specific articulation shifts depending on the ideological framework that makes use of it.

4. Despite its importance, this will not be used in this article in order not to complicate things too much.
5. In order to distinguish this broader approach from neo-Marxist theory, the notion of “the critical” is used, in similar ways, and for similar reasons, as Laclau (1996) uses “the social” or “the critical”.
6. See [http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/body\\_movies.php](http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/body_movies.php) [Accessed 18 December 2015].
7. Actor network theory would also include objects in this list. In the context of this article, the choice has been made not to do so, as the discussion of whether objects can participate or not might bring us too far from the objective of the article.
8. From a different paradigmatic perspective, this is what others would call personal identity.
9. Of course, there are also less abstract definitions available; as, for instance, Harrison’s (1987, 2) definition of the decision as “a moment in an ongoing process of evaluating alternatives for meeting an objective, at which expectations about a particular course of action impel the decision maker to select the course of action most likely to result in obtaining the objective”.

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