



## From:

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### **Precarious Alliances**

### Cultures of Participation in Print and Other Media

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Starting from an analysis of practices of participation in contemporary print and other media, the volume opens up a historical perspective, probing the potential of the concept of participatory cultures for the exploration of past forms of collaboration between individual and collective actors (i.e. authors, editors, publishers, fans, critics etc.). In doing so, the volume sheds new light on the historically, culturally, and medially specific forms and functions as well as on the economic, political and institutional parameters that contributed to the emergence and transformation of what turn out to be precarious alliances.

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# Introduction: Participation and Precarious Alliances, Now and Then

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MARTIN BUTLER, ALBRECHT HAUSMANN, ANTON KIRCHHOFER

In recent years, participatory forms and practices of cultural expression have increasingly been paid attention to in public and scholarly discourses. Both a wide media coverage of the implications of new digital technologies on our ways of creating and distributing cultural knowledge and a steadily growing number of academic publications and projects, especially in the field of popular cultural studies, give ample proof of the dramatically increased fascination with participatory cultures. Participation, it seems, is *en vogue*, both as a mode of cultural production that has especially gained ground with the advent of what is commonly referred to as social media and as an analytical category employed for the examination of the processes and results of exactly this mode of production.

However, both the public debate and the scholarly discussion in the field tend to exclusively focus on contemporary practices and forms of expression and explore their participatory potential within present day social, cultural, and political contexts. Moreover, whether it is the participation of fans in the writing, or rewriting of their most famous narratives online, or the creation and dissemination of amateur clips on Vimeo or YouTube, the subject matter of the discourse on participatory cultures, more often than not, limits itself to the ways and channels of participation provided by Web 2.0 environments (e.g., Ackermann/Boroffka/Lersch; Apprich/Stalder; Delwiche/Jacobs Henderson; Greif et al.). And, to be sure, there are good reasons for doing so, as the increase in what Axel Bruns has labeled “produsage,” i.e.,

the convergence of production and consumption through interactive online media, is certainly due to the most recent technological developments in this area.

What might be a legitimate choice in popular cultural and media studies, then, i.e., focusing on different modes of participation in contemporary mediascapes, has only rarely been turned into a perspective of analytical inquiry when it comes to the examination of *past* modes and practices of cultural production. More often than not, we indeed tend to forget that the concept of participation might also help shed light on *historical* phenomena, and that its application is not restricted to the most recent trends and developments. What seems to be an obvious insight, however, has not manifested itself in projects and publications so far—still, scholarship as well as the public discourse are predominantly concerned with participatory cultures since the advent of Web 2.0. In other words, starting from the theoretical, conceptual, and analytical insights that the study of contemporary participatory cultures has already brought forth, we should allow ourselves to look back and ask, first, whether or not we can identify and describe specific historical settings and/or constellations which might be approachable via the concept of participation, and, second, whether or not the concept of participation could not lend itself to a fruitful reevaluation of some of our central ideas on cultural production both in historical and contemporary print and other media cultures. In other words: It might well be that established notions of ‘text,’ ‘author,’ or ‘originality’ appear in a different light once reconsidered through the conceptual lens of ‘participatory cultures,’ which may thus prove to be a fruitful concept for the analysis of both past and present phenomena.

This book sets out to contribute to answering these questions by investigating into past and present modes of collaborative cultural production, approaching them as ‘cultures of participation,’ in which a number of different—historically and culturally specific, and sometimes highly unlikely—actors, such as authors, printers, agents, critics, scholars, fans, readers, audiences, cooperate and interact in a range of different and highly complex ways which have not been described and analyzed systematically and in full detail yet. In so doing, the present volume probes the adequacy of the concept of ‘participation’ for the scholarly examination of historical forms and practices of cultural expression and might thus add to the critical re-

valuation of a number of received notions and ideas about historical processes of cultural formation and transformation.

We assume that the ways of cooperation and interaction between actors in these processes lead to the formation of what we would like to conceive of as ‘precarious alliances,’ i.e., particularly fragile agreements of collaboration through which all participating individual and/or institutional actors at least temporarily benefit from. Admittedly, this definition remains as vague as the term ‘alliance’ itself. Moreover, it bears only a limited analytical potential, as it leaves open many questions, such as: How many actors have to be involved to form an alliance? Do these actors have to know that they are part of an ‘alliance’ to make the collaboration work? What kind of relationship do the participants have (symbiotic, parasitic, hierarchical, balanced)? How does the term ‘alliance’ relate to other terms that are employed to describe phenomena of collaboration (e.g., cooperation, network, movement)?

Against the backdrop of this list of unsolved issues and open questions, one could well drop the term for good. However, we deliberately decided to keep it exactly *because* of its vagueness: We would like to argue that the term ‘alliance’—due to its very *unspecificity*—invites a discussion of the questions listed above (among others), a discussion which will eventually contribute to further sharpening our understanding of what it is that constitutes an alliance in the realm of cultural production. Luckily enough, then, the contributions to this volume accepted the invitation and added to this discussion, tested the applicability of the term and thus contributed to shedding light on its many dimensions and implications as well as on alternative terms and concepts.

To conceive of historical and contemporary cultural forms of expression as results of participatory practices, which, in turn, foster the formation (and transformation) of a range of alliances between a variety of individual and collective actors, of course questions the notion of the author as an autonomous creator of original content and value, an idea which, for quite a considerable amount of time, has informed literary historiography as well as literary criticism. To be sure, this romantic notion has been demystified to a great extent by literary and cultural criticism and scholarship anyway (though, surprisingly, it has remained quite powerful both within scholarly debates and in public discourse). Most sustainably, perhaps, the works of Pierre Bourdieu have fostered the proliferation of the idea that authors as

well as their writings are embedded in a network of a range of individual and collective actors which impact on literary production, distribution, and reception, and have thus significantly contributed to deconstructing the myth of the solitary genius. So, after the ‘death’ of the author (Barthes) and the recently proclaimed ‘rebirth,’ or return, in literary and cultural studies (cf., e.g., Jannidis et al.), there is certainly no need of declaring the author obsolete once again. Yet, what remains to be done is to identify and analyze in much closer detail (and from a number of different theoretical and methodological perspectives) the complex entanglements of individual actors and institutions in the realm of literary and cultural production, in which ‘the author’ (among other usual and unusual suspects) might be conceived of, conceptualized as, even constituted as a historical person, a public persona, a category, or a concept.

It is among the goals of this book to highlight the collaborative nature of this kind of ‘cultural work’ which can be observed in both past and present contexts, and which, through diverse kinds of interactions, results in the formation and transformation of print and media cultures, their institutions, and—not to forget—the very terms and concepts employed to describe exactly these formations and transformations. To pursue this endeavor, we believe that the notions of participation and precarious alliances provide fruitful conceptual coordinates for an analytical framework that indeed allows us to trace and describe both the specific nature of the interactive modes of production, dissemination, and reception, as well as the (changing) roles, functions, and intentions of diverse actors involved therein.

Thus examining both past and present modes of cultural collaboration, this volume also sheds light on the many complexities attached to the concept of participation itself, among them, for instance, its highly normative usage in recent (and not so recent) debates on processes of democratization and in-/exclusion, in which participation usually turns out to be something ‘good.’ Indeed, if we set out to discuss cultures of participation in print and other media, we also need to reflect and be constantly aware of the context-specificity of the concept and the values ascribed to it. To be precise, the discourse on participation (at least in western democratic societies), more often than not presupposes a functionally differentiated society complemented by a specific idea of justice, according to which every individual’s option of participation is a desirable norm. Under these premises, then, participation turns out to be a core concept in these societies—and a highly

normative one at that. Starting from here, one might argue that *cultural* participation, understood as an important asset in processes of education and identity formation, and, consequently, as a basis for the accumulation of social prestige, has become a central demand as well, especially for those who, for various reasons, have been excluded from it so far.

In one way or another, then, the contributions to this volume add to a theoretical discussion that has only begun to take shape very recently; a discussion which needs to be led exactly because the rhetoric of participation and participatory cultures has become so pervasive and, thus, incredibly powerful. “Our understanding of participatory culture,” as Henry Jenkins argues in his contribution to this book, “is evolving rapidly at a time when there are many emerging kinds of relationships between media producers and audiences, when there are many loose or broad claims being made about the value of participation, when there is an ongoing theoretical project—both within and beyond the academy—to refine our understanding of the concept of participation.” It is exactly this “ongoing theoretical project” that this volume sets out to advance by drafting what Jenkins calls “a more nuanced vocabulary” for the description and analysis of participatory cultural production, without, however, mystifying the concept of participation the very moment the concept of authorial autonomy has been disqualified as a romantic invention. What this book offers, then, is an alternative perspective on print and other media cultures through the centuries, which, in the process of developing critical terms and concepts, is (or shall be) aware of its own blind spots, shortcomings, and contingencies at all times.

In order to structure the analyses of the forms and functions of precarious alliances now and then, we decided to cluster the contributions to the present volume according to what we identified as important dimensions in the complex fabric of participatory cultural production (of course, being fully aware of the contingency of our choice and the overlaps between the dimensions). Resulting from this are three sections (“Market,” “Authorship, Agency, and Value,” “Politics, Institutions, Movements”) framed by short introductory notes, which illustrate the interrelatedness of the sections’ contributions and their relevance in the discussion of the central questions this volume sets out to address.

Starting from the analysis of contemporary forms of participatory cultures, the first section (“Markets”) is dedicated to the many intricate relationships of literary and cultural production to market-related processes and

developments. As the contributions reveal, print and media cultures in different cultural and historical contexts are—in one way or another—shaped by economic parameters, e.g., by calculations of cost and benefit, by strategies of marketing, or by processes of commodification and commercialization, all of which, in turn, involve a number of individual and institutional actors that are collaborating (but also, at times, antagonizing) in a range of different ways in order to achieve their goals.

The second section (“Authorship, Agency, and Value”), then, returns to the category of the author, which, as hinted at above, still plays a dominant role, especially in public debates on questions of authorship and, closely attached to this, questions of ownership, agency, and the ‘value’ of literary and cultural production. The contributions in this section take a close look at the intricate processes of creating the author as a subject position, which is not seldom charged with a set of particularly normative assumptions that, in turn, allows the participants involved in this process to harvest different kinds of material and immaterial benefits. The topics dealt with in this section range from the making of posthumous careers of authors and strategies of self-fashioning to the repercussions of media change and the investments of readers on the state and role of the author.

Finally, the contributions to the third section (“Politics, Institutions, Movements”) open up the view on the political contexts of print and media cultures and both analyze and theorize the different practices of collaborative cultural production with particular regard to their embeddedness in institutional frameworks and in specific constellations of political power. Covering different historical periods ranging from the late 18th to the 20th centuries as well as different cultural, economic, and ideological environments, the essays in this section show in how far and to what extent cultural production in print and other media both is shaped by and contributes to shaping larger societal and political patterns and structures.

\* \* \* \* \*

The contributions to the present volume are based on papers given at a symposium held at the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK) in Delmenhorst in June 2012, in which a range of scholars from a variety of disciplinary and cultural backgrounds met for two and a half days to discuss cases of precarious alliances and cultures of participation in different fields of lite-

rary and cultural production. The symposium was held as part of an HWK Associated Junior Fellowship awarded to Martin Butler in December 2011.

We owe gratitude to a number of people who helped turning this project, i.e., both the symposium and this book, into what we had hoped it would be: a lively and productive dialogue, a space to exchange ideas, to initiate debates, to link up with colleagues, and—finally, and in the most productive sense—to become aware of the limitations and shortcomings of one’s own approach. First of all, we would like to thank the scholars we invited to join the conversation. In their contributions to the symposium, they all engaged with the notion of ‘precarious alliances’ which we had introduced in our conceptual draft for the event, and thus contributed to weaving a central thread, while, at the same time, adding new and insightful perspectives to add further precision to the debate. Fortunately, they kept up the dialogue with us even after the symposium and added, with their articles, to the coherence of this volume.

We would also like to thank the staff at the HWK for their generous financial and organizational support, first and foremost Dr. Susanne Fuchs and Sabine Friedrichs for their commitment before, during, and after the event, which has been extraordinarily helpful and productive. In general, as an Institute for Advanced Study, the HWK served as the ideal setting and provided the necessary infrastructure for our interdisciplinary dialogue—we are very grateful that we had the opportunity to use these resources for our symposium. We also thank the President’s office of the University of Oldenburg, which provided financial support for the printing of this volume. Last but not least, we owe gratitude to our student assistants, who neither lost their patience nor their politeness in handling the all-too-busy editors of this volume: We are particularly grateful to Katharina Bieloch and Almke Ratjen for their translations as well as for their general support in proofreading the manuscript, as well as to Britta Kölle, Thomas Hühne, Patrizia Striowsky, and Lara Brünjes who also invested an incredible amount of energy into the editing and formatting of this volume.

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