



**Intro to 16.2**

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5 ***Participatory knowledge production 2.0: Critical views and experiences***  
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14 In recent years, the role of social media (also referred to as Web 2.0, user-generated content,  
15 participation, and crowd sourcing) in nearly all aspects of daily life has hardly been out of the  
16 news, and it has also become a fashionable topic amongst scholars from many disciplines. Social  
17 media can be defined as web-based applications which facilitate the exchange of ideas and  
18 information through their ‘architecture of participation’ (O’Reilly, 2005). Popular and scholarly  
19 accounts of the participatory potential of new digital technologies are usually enthusiastic.  
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21 Twitter, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia are all lauded for their capacity to harness  
22 people’s creativity and knowledge, and for their potential to challenge traditional hierarchies in  
23 politics, science, and the media. It is claimed these web-based applications have facilitated  
24 political uprisings, the solution of scientific problems, and the emergence of hitherto  
25 undiscovered talents in music and the arts. Others question the validity of such claims, pointing  
26 to the dangers of hoax, misinformation, narcissism, and loss of privacy. Sometimes the stories  
27 are very serious, such as the controversy about the YouTube video about Joseph Kony and child  
28 soldiers that ‘went viral’ in March 2012. Sometimes they provide voyeuristic entertainment, as in  
29 the case of the bigamist and his two families who found out about each other via Facebook  
30 photographs and connections. Social media are used in areas where citizens and fans have long  
31 participated such as politics and popular culture, and in domains where the boundary between  
32 expert and amateur is more tightly guarded such as medicine, science, and scholarship. The  
33 decentralized architecture of social media and the internet more generally challenges traditional  
34 knowledge authorities and hierarchies. Questions subsequently arise about whether lay inclusion  
35 helps to ‘democratize’ knowledge formation or if existing hierarchies are re-enacted online. The  
36 resulting fascination with new forms of knowledge production may signal a desire for change in  
37 those traditionally hierarchical and increasingly commercialized institutions that produce and  
38 distribute knowledge.  
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3 In this special issue, we bring together a collection of articles that critically examine these  
4 claims. The articles are based on empirical research in different domains, including an online  
5 encyclopaedia, games, art, health, and policy making in urban sustainability. One of the  
6 advantages of bringing such disparate domains together is that it reminds us that participation or  
7 crowd sourcing mean very different things across these domains, and even within domains. For  
8 example, clicking 'like' on the Kony video is a somewhat different level of political engagement  
9 than making and uploading the video itself.  
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18 The authors of the articles also come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (including  
19 medical sociology, geography, political science, media studies, and science and technology  
20 studies), allowing us to see how different disciplines have dealt with these questions both in the  
21 past and again now with the spread of social media. 'Participation' is a term that is much used  
22 (Jenkins, 2006; Surowieki, 2004), and it has a long history in political theory, human geography,  
23 sociology, and design. But there is surprisingly little specificity about its meaning when used  
24 together with social media (for exceptions to this generalization, see Carpentier, 2008; van Dijck,  
25 2009). Geographers have tended to be much more critical than their colleagues in other  
26 disciplines, perhaps because Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have a long history of  
27 participation, and scholars have had time to assess the long-term consequences. Within political  
28 science, 'political participation' is the usual term to describe the involvement of citizens, though  
29 engagement is also used (Zukin *et al*, 2006), with differences captured by the choice of adjective.  
30 Thus civic engagement is contrasted with political engagement to capture more voluntary,  
31 bottom-up activities.  
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44 The articles presented here shed light on four sets of questions:

- 45 • How does participation vary across social groups and across spheres of activity? Are  
46 different subjectivities being created by various forms of participation?  
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- 48 • How does knowledge itself change as a result of greater participation? Can different  
49 types of participation be identified, more or less active and engaged?  
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- 51 • How does the architecture of participation (O'Reilly, 2005) shape the possibilities for  
52 participation? Do all Web 2.0 platforms live up to the promises?  
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- How does academic work from different disciplines inform how we think about participation, and participatory governance?

Participation has long been seen as one of the hallmarks of digital culture (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), but the articles presented here remind us not to confuse the potential for participation with what is currently happening. We need to distinguish between participation as an action that millions of people now engage in every minute of every day from the consequences of those very diverse forms of participation for science, politics and culture. In addition to the empirical and theoretical questions listed above, we need to ask the normative question of whether ‘participation’ is always good or to be desired. We also need to remember that hopes about the participatory promises of technologies have accompanied all new media, at least since the printing press.

In the first article, René König focuses on Wikipedia, one of the most celebrated successes of participation and the wisdom of crowds, in which people work together to produce entries on a variety of topics. Drawing on insights from the sociology of knowledge, König examines the German-language Wikipedia entry for the September 11, 2001 attacks and the related talk pages. Alternative accounts emerged that contradicted the account presented by established authorities. These views collide on the talk pages, thus providing an opportunity to examine the role of experts and lay participants in the process of knowledge construction on Wikipedia. He focuses on how the different contributors negotiate ‘what actually happened’ and which knowledge should be represented. Knowledge which is not verified by external expert authorities is excluded, or relegated to a separate page labelled ‘conspiracy theories’. In this case, lay participation did not lead to a ‘democratization’ of knowledge production, but rather it re-enacted established hierarchies.

In the second article, Karin Wenz turns to another popular site of participatory culture. She investigates ‘theorycrafting’, the name given to a practice that some dedicated members of gaming communities undertake. It is a process of reverse engineering in order to understand better how the design of the game, and its underlying algorithms, structure the gaming experience. Players produce knowledge to share with one another, and to develop tools for improving playing skills. Drawing on Aristotle’s notions of *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*,

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3 Wenz analyzes theorycrafting as a form of the scientification of game play that can increase  
4 some players' control over the game as well as control over other players.  
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8 Payal Arora and Filip Vermeyleen explore the art world, a very different cultural form from  
9 games. In the art world, expertise is crucial to the evaluation of the quality and economic value  
10 of works of art, but art institutions are also under pressure to use social media to reach out to new  
11 audiences. Arora and Vermeyleen adopt a historical perspective and examine how art experts in  
12 the past used media, such as catalogues, to produce knowledge about art and to establish their  
13 claims to expertise. This historical perspective enables the authors to move beyond the present-  
14 day hype about the democratising potential of new media, in an arena where elite expertise  
15 continues to hold sway.  
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23 The fourth and fifth contributions both deal with health, another field where professional  
24 expertise has been challenged by technical developments. Samantha Adams examines websites  
25 where patients rate and evaluate healthcare services as mechanisms for transforming citizens into  
26 monitors of public services in order to generate knowledge about the everyday performance of  
27 professionals and institutions. Using post-panoptic theories about the use of information and  
28 communication technologies in daily life, she questions how such sites, and the knowledge they  
29 generate, relate to existing surveillance structures. Adams focuses on a Dutch site, *Zoekdokter*  
30 (DoctorSearch) which encourages patients to evaluate individual healthcare professionals by  
31 name and location. Adams draws attention to the ways in which the site facilitates multiple types  
32 of surveillance that occur simultaneously and in different directions.  
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43 Anna Harris, Sally Wyatt and Susan Kelly examine another development in the health arena.  
44 Direct-to-consumer genetic testing makes it possible for people to send a sample of their saliva  
45 to an internet-based company in order to discover genetic information about themselves. After  
46 they have done so, they may be enticed to engage in various forms of 'participatory' practices,  
47 including taking part in genetic research by providing phenotypic data. Harris and her colleagues  
48 analyse the research activities of 23andMe, one of the largest and best-known of these  
49 companies. The company's research is based on what they term 'participant-led' research  
50 methodologies, which combine consumers' genetic information and self-reported data in the  
51 form of completed online surveys. The authors argue that the notion of gift exchange is used to  
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3 draw attention away from the free labor which drives the profitability of the companies selling  
4 this service, and offer a timely analysis of emerging participatory practices.  
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9 The final contribution focuses on the development and use of participatory tools for creating and  
10 managing knowledge in the area of urban sustainability. Karin Pfeffer, Isa Baud, Eric Denis,  
11 Dianne Scott and John Sydenstricker-Neto examine how recent developments in geographic  
12 information and communication technologies have extended the opportunities for participatory  
13 spatial knowledge production, use and exchange. Pfeffer and her colleagues identify a number of  
14 problems, including the reliability of user-generated content, social exclusion due to dependence  
15 on technology, and the interpretation and implications of digital maps. Drawing on examples  
16 from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they provide a heuristic framework for assessing the  
17 extent to which participatory spatial knowledge management tools can be instrumental on several  
18 fronts. They argue that important issues related to accountability, empowerment, control and use  
19 of knowledge are not adequately addressed.  
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29 Before closing, we would like to provide some of the background to this special issue. It grew  
30 out of a low-key, low-budget workshop that we hosted at the Faculty of Arts and Social  
31 Sciences, Maastricht University in March 2011, with the same title as this special issue,  
32 '*Participatory knowledge production 2.0: Critical views and experiences*'. This drew upon our  
33 own research, and we felt it would be of interest to people from a range of disciplines, reflecting  
34 the interdisciplinary nature of the Faculty where we were all working at the time.  
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41 The technology we were discussing was not invited, except to enable the remote participation of  
42 Jad Baaklini from Lebanon. Authors were not allowed to use PowerPoint as all texts had been  
43 pre-circulated, and the level of security of the University's wireless facilities make it difficult for  
44 guests to gain access to the internet. One participant expressed disappointment at not being able  
45 to tweet during the workshop, but others realized that once they had overcome their initial  
46 anxieties of not having internet access or twittering capabilities, they could engage in the  
47 workshop more fully (although there was a twitter discussion about the workshop before and  
48 after the event, using the hashtag #pkp20).  
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3 In addition to the editors and authors of the papers included in this special issue, the following  
4 people attended the workshop: Smiljana Antonijević, Jad Baaklini, Ruth Benschop, Philipp  
5 Dorstewitz, Graeme Evans, Ike Kamphof, Matthijs Kouw, Nicolle Lamerichs, Bernike Pasveer,  
6 Isabelle Peters, Jason Pridmore, Cornelius Puschmann, Ana Raus, and Katrin Weller. Matthijs  
7 Kouw and José Cornips helped us to organise the workshop. We are very grateful to all of them  
8 for their contributions.  
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15 After the workshop, we began to explore publication options, and were delighted that the editors  
16 of *Information, Communication and Society* were interested in helping us to prepare a special  
17 issue. We would like to thank Brian Loader and Sarah Shrive-Morrison for their help and  
18 patience in guiding us through the process. We are also grateful to the many reviewers who  
19 provided generous and detailed comments on the papers that were submitted, but who must  
20 remain anonymous. They may or may not be grateful to us for a decision we made after the first  
21 reviews came in. One of the features of the iCS online submission system, only visible to guest  
22 editors such as ourselves at a relatively late stage, is that we too were asked to engage in the  
23 increasingly pervasive request to review everything from books, to hotels, to doctors. We were  
24 asked to rate the reviewers on the quality and the timeliness of their reviews. We were very  
25 happy with the reviewers we had selected, but we feared that if we made this too well known to  
26 the iCS system they might be overloaded with requests. So we too engaged throughout this  
27 process with the potential consequences of judgements as to the level and quality of participation  
28 in this special issue itself.  
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## About the editors

**Sally Wyatt** divides her time between the e-Humanities Group of the Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences, and Maastricht University. Her research focuses on digital inequalities and on the everyday uses of web-based technologies by people looking for health information and by scholars engaged in research. Together with Roma Harris and Nadine Wathen she has edited two collections, both published by Palgrave: *Mediating Health Information* (2008) and *Configuring Health Consumers* (2010).

**Jess Bier** is a Ph.D. candidate in Science and Technology Studies at Maastricht University. In her research, she analyses the ways that segregated landscapes influence the use of mapmaking technology in Jerusalem and the West Bank. She has a background in geography, anthropology, and postcolonial theory, and overall her work investigates the spatiality of the production of knowledge. She previously conducted research on intersections of migration, Arabic language, and everyday economic life in New York City.

**Anna Harris** is a postdoctoral research fellow at the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society (Egenis) at the University of Exeter. She has a background in medicine and medical anthropology/science and technology studies and conducts research on the social life of medical technologies, workers and institutions. Her current research with Sally Wyatt and Susan Kelly focuses on the emerging direct-to-consumer genetic testing market.

**Bas van Heur** is assistant professor of social geography at the Department of Geography of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium. His main research interest is in the politics of urban development and the role of research in engaging with and analysing urban development strategies and their effects. He has a background in cultural and media studies and geography and has published on the creative industries, cultural policy and urban development for a wide variety of journals and publishers.



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