Social Media as Participatory Culture

Key questions

- What is participatory culture? How have different scholars attempted to define it?
- How have scholars understood participatory culture within the realm of social media?
- What do scholars mean by ‘participatory democracy’?
- Are contemporary social media truly participatory?

Key concepts

- Henry Jenkins’s notions of participatory culture and spreadable media
- Participatory culture as ideology
- Participatory democracy
- Digital labour

Overview

Participatory culture is a term that is often used for designating the involvement of users, audiences, consumers and fans in the creation of culture and content. Examples are the joint editing of an article on Wikipedia, the uploading of images to Flickr or Facebook, the uploading of videos to YouTube and the creation of short messages on Twitter or Weibo.

The participatory culture model is often opposed to the mass media and broadcasting model typical of newspapers, radio and television, where there is one sender and many recipients. Some scholars argue that culture and society become more democratic because users and audiences are enabled to produce
culture themselves and to not just listen or watch without actively making and creating culture:

- The Internet analyst Clay Shirky (2011a, 27) has argued that social media result in “the wiring of humanity” and let “us treat free time as a shared global resource, and lets us design new kinds of participation and sharing that take advantage of that resource”.
- The Australian scholar Axel Bruns argues that produsage, the combination of production and use, is characteristic of social media. As the result of social media he envisions a “produsage-based, participatory culture” (Bruns 2008, 256) and “a produsage-based democratic model” (372).
- Similarly, the business consultants Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams (2007, 15) argue that social media result in the emergence of “a new economic democracy [...] in which we all have a lead role”.

All three statements have in common that they highlight positive aspects of social media and point out that these media are possible to make culture and society more democratic. This chapter critically questions these claims. Section 3.1 discusses the notion of participatory culture, section 3.2 deals with Henry Jenkins’ focus on fan culture, section 3.3 addresses his discussion of social media, and section 3.4 looks at how he sees the so-called digital labour debate, i.e. the role of unpaid user activities in value-generation.

### 3.1. The Notions of Participation and Participatory Culture

**Social Media as Spreadable Media**

For Henry Jenkins, the main characteristic of “social media”/“web 2.0” is that they are spreadable media (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green 2009): “Consumers play an active role in ‘spreading’ content [...] Consumers in this model are [...] grassroots advocates for materials which are personally and socially meaningful to them” (Jenkins et al. 2009, part 2). Spreadable media are based on the logic “if it doesn't spread, it's dead” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 1) and involve audiences that “actively” shape “media flows” (2) so that culture becomes “far more participatory” (1). Sharing, co-creation, remixing, reuse and adaption of content on Facebook, YouTube and other online platforms are, for Jenkins, a manifestation of a gift economy.

He argues that spreadable media “empower” consumers and “make them an integral part” of a commodity’s success (Jenkins et al. 2009, part 8). The “longer term” benefits would include the expansion of “the range of potential markets for a brand” and the intensification of “consumer loyalty by increasing emotional attachment to the brand or media franchise” (Jenkins et al. 2009, part 8).
Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, xii) argue that they “accept as a starting point that the constructs of capitalism will greatly shape the creation and circulation of most media texts for the foreseeable future” and that those companies that “listen to [ . . . ] their audiences” will strive. They accept the logic of capitalism in a time of crisis, where trust in corporations is low and capitalism has shown that it organizes society necessarily in such a way that exploitation, misery and precariousness are a necessary reality for a certain share of people.

When Pepsi launched a marketing campaign in 2007, which allowed consumers to design the look of a Pepsi can that was featured on 500 million Pepsi cans around the United States, the task was not, as frequently claimed by management gurus, to create “a new economic democracy [. . .] in which we all have a lead role” (Tapscott and Williams 2007, 15; for a critique of this approach, see Fuchs 2008b), but to outsource design work and thereby surplus value-generation cheaply to consumers and to ideologically bind the emotions of the consumers to the brand so that more Pepsi could be sold and more profit be made. The Convergence Culture Consortium that includes GSD&M Advertising, MTV Networking and Turner Broadcasting funded Jenkins’ study of spreadable media.

Participatory Culture

For Jenkins, social media are also an expression of participatory culture. Jenkins defines participatory culture as culture “in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (Jenkins 2008, 331). It also involves “participants who interact with each other” (Jenkins 2008, 3). Participation involves, for Jenkins, “new forms of participation and collaboration” (Jenkins 2008, 256). Jenkins points out, based on Pierre Lévy (1997), that those who engage in “participatory culture” pool resources and combine skills so that collective intelligence emerges as “an alternative source of media power” (Jenkins 2008, 4).

Jenkins defines participatory as a culture with:

1. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,
4. members who believe that their contributions matter, and
5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created). (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison 2009, 5f)

Participatory Democracy

Jenkins has argued that increasingly “the Web has become a site of consumer participation” (Jenkins 2008, 137). A problem of concepts like “participatory culture” is that participation is a political science term that is strongly connected to
participatory democracy theory and authors like Crawford Macpherson (1973) and Carole Pateman (1970). An article by Staughton Lynd (1965) that describes the grassroots organization model of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) made the earliest use of the term "participatory democracy" that I could trace in the literature. One should avoid a vulgar use of the term "participation". Internet Studies should relate the usage of the term to participatory democracy theory, in which it has the following dimensions (Fuchs 2011b, chapter 7):

1. The intensification and extension of democracy as grassroots democracy to all realms of society.
2. The maximization of human capacities (Macpherson (1973): human developmental powers) so that humans become well-rounded individuals.
3. Extractive power as impediment for participatory democracy:
   Macpherson (1973) argues that capitalism is based on an exploitation of human powers that limits the development of human capacities. The modern economy "by its very nature compels a continual net transfer of part of the power of some men to others [for the benefit and the enjoyment of the others], thus diminishing rather than maximizing the equal individual freedom to use and develop one's natural capacities". (Macpherson 1973, 10f)
4. Participatory decision-making.
5. Participatory economy: a participatory economy requires a “change in the terms of access to capital in the direction of more nearly equal access” (Macpherson 1973, 71) and “a change to more nearly equal access to the means of labour” (73). In a participatory society, extractive power is reduced to zero (74). A democratic economy involves “the democratising of industrial authority structures, abolishing the permanent distinction between ‘managers’ and ‘men’” (Pateman 1970, 43).
6. Technological productivity as material foundation of participatory democracy.
7. Participation as education in participation.
8. Pseudo-participation as ideology.

Ignoring Ownership, Capitalism and Class: Cultural and Political Reductionism

For Jenkins, participation means that humans meet on the net, form collectives, create and share content. He has a culturalistic understanding of participation and ignores the notion of participatory democracy, a term which has political, political economic and cultural dimensions. Jenkins’ definition and use of the term “participatory culture” ignores aspects of participatory democracy; it ignores questions about the ownership of platforms/companies, collective decision-making, profit, class and the distribution of material benefits. Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison (2009, 9) mention community
membership, production, collaboration and sharing as activities in participatory cultures, whereas ownership is not mentioned. The 11 skills listed as characteristics for literacy in participatory culture do not include critical thinking, but rather activities that can all work well in a company context (collective intelligence, networking, multitasking, etc.; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison 2009, xiv). Corporate platforms owned by Facebook, Google and other large companies strongly mediate the cultural expressions of Internet users. Neither the users nor the waged employees of Facebook, Google and others determine the business decisions of these companies. They do not “participate” in economic decision-making, but are excluded from it.

Jenkins’ concept of participation is not theoretically grounded. Also, Nico Carpentier (2011), who advances a more nuanced approach that is grounded in political theory, ignores ownership aspects of the participation concept. He conceives participation as “equal power relations in decision-making processes” (Carpentier 2011, 69) and media participation as co-decision-making in the contexts of media technology, content, people and organizations (130). This notion of media participation is explicitly a political concept (354), focusing on involvement in media decision-making (355) and avoiding a broad definition of participation (69). Carpentier does not include aspects of media ownership, neither does he consider ownership questions as questions relating to participation. In contrast to Crawford MacPherson, Carpentier ignores the level of political economy of participation and reduces participation to the political level. The problem of Carpentier’s political reductionistic concept of (media) participation is that it implies that full “participation” can be achieved without letting people participate in the ownership of the organizations in which they work, as long as they are involved in decision-making. The topic of inequality of ownership and wealth is ignored and declared to be secondary or unimportant. A truly participatory media democracy must also be an ownership democracy (Fuchs 2014, 2011b). Carpentier, although being theoretically versed and well read, just like Jenkins, ends up with a reductionistic concept of media participation. Reductionism means that a certain aspect of the world is explained based on one specific dimension, although other dimensions also matter. In the social sciences, liberal and conservative scholars have often claimed that Marxism reduces explanations of society to the economy. At the same time, the same scholars often ignore aspects of class and capitalism and thereby reduce explanations of society either to politics (politicism, political reductionism) or culture (culturalism).

Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, 193) argue that participatory culture is relative and that we “do not and may never live in a society where every member is able to fully participate”. This passage essentializes exclusion, as if it were a natural feature of every type of society. Essentialism is a form of argumentation that does not see phenomena as historical, which means that they have a beginning and an end and can be changed by human action. These phenomena (such as money, capital, domination, violence, egoism, competition, etc.) are declared to exist necessarily and forever. Karl Marx (1867) has termed this form of argumentation “fetish thinking”: certain phenomena are treated like being things
and the fact that they are social circumstances that can be changed by humans is ignored.

Participation means that humans have the right and reality to be part of decisions and to govern and control the structures that affect them. Rights are always universal and not particularistic. For example, if human rights are only valid for some people but not others, then they are no rights at all. Similarly, participation is a universal political demand, not a relative category. Otherwise one could say that a dictatorship is a participatory democracy because a ruling elite is "participating", which is, however, only a relatively small part of the population.

When Jenkins writes about political goals, he remains rather vague with formulations such as the demand for "corporate responsibility" (Jenkins 2008, 259) or "a much greater diversity of opinion" (Jenkins 2008, 250; see also 268). He says it is important for "pressuring companies to change the products they are creating and the ways they relate to their consumers" (Jenkins 2008, 261), that there is an "alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media" (Jenkins 2008, 18) and that "concentration is bad" (Jenkins 2008, 259). The basic question is whether capitalist organizations can ever be responsible, given that they must necessarily be interested in reducing wage and investment costs in order to increase profits if they want to survive in the competition process. The notion of diverse opinion remains empty if one does not consider the question of whether a fascist opinion is equally desirable and valuable as a democratic socialist opinion. Capitalism is based on the need to increase productivity for increasing profits. But productivity and competitive advantages tend to be asymmetrically distributed. As a result, competition tends to turn into monopolies and capital concentration. Media and other concentration is not just something that is bad, but rather a structural feature of capitalism.

White Boys with “Participatory” Toys

Internet culture is not separate from political economy, but is to a large extent organized, controlled and owned by companies (platforms like Wikipedia are non-corporate models that are different from the dominant corporate social media model). Social media culture is a culture industry. Jenkins’ notion of “participatory culture” is mainly about expressions, engagement, creation, sharing, experience, contributions and feelings and not so much about how these practices are enabled by and antagonistically entangled into capital accumulation. Jenkins tends to advance a reductionistic understanding of culture that ignores contemporary culture’s political economy. Furthermore, he reduces the notion of participation to a cultural dimension, ignoring the broad notion of participatory democracy and its implications for the Internet. An Internet that is dominated by corporations that accumulate capital by exploiting and commodifying users can in the theory of participatory democracy never be participatory, and the cultural expressions on it cannot be an expression of participation.

Important goals for Jenkins seem to be that companies establish “stronger connections with their constituencies and consumers” (Jenkins 2008, 22), a
“collective bargaining structure” (Jenkins 2008, 63) between fans and companies, brand communities that “empower” consumers to “assert their own demand on the company” (Jenkins 2008, 80), “experiments in consumer-generated content” that “have an influence on the mass media companies” (Jenkins 2008, 172), and cultural entrepreneurs that give “their consumers greater opportunities to shape the content and participate in its distribution” (Jenkins 2008, 268). Jenkins is deeply concerned with the question of whether consumers will be able to shape the content of cultural commodities according to their desires by engaging as active and creative prosumers in “participatory culture”.

Jenkins’ writings read much like a celebration of participatory culture as a structure that allows consumers “to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods” (Jenkins 2008, 137) that does not much engage with or analyze the downsides of the Internet, such as the economic crisis; the exploitation of users; concerns about privacy violations and surveillance; e-waste (Maxwell and Miller 2014); the exploitation of miners who often extract the minerals needed for the production of laptops, computers and other hardware under slave-like working conditions (this topic is also called “conflict minerals” because of the wars and interest conflicts that often underlie these working conditions); and the exploitation of hardware manufacturers who often are overworked, underpaid and conduct their jobs in toxic workplaces (Fuchs 2014). Participatory democracy is a demand that speaks against such problems, whereas participatory culture is a rather harmless concept mainly created by white boys with toys who love their toys.

3.2. Online Fan Culture and Politics

Fan Culture as Politics?

Henry Jenkins sees fan communities in general, and online fan communities in particular, as “preparing the way for a more meaningful public culture” (Jenkins 2008, 239). He tends to idealize the political potentials of fan communities and cannot explain why these communities should make fans more interested and active in politics. From the circumstances that “fans are viewers who speak back to the networks and the producers” and that they “know how to organize to lobby on behalf of endangered series” (Jenkins 1992, 284), it does not follow that fans have an interest in protesting against racism, neoliberalism, wage cuts, the privatization of education or welfare, lay-offs in the companies, etc. Toby Miller asks in this context, can “fans be said to engage with labour exploitation, patriarchy, racism, and neo-imperialism, or in some specifiable way make a difference to politics beyond their own selves, when they interpret texts unusually or chat about romantic frustrations?” (Miller 2008, 220).

Henry Jenkins mistakenly assumes an automatic connection with fandom in popular culture and political protest. He also mistakes politics with popular culture and sees politics taking place largely as micro politics within popular culture (as the struggle of fans to make the culture industry respect their ideas in the design of plots). The protestors who brought about a revolution in Egypt in 2011 to a certain extent also made use of media (like Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones)
for forming communities – not fan communities, but rather a political community engaging in street protests, strikes, blockades, and the struggle against a regime. Their political practices have shown how a revolution works and that revolution is possible today. The revolution was not caused by social media, but only supported by them. Fan communities played no significant role in this process. Many passages of Jenkins’ books (for example, Jenkins 2006, 10f) convey the impression that he wants to get rid of the heritage of Critical Studies having to be political in an analysis and that he feels the desire to engage purely with the fun of popular culture. But if academics do not engage with popular culture for political reasons (to establish a just society), what is really the goal and justification for it?

Henry Jenkins (2008, 12) says that he is “not simply a consumer of many of these media products; I am also an active fan”. He says that his living room is full of various media players and recorders, “a huge mound of videotapes, DVDs and CDs, game cartridges and controllers” (Jenkins 2008, 15). Fandom as such is not a problem, if the researcher, who is also a fan of his object of study, manages to maintain critical reflexivity. I am a fan of *The Simpsons*, Monty Python, 3WK Underground Radio or bands such as Mogwai, Radiohead and The Fall, but I do not think that it is political to watch these programmes or listen to these bands. In a lot of contemporary works on popular culture, one gets the impression that scholars want to rationalize their own fandom and their love for commodity culture by trying to identify progressive political aspects of the consumption and logic of cultural commodities. Because they like spending their work time and free time consuming popular culture, they tend to justify this behaviour as a form of political resistance. There is then no need to engage in, or support, the more risky activities of political movements because popular culture is declared to be a political movement itself. Most intellectuals are probably fond of some type of popular culture, but it makes a difference whether one sees and celebrates this fondness as an act of resistance or not.

**Is Online Fascism Participatory Culture?**

Cultural communities are not automatically politically progressive. An example is that [document.no](http://example.com) and an accompanying Facebook group are gathering places for Norwegian right-wing extremists, who oppose immigration to Norway and argue for advancing Islamophobia and the idea of cultural purity. The fascist terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 77 people in the Norwegian terror attacks on July 22, 2011, was one of the active members of this community. Jenkins does not much discuss the negative potentials and realities of online communities and cultural communities.

[www.ultras.ws](http://example.com) is a discussion forum of the Ultras soccer fan movement. One can find anti-Semitic and racist jokes in the forum, and in a survey conducted in the forum 56% said that it is no problem if fans shout “Jews” for characterizing opposing teams.¹ The following joke is typical and no exception, but rather the rule,

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¹ [www.ultras.ws/umfrage-juden-jena-rufe-und-die-strafe-t4414.html](http://example.com), accessed on August 1, 2011.
The concept of participatory culture has a focus on “community involvement” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison 2009, 6). However, it idealizes community and fan culture as progressive and ignores the fact that the collective intelligence and activity of cultural communities and fandom can easily turn into a fascist mob, especially in situations of capitalist crisis that are prone to advance the growth and radicalization of right-wing extremism.

Jenkins has, thus far, mostly analyzed the fan communities he likes and rather neglected those that have fascist potentials. Fascist communities do not seem to fit his concept of fandom and communities. Jenkins (1992, 290) says that fans are not necessarily progressive, but that they have the potential to be active (293) and that they “find the ability to question and rework the ideologies that dominate the mass culture” (290). There is no doubt also that hooligan soccer fan groups are active (they actively inflict violence against other fans and immigrants, make active plans to harass, threaten or kill them, etc.), but activity and creativity of fans is not necessarily, as assumed by Jenkins in his deterministic and reductionistic logic of argumentation, a questioning of ideologies; it can just as likely be a reproduction of dominant ideologies (like racism). Although Jenkins assures his readers in single sentences that fans are not always progressive, the structure of his examples and other formulations advance exactly the conclusion that they are progressive.

3.3. Social Media and Participatory Culture

Social Media Capitalism

Although Henry Jenkins is to a certain extent aware that corporations exert greater power than consumers (Jenkins 2008, 3, 175), he focuses the reader’s attention in most of his books on the presentation of hundreds of examples that want to assert to the reader that contemporary media empower consumers because they enable production processes and that consumers successfully resist corporatism. He conceives media prosumption as inherently participatory. Jenkins argues that increasingly “the Web has become a site of consumer participation” (Jenkins 2008, 137) and hardly gives any examples of corporate domination in culture or on the Internet. Therefore, the notion of participatory culture takes on a reified character in his works.

Jenkins argues that participatory culture advances cultural diversity (Jenkins 2008, 268), but overlooks that not all voices have the same power and that produced content and voices are frequently marginalized because visibility is a central resource in contemporary culture that powerful actors, such as media corporations, can buy. Jenkins assumes that diversity is the linear result of prosumption.

Jenkins simply constructs a dualistic “both . . . and” argument based on the logic that “Web 2.0 is both . . . and . . .”: both pleasure and exploitation, both a space of

participation and a space of commodification. Convergence is "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence" (Jenkins 2008, 18). He wants to focus on the aspects of pleasure and creativity and to leave the topic of exploitation to others and does not, thereby, grasp the dialectics at work and the relations of dominance we find on web 2.0. The question is not only what phenomena we find on social media, but how they are related and to what extent and degree they are present. There is no doubt that web 2.0 users are creative when they generate and diffuse user-generated content. But the question is also how many web 2.0 users are active and what degree of activity and creativity their practices have. So, for example, in Sweden, one of the world’s most advanced information societies, only 6% of Internet users write blog postings occasionally and only 1% do so on a daily basis (Findahl 2012). Scholars like Jenkins tend to overstate the creativity and activity of users on the web. Creativity is a force that enables Internet prosumer commodification, the commodification and exploitation of the users’ activities and the data they generate. Creativity is not outside or alongside exploitation on web 2.0; it is its very foundation.

**YouTube**

Jenkins (2008, 274) argues that YouTube is a site “for the production and distribution of grassroots media” and that on YouTube “participation occurs at three distinct levels [. . .] – those of production, selection, and distribution” (Jenkins 2008, 275), without considering the fact that YouTube is owned by Google and that the revenues that are accumulated with online advertising on YouTube do not belong to the immediate content producers, but to the shareholders of Google. Jenkins here neglects ownership as a central aspect of participation. The most popular YouTube videos stem from global multimedia corporations like Universal, Sony and Walt Disney (see Table 5.1 in Chapter 5). Google and Facebook are based on targeted advertising models and a commercial culture, which results in huge profits for these companies. Politics on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook are possible, but are minority issues – the predominant focus of users is on non-political entertainment. Web 2.0 corporations and the usage they enable are not an expression of participatory democracy. As long as corporations dominate the Internet, it will not be participatory. The participatory Internet can only be found in those areas that resist corporate domination and where activists and users engage in building and reproducing non-commercial, non-profit Internet projects like Wikipedia or Diaspora. Jenkins (and many others) continuously ignores questions of who owns, controls and materially benefits from corporate social media.

Jenkins is aware of the topic of the exploitation of digital labour on the Internet (Green and Jenkins 2009; Jenkins 2009). He concludes, however, that the problem is that “YouTube pushes up content which receives support from other users” (Jenkins 2009, 124), which is only part of the truth and ignores the fact that large corporate media companies’ content is so popular because they have resource advantages in attaining recognition and attention over everyday users.
Jenkins concludes that "a more collaborative approach" is needed that is based on a "negotiation of the implicit social contract between media producers and consumers, balancing the commodity and cultural status of creative goods" (Green and Jenkins 2009, 222). This view ignores the contradictory and crisis character of capitalism. The history of capitalism is a history of the colonization of societies and human spaces in order to create new spaces of commodification and capital accumulation and is a history of the crisis of capitalism. There can be no long-term peace between capital and consumers/workers/prosumers because the first has an inherent interest in exploiting the latter and accumulation leads to crisis, which is the ultimate disruption of temporary class compromises. Also, the welfare-oriented model of Fordist capitalism was ended by the world economic crisis in the 1970s, which shows that capitalism is inherently crisis-ridden.

Blogs

In the corporate social media sphere, attention is unequally distributed: big companies, celebrities and well-known political actors enjoy attention advantages and the most active prosumers come from the young, educated middle-class. Jenkins (2008, 227) celebrates blogs as a "means for their participants to express their distrust of the news media and their discontent with politics as usual", "potentially increasing cultural diversity and lowering barriers in cultural participation", "expanding the range of perspectives", as "grassroots intermediaries" that ensure "that everyone has a chance to be heard" (Jenkins 2006, 180f). He forgets the lack of visibility in the public sphere of most political blogs. Political blogs have hardly been able to reach the large numbers of readers of the websites of big corporate newsmakers like CNN and The New York Times. Statistics of the most frequently accessed web platforms (alexa.com, measured by a combined index of average daily visitors and page views over the past month, accessed on February 28, 2013) show that popular political blogs tend to get much less visibility and attention than mainstream news websites. Political blogs do not rank under the top 1000. Examples are: Daily Kos (#3211), NewsBusters (#4838), Raw Story (#5105), Talking Points Memo (#5128), Hot Air (#5293), ThinkProgress (#5467), Mediaite =(#5981), LewRockwell (#8597), Redstate (#16353), Common Dreams (#17567), Crooks and Liars (#20372), Power Line (#21329), Wonkette (#30087), AmericaBlog (#41220), Andrew Sullivan's Daily Dish (#68132), Little Green Footballs (#73382), Eschaton (#104454), Liberal Conspiracy (#229574), Labourlist (#299278), Left Food Forward (#404020) and My DD (#540384). In contrast, popular mainstream news sites achieve top rankings: BBC Online (#54), CNN (#80), The New York Times (#120), Daily Mail (#125), Der Spiegel (#222), Indiatimes (#127), The Guardian (#197). This inequality shows that visibility and popularity on the web are stratified.

The political economy of online attention tends to privilege large media companies that have established brands and control a lot of resources. The Huffington Post (#92) started in 2005 as a blog project, acquired venture capital
investment and so became a relatively popular site. It was purchased by AOL in February 2011 and thereby became part of the mainstream media market. Its business model is targeted advertising. The example shows that alternative online media can easily become commodified and transformed into capitalist businesses.

One can now argue that political blogs still gather a lot of attention and as a total phenomenon have a lot of readers. The advantage of a site like *The New York Times* is that it attracts the attention of a high number of people who all have the same information as a basis for discussion and opinion-formation. This does not mean that the information published in the mainstream media is superior and unproblematic. To the contrary, it is often more one-dimensional and distorted than the information on political blogs. But gathering a large number of people on one site is a power in itself, whereas gathering some people on many dispersed sites fragments the public, results in “a huge number of isolated issue publics” (Habermas 2006, 423) and risks “cultural relativism” that neglects that democracy is in need of “some common normative dimensions” and “more generalized media” (Garnham 1992, 369).

### 3.4. Henry Jenkins and Digital Labour

The digital labour debate is a discourse that has emerged in Critical Media and Communication Studies with the rise of social media (see Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012; Fuchs 2010c, 2012c, as well as the contributions in Burston, Dyer-Witheford and Hearn 2010; Scholz 2013). It focuses on the analysis of unpaid user labour and other forms of labour (such as slave labour in Africa, highly exploited ICT manufacturing work) that are necessary for capital accumulation in the ICT industries. In this debate, the works of Dallas Smythe (1977, 1981/2006) have gained new significance (for a detailed discussion, see Fuchs 2012a). Smythe argued that audiences of advertising-financed newspapers, TV and radio stations work when giving attention to these media (audience labour) and produce themselves as a commodity (the audience commodity) that is sold to advertisers. In the book *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013), Henry Jenkins and his colleagues engage with some of the arguments in the digital labour debate.

**Dallas Smythe, Digital Labour and Henry Jenkins**

Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, 127) discuss Smythe’s approach and comment that “companies are often profiting from this audience labor, but it’s crucial not to paint this wholly as exploitation, denying the many ways audience members benefit from willing participation in such arrangements”. They argue against representatives of the digital labour discourse that “free labour may be meaningful and rewarding” (57). The authors make the argument that users are not purely motivated by financial returns (58f), but by the desire to “share with a larger audience”, the “pride in their accomplishments” and the “desire for dialogue” (59).
Jenkins, Ford and Green insinuate that representatives of digital labour theory assume that the money logic drives users, which they definitely do not. The three authors miss the point that the profit orientation is inherent in capitalism, not in users or audiences, who are confronted with the commodity form in their everyday lives. Audience work would be engaged, not exploited (60), and would be “labor[s] of love” (61). It would have much to do with worth, i.e. “sentimental investment” (71).

There is no doubt that users are motivated by social and communicative needs and desires to use social media. But the fact that they love these activities does not make them less exploited. Jenkins' argument follows the logic “if users like it, then it is no problem”. That work is and feels like play does not mean that it is more or less exploited, but rather that the structures of work are changing. Exploitation is measured as the degree of unpaid labour from which companies benefit at the expense of labour: If exploitation does not feel like exploitation, then this does not mean that it does not exist. It is exploitation even if users like it. User labour is objectively exploited and, to a certain degree, at the same time enjoyed by the users. This does not diminish the degree of exploitation, but rather shows the contradictions of culture in capitalism. In Jenkins' terminology one can say that social media corporations capitalize on users’ desire for social, intellectual and cultural worth in order to exploit their labour and make them create monetary value. In Jenkins’ account, cultural worth is seen as legitimization of exploitation: it is perfectly fine for him that users are exploited if they feel they are appreciated by other users and companies.

Jenkins and his colleagues argue that Smythe and the digital labour approach overlook that audience members benefit from corporate web 2.0. But they overlook in this critique that money has a central importance in capitalism because it is a general equivalent of exchange: it is the only commodity that can be exchanged against all other commodities. It is the universal commodity and is therefore of specific relevance. One can directly buy food, games, computers, phones, etc. with money. One can, at most, gain such goods indirectly by making use of reputation and social connections. Money is a privileged medium for achieving objectives in capitalism, which is why capitalism is an economy that is based on instrumental reason.

Social Media and Fans, Fans, Fans – Did Occupy, the Arab Spring and WikiLeaks Never Happen?

Jenkins, Ford and Green’s (2013, 29) book *Spreadable Media* mainly uses examples from fan culture because “fan groups have often been innovators in using participatory platforms”. Reading this book, one gets the impression that the world is only inhabited by fans, as if the Arab Spring, WikiLeaks, Anonymous, the Occupy movement and the widespread protests and revolutions in the world during 2011 never happened. One wonders why Henry Jenkins advances a new form of elitism that privileges fans and disregards activists and citizens. The
book, for example, discusses the online platform 4chan, but ignores the political hacking of Anonymous that was born on 4chan.

3.5. Conclusion

Jenkins' work stands in the celebratory Cultural Studies tradition that focuses on worshipping TV audiences (and other audiences) as “rebelling” and constantly “resisting” in order to consume ever more. Jenkins (2008, 259) opposes the approaches of political economists like Noam Chomsky and Robert McChesney because their "politics of critical pessimism is found on a politics of victimization", whereas his own “politics of critical utopianism is founded on a notion of empowerment”. It is incorrect to characterize the Critical Political Economy approach as disempowering because it frequently stresses the potential of political movements and their media use for bringing about transformation. Jenkins is a utopian thinker in respect to the circumstance that he sees resistance of consumers necessarily and almost always at work in popular culture and ignores aspects of exploitation and ideology, but due to this approach he is certainly not a critical utopian, but only a utopian. Critical Theory and Critical Political Economy do not, as claimed by Jenkins (1992, 291), read "the audiences from the structures of the text or in terms of the forms of consumption generated by the institutions of production and marketing", they are rather in contrast to Jenkins and other Cultural Studies scholars concerned about the phenomena of exploitation (of workers and audiences) and class inequality that are implicated by the commodity form of culture. They see deep inequalities at the heart of the commodity form and therefore question the logic of commodification and capital accumulation.

Media and Communication Studies should forget about the vulgar and reductionistic notion of participation (simply meaning that users create, curate, circulate or critique content) and focus on rediscovering the political notion of participation by engaging with participatory democracy theory. There was a time when Cultural Studies scholars were claiming about others that they are economic reductionists. Today, it has become overtly clear – and Jenkins' work is the best expression of this circumstance – that cultural reductionism has gone too far, that the cultural turn away from Critical Political Economy was an error and that Media and Communication Studies needs to rediscover concepts like class and participatory democracy.

We can summarize the main results of this chapter as follows:

- Henry Jenkins reduces the notion of participation to a cultural dimension, ignoring the broad notion of participatory democracy and its implications for the Internet. An Internet that is dominated by corporations that accumulate capital by exploiting and commodifying users can never, in the theory of participatory democracy, be participatory and the cultural expressions of it cannot be expressions of participation. Jenkins especially neglects ownership as an aspect of participation and does not give attention to aspects of class and capitalism.
Jenkins mistakenly assumes an automatic connection of fandom in popular culture and political protest. He also mistakes politics with popular culture and sees politics taking place largely as micro politics within popular culture (as the struggle of fans for making the culture industry respect their ideas in the design of plots).

Jenkins' account of participatory culture and social media as producers of participatory culture is a form of cultural reductionism and determinism that neglects structural constraints of human behaviour and the dialectic of structure and agency.

In his arguments, Jenkins misses the central economic relevance of money in the economy and argues that the exploitation of users' digital labour is not really a problem if they have social benefits from platform usage.