

Bournemouth
University



Re-imagining the
meaning of
participation for a
digital age

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Defining Participation?

“an act or instance of taking part; or sharing something, as in benefits”

(Oxford English Dictionary)

Suggests:

“any action involving others, even the most simple interaction, is in some way participatory”

Political Participation

- Huntington & Nelson (1976: 3): "By political participation we mean **activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making.**"
- Verba et al. (1995: 38): "By *political* participation we refer simply to activity that has the intent or effect of **influencing government action** – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by **influencing the selection of people who make those policies.**"

Hence, most research focuses on a narrow range of participatory forms

- Voting
- Campaigning
- Contacting elected representatives
- Protesting

Political Participatory in practice

- People can get involved in a public arena to advertise and communicate demands to anyone willing to listen.

Example: joining a demonstration.

- People may target policy-makers in legislatures or the executive branch as addresses of their communications.

Example: signing a petition.

- People may get involved in the selection process of those who aspire to legislative or executive office.

Example: voting for a party or running for office

Rethinking participation

Do actions intended to meet these outcomes have to take place in specific environments or if we adapt the ideas do they work anywhere?

Do all forms of participation that can be deemed political have to be outcome driven at a macro-level?

Motivations and meanings

- o Little research fully explains why citizens participate in political actions; rather their motivations are usually attributed based on the context
 - o Protesting activities are expressions of dissatisfaction
 - o Campaigning is an expression of partisan support
- o Little research explores the meaning individuals attribute to their participation
 - o The vote is an act of citizenly duty – or a protest – or?
 - o A like is just a meaningless click – or?
 - o Commenting is entertainment, not meaningful political debate – or?

Traditional political protests can occur via digital tools

- o Public arena to advertise and communicate demands – THE PROTEST
 - o Does the action of communicating dissatisfaction with public policy on Facebook and Twitter have the same meaning as taking to the streets?
- o Targeting policy-makers – THE PETITION
 - o Does tweeting at a politician, telling her/him what you think, have the same meaning as signing a petition?
- o Getting involved in the selection process – THE VOTE
 - o Does promoting a party/candidate via Facebook have the same meaning as putting a cross next to their name in a voting booth?

Non-traditional participation

- Clicktivism

“the use of social media and other online methods to promote a cause.”

- Slacktivism

“Actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement”

Traditional v Non-Traditional

- o Traditional participation is concrete, outcome-oriented, effortful, using established mechanisms, with clear political goals
- o Non-Traditional is unstructured, may not always appear to have an intended outcome, using a range of unofficial and anarchic mechanisms (platforms) with vague political goals

Cognition and Participation

- o We have limited understanding of the link between non-traditional and traditional forms of participation
- o We have limited understanding of the meanings attributed to the various forms of participation among those who carry them out
 - o “it was just for a laugh and my mate said it might be fun”
 - o “I wanted to show I cared, to be counted and that was the only way”

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**The first quote is from a student participating in demonstration against fees;
The second from a student who runs a Facebook group against discrimination
against immigrants from Eastern Europe**

Why non-traditional participation might be 'participation'

- Basic use of the web for information stimulates engagement (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003)
- Being informed leads to expressive behaviour (Shah et al, 2005; De Zuniga et al, 2009)
- Expressive behaviour leads to interaction (Puig-i-Abri & Rojas, 2007)
- Interaction can lead to communities forming around a public sphere (Avril, 2014)
- Communities can be self-mobilising (or mobilised by organisations) and members become involved in offline participation (Rojas et al, 2007)
- The various opportunities to express opinions online act as pathways to further forms of participation (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009)

The limitations of what we know

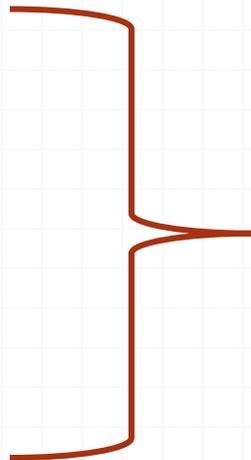
- o Research tends to start with behaviour (through experiments or by targeting specific populations)
- o What it is harder to locate is what leads to the first participatory action, or indeed what that might be.

For any planned action an event must stimulate higher brain functions leading to engagement

The digital age provides space for myriad such events to occur

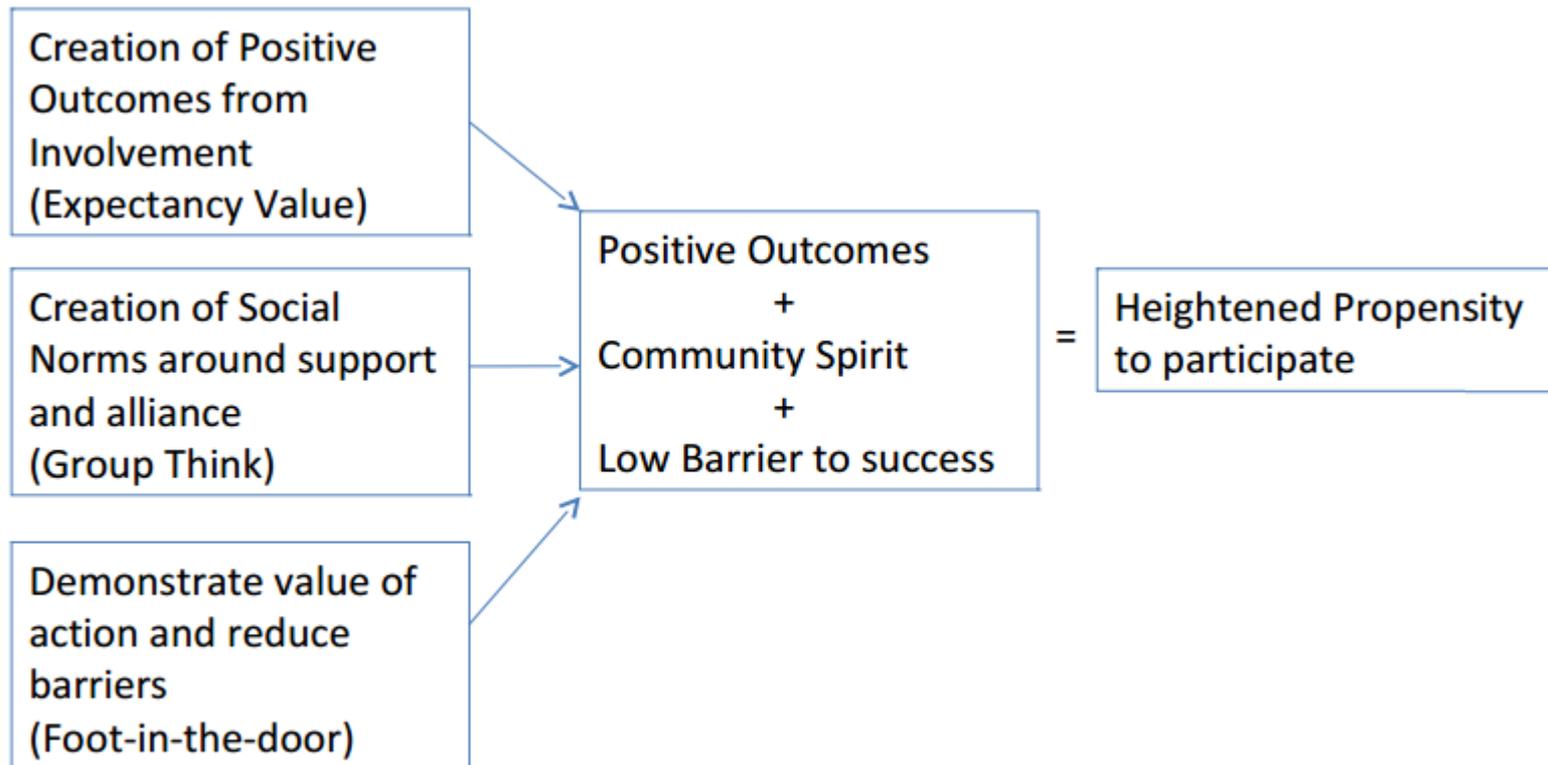
Cognitive pathways to participation

- o INTEREST
- o ENGAGEMENT
- o CONNECTEDNESS
- o MOBILISATION
- o EMPOWERMENT



These are inter-related and interdependent, they each are likely to cause and sustain one another

Modelling pathways to participation



Adapted from Azjen's Theory of Planned Behaviour

In defence of slacktivism

- Clicks may have no meaning, but they may be a first stage in becoming more involved:- **they test the waters of participation**
- A click is a show of interest, and a public expression
- Further participation requires rewards...
- Interest leads to information seeking (what some call a form of participation)
- What happens online may lead to things happening offline
- Rewards seem important; punishments demotivating and lead to withdrawal
- With continued stimuli, participation can increase and become a norm

The virtuous circle



What the digital age offers are myriad additional means to gain interest, become engaged, interact with others, gain instantaneous feedback and move along the participation continuum

The outcomes may not purely aim at influencing policy anymore.

The processes involve greater numbers of others

The outcomes are self-oriented but not less empowering

Beyond the participation crisis

SCOTLAND VOTES NO

Scotland has voted against becoming an independent country by 55% to 45%.

Should Scotland be an independent country?

	Votes	%
NO	2,001,926	55.30
YES	1,617,989	44.70
TARGET TO WIN	1,809,958	N/A

After 32 of 32 counts

Electorate	4,283,392
Turnout	84.59%
Rejected ballots	3,429

When every vote matters we get high levels of traditional participation

Broader participation?

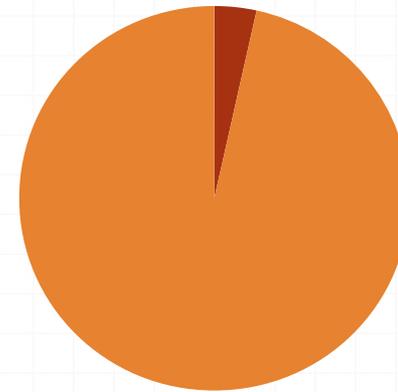
o The YES Campaign

- o 73,298 community on Facebook
- o Average 809 likes per post
- o Average 240 shares per post
- o Average 89 comments per post

o The NO Campaign

- o 69,182 community on Facebook
- o Average 562 likes per post
- o Average 77 shares per post
- o Average 169 comments per post

■ Participants
■ Total Voters



**But this is only one part
of a Big Conversation**

The many forms of participation?

- Non-traditional participation involved
 - Informed commentary
 - Uninformed commentary
 - Individual observations
 - Expressions of opinion
 - Expressions of support
 - Heckling/Graffiti
 - Persuasion
 - Sharing with no comment

Retweeted by Wings Over Scotland

 **Trudy Whittam** @PerfumeLodge · 5h
@YesMidlothian I support your right for Independence, Scotland :) & I'm not Scottish or living in Scotland. I believe it's the right thing x

[View conversation](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

Retweeted by Wings Over Scotland

 **BeCo** @BeCo74 · 5h
..@David_Cameron Vote for your independence from these terrible fucking Tories, Scotland ... and then we can all come and live with you!

[View conversation](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

Retweeted by Wings Over Scotland

 **dave_uk05** @dave_uk05 · 5h
I am English and i say if a Scotland gain independence it will be a great thing.
..Scotland vote for independence

[Expand](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

Retweeted by Wings Over Scotland

 **Karl Frampton** @Karl_Frampton · 5h
I actually never cared much how Scotland votes on independence. After Cameron's speech I hope they vote yes and good luck to them.

[Expand](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

Retweeted by Wings Over Scotland

 **emma** @spiggityspock · 5h
If Scotland gain independence then I'm moving to Scotland

[Expand](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

Retweeted by Wings Over Scotland

 **James G** @SeumasG · 5h
After listening to DC I have decided to phone my friends in Scotland and remind them what they will lose with independence - him

[Expand](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

Retweeted by Wings Over Scotland

 **Sam MacGregor** @samjustsamyeah · 5h
Following David Cameron's advice "HEY! YOUSE IN SCOTLAND! VOTE YES FOR INDEPENDENCE"

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Rethinking Participation

- o Much of the commentary alongside the Scottish referendum could be classified as demonstrations of:
 - o Activism
 - o Applying Pressure on others
- o So may be traditional participation by other means

- o Much is nothing more than clicktivism
 - o Unorchestrated
 - o Anarchic
 - o With no intended outcome

Planned Participation

- o What we know

Planned Participation

○ Questions

- Was it pre-meditated or spontaneous?
- Was it the result of consideration?
- Was it inspired by momentary 'hot cognition'?
- Was it part of a coherent plan of activism?

- Does the digital age allow all of these...
- So should we reconsider the importance of non-traditional forms of participation?
- And the meaning attributed by the individual participant?

My argument in four sentences

- o Mostly traditional political participation is outcome oriented
- o Much online participation about politics may have no intended outcome

BUT

- o Some of those participating in non-traditional political participation may have outcome-oriented goals

SO

- o We need more understandings (more research) on the meanings of clicks and likes (etc) in order to know what political participation means in a digital age.

Thank you

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