

From Taking Part to Having a Part?

Interdisciplinary Theoretical Considerations for Participation Research in Media Studies

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Introduction: A Differentiated Approach to Participation

Tell us your story! Join the conversation! Get involved! These are typical calls for participation in interactive documentaries on the web (i-docs). Users are often able to participate in multimedia web documentaries by providing content or comments (Gaudenzi 2014, 130). Some i-docs also enable co-creation, allowing participants to take part in documentary projects on an equal footing with the initiators in various phases (Cizek and Uricchio 2022, 19, 24, 36). It is particularly common for i-docs dealing with social issues to seek to involve “community narrators” (Ryan and Staton 2022, 11) in media production processes. The people affected become participants or producers and tell their own stories. Many of these projects assume that media participation enables those involved to assert themselves in the public sphere and with respect to the dominant culture (see the i-doc *Dadaab Stories*, U.S. 2013) or to become part of a community (see the i-doc *The G Word*, U.S. 2015). In media studies, such promises raise the question of the extent to which the aesthetics, affordances, and practices of the projects fulfill the prerequisites for promoting socio-cultural and community participation.

Media and communication scholar Kate Nash states that i-docs “offer distinct resources for nurturing citizenship and convening publics” (Nash 2022, 80). In her study of co-creative projects, Mandy Rose finds that “[i]n taking part, participants become a community to interrogate a theme of shared concern” (Rose 2014, 208). “Taking part” seems to enable participants to ‘have a part’¹ in the cultural sphere, the

1 In this chapter, I deliberately use the expression ‘having a part’ for a passive dimension that focuses on ‘being part of something’ instead of more common English terms such as ‘partake’. I do this first because ‘partake’ can also mean a form of active participation in something, which I would describe as ‘taking part’. Second, the expression ‘having a part’ is a reference to the philosopher Jacques Rancière and his expression “the part of those who have no part” (Rancière 1999, 30), as I will explain in detail later. Third, by using this unusual expression,

public sphere, and a community. What are the conditions, however, under which media participation can lead to cultural, democratic, and community participation? It is unlikely that we can answer this question solely using the methodologies of media studies. Rather, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary, one that takes account of theories of participation in philosophy and political science, among other tools. Operationalizing these theories for media studies research can contribute to examining the relationship between ‘taking part’ and ‘having a part’. This perspective is neither interested in measuring the impact of participatory projects nor in the participation of citizens in political processes. Rather, the focus is on cultural practices and cultural forms of democracy, as opposed to formal-institutional forms.

In this chapter, I use the example of i-docs to argue that we need to incorporate an interdisciplinary perspective into media studies research on participation in and through digital media cultures if we want to examine its transformative potentials. To this end, I will first present a taking part–having a part model and will then mainly use philosophical and political theory approaches, particularly those of Jacques Rancière, Michaela Ott, Nancy Fraser, Chantal Mouffe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, to clarify the conditions for three recurring forms of ‘having a part’ in i-docs, namely cultural participation, democratic participation in the public sphere, and participation in a (virtual) community. This chapter deliberately pays little attention to approaches taken to ‘participation’ in the sense of actively ‘taking part’ within the field of media studies (see, e.g., Schäfer 2011) as a means of showing how media studies can benefit from using other theoretical approaches when examining forms of ‘having a part’. I will illustrate this by applying the theoretical concepts in analyses of various i-docs. The hypothesis is that ‘taking part’ in i-docs does not lead to ‘having a part’ per se, but that a specific interplay of various human and non-human actors is decisive.

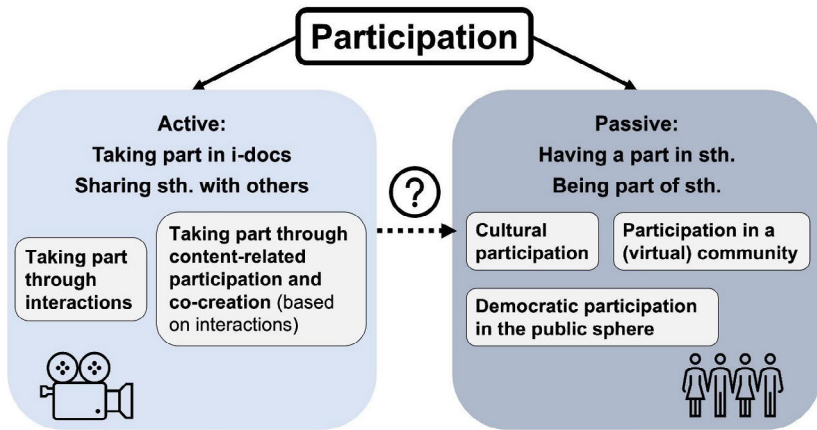
The Taking Part–Having a Part Model

In research on i-docs and online practices in general, the term ‘participation’ often appears alongside the term ‘interactivity’. By ‘interactivity’, I mean possibilities for interacting with media, such as navigating, as well as forms of interpersonal interaction, which can take place in both a digitally mediated form and face-to-face (cf. Bucher 2004, 135–137). My taking part–having a part model assumes that users *take part* in the i-doc through *interactions*, for example, by selecting options. This type of

I would like to draw attention to the fact that there are different forms of participation that have not yet been sufficiently differentiated in relation to i-docs. The approach proposed in this chapter is based on my German-language monograph *Dokumentieren – Partizipieren – Intervenieren. Teilnahme und Teilhabe in Interactive Documentaries* (Kermanchi 2025).

participation must be distinguished from participation with one's own content or through co-creation. Nevertheless, these practices are themselves based on interactions: Contributing content to an i-doc can mean, for example, clicking on a button such as 'Tell us your story' and selecting a video to upload. This is called "user-to-documents interactivity" (McMillan 2009, 213). Similarly, co-creation can only take place through interpersonal interactions, for example, between professional media makers and non-professionals (cf. Cizek and Uricchio 2022, 24). Therefore, my taking part–having a part model proposes understanding 'participation' as a generic term and categorizing interactivity under its active dimension (Fig. 1). 'Taking part' is based on interactions.

Fig. 1: The taking part–having a part model. © Jasmin Kermanchi, 2024.



Source: Jasmin Kermanchi 2024

This leads to the distinction between active and passive participation, representing 'taking part' and 'having a part' or 'being part', respectively. In German, there are separate nouns for this: *Teilnahme* and *Teilhabe*. Media scholar Anna Grebe understands active participation, for example, as claiming a right, and passive participation as having a part in a larger whole, such as society (Grebe 2013, 36). This should not be mistaken for the distinction between "participation in the media" and "participation through the media" proposed by media and communication scholar Nico Carpentier (Carpentier 2011, 67–68). "Participation through the media" refers, for example, to "mediated participation in public debate" (Carpentier 2011, 67), which is rather an active form.

For 'having a part', I differentiate between cultural participation, democratic participation in the public sphere, and participation in a (virtual) community (Fig. 1). These three types cannot be strictly separated but are closely related, as I will show. Furthermore, each of the types does not describe a static state but rather a dynamic phenomenon (cf. Grebe 2013, 37).

Distinguishing between 'taking part' and 'having a part' and clarifying the conditions for forms of the latter can help to avoid hastily equating media participation with socio-cultural participation and community participation. In the following, I will address the question of the extent to which 'taking part' can lead to 'having a part' (see Fig. 1), both on a theoretical level and using the example of specific i-docs.

Conditions for Forms of 'Having a Part' and Examples of I-Docs

Cultural Participation

To what extent can media participation via the contribution of content and co-creation enable participants to 'have a part' in the cultural sphere? To answer this question, the writings of the philosopher Jacques Rancière can be productive. He explains that "forms of partaking" are inscribed in "modes of perception" (Rancière 2010, 36). Rancière's work deals with the realization of equality through artistic practices. He assumes that aesthetics and politics are interdependent. For Rancière, the term "politics" refers to the intervention in an existing order, the so-called "police order" (Rancière 1999, 30). In his understanding, the police order determines the hierarchical organization of society and assigns "bodies [...] by name to a specific location and a specific task" (Rancière 1999, 29), which causes exclusion. According to the philosopher, art can create spaces where "the part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, 30) receives a platform as speaking subjects and challenges prevailing identity attributions (Rancière 2010, 139). Rancière explains:

Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise. (Rancière 1999, 30)

This idea is important for an understanding of cultural participation. Rancière assumes that 'having a part' is preceded by a "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2010, 36), which determines who can share in the commons and who cannot (Rancière 2010, 36). Accordingly, claiming participation can take place by intervening in sensory experience (Rancière 2010, 140). "The part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, 30) must move into the realm of the visible and audible.

One example is the participatory i-doc *Dadaab Stories* (U.S. 2013, Ryan Jones, Rafiq Copeland, and Liz Manne). It was conceived to make the voices of the residents of the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya heard. The project is the result of co-creation with the refugees on-site. It gives an insight into life in such a refugee camp by asking the residents to tell their own stories. While European mass media tend to reproduce the marginalization of refugees' voices (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017, 630), *Dadaab Stories* offers a space for precisely these voices. By producing videos themselves, the refugees were able to question existing identity attributions. In clips such as "Ifo Town Market" or "The Gym", they present their colorful everyday lives, which the mass media rarely sheds light on and which therefore remain largely invisible outside the project.

A closer look at Rancière's approach, however, reveals that to 'have a part', it is not sufficient that the refugees speak for themselves. In addition, a "redistribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2006, 43) is necessary, which no longer expresses an inequality but rather creates space for new participation. This implies that (self-)representations of participants must overcome dominant patterns of representation. Challenging the "police order" requires emancipating oneself "from the place assigned" (Rancière 1999, 30), which means "to rupture given relations between things and meanings" (Rancière 2010, 141). 'Taking part' must entail emancipation from prevailing images that express inequality if 'having a part' is to emerge. Philosopher Michaela Ott, for example, advocates a reflexive approach to participation. Her premise is that human identities – as well as other entities such as artworks (Ott 2018, 140) – should be understood as *dividual* rather than *individual* because they are "multiply subdivided" (Ott 2018, 7) through their participation in various processes and, for example, cultural techniques. Based on this fact, Ott explains the need to consciously select, modify, or interrupt the various involvements (Ott 2018, 126). Media scholar Thomas Weber concludes that this reflection also implies that the self-image "detaches itself from old dependencies" (Weber 2023, 45). Emancipation from existing images and narratives is, therefore, another prerequisite for cultural participation.

In *Dadaab Stories*, the aim was for the refugees, some of whom have been living in the camp for 30 years, to present themselves differently than in the stereotypical representations of the mass media (Ronik Design n.d.). The news media often reduce the portrayal of refugees to their need for help during crises (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1173). In addition, the refugees are "deprived of their personhood, as unique individuals with their own live [sic] stories" (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017, 628). In *Dadaab Stories*, by contrast, numerous videos in the category "The Arts" do not show victims but creative camp residents presenting poems, songs, and dances. As participating refugee Liban Rashid explained in an interview with Clar Ni Chonghaile:

There are so many talented youths in the camp, who know about music and singing, [...] and they think nobody needs their talent. Now, they can share their stories, and some people might like what they are doing, and might give them a market. (Rashid quoted in Ni Chonghaile 2013)

In Rancière's terms, this is an intervention into the existing order of the visible and audible, resulting in an alternative perception of the camp. The camp residents confront the mass media's portrayal of refugees as passive victims with a much more active image. By emancipating themselves from the victim narrative that reduces them to their need for help, they demand cultural participation.

However, in some cases, the i-doc displays stereotypical self-images – failing to question and challenge the prevailing distribution of the sensible, which perpetuates inequality. The video “Caring for Abidirsack”, for example, focuses on the suffering of an overburdened father. The video “Gilo River” highlights the suffering caused by a dried-up river. In these cases, the potential to “[shift] a body from the place assigned to it” (Rancière 1999, 30) is lower than in the depictions that break with mass media images.

Another example is the i-doc *Question Bridge: Black Males* (U.S. 2012, Chris Johnson et al.). The project offers Black men a space in which they can share experiences and represent themselves to deconstruct stereotypes (“About”, *Question Bridge*). Participants can upload videos with questions for other Black males or answer existing questions posed in other videos. The conversations show the diversity of Black masculinity. In some cases, however, participants take up stereotypes by asking generalizing questions, such as “Why do we keep going around killing each other?” (Jermayue C. Edwards), “When will you realize violence will bring us down?” (William Bunn III), or “Why do blacks fight in public places?” (Larry Witherspoon). The danger is that people with prejudices who watch the videos will see existing stereotypes confirmed (cf. Petersen and Six-Materna 2006, 432). Yet *Question Bridge* also contains many cases of alternative representation that promote cultural participation and a reflexive approach. One example is the question “Why are we so quick to believe the negative stereotypes about ourselves?” (Bayeté Ross Smith), although the “we” can again be interpreted as homogenizing.

So far, it can be stated that content-related participation and co-creation in i-docs do not necessarily result in cultural participation for those who take part. Some of them fall into victim narratives or stereotypical patterns. However, a “change in the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2010, 141) can also emerge in other ways than just by deviating from stereotypes, for example, by breaking with perceptual conventions. This can offer a new form of experience that draws attention to the excluded (Rancière 2008, 77). Similarly, Ott argues that various forms of alienation, appropriation, and recontextualization (Ott 2018, 38, 242–243) can intervene “in the visibility zones” (Ott 2018, 246).

One example of this is the i-doc *Unquiet Voices* (Romania 2019, Ioana Zamfir) about women in Romania who are victims of domestic violence and whose voices are suppressed in the country. The initiators paired the audio testimonies of seven of these Romanians with scenes from old silent films showing fictional domestic violence. The project assumes that films influence society's perception of aggression against women (Anais Association n.d.). It reflects this media-conditioned public perception by combining scenes from old U.S. silent films, in which violence served as a means of entertainment, with the testimonies of today's victims of abuse. The distribution of the sensible that is expressed in the old films, such as the role of women, becomes visible through a new distribution using the voices of the participating Romanian women and the strategy of recontextualization. The discrepancy between image and sound breaks with conventions. A further source of irritation also arises when users are required to interrupt the videos to listen to user-generated content added later by numerous other women affected. In this way, aesthetic strategies challenge the power structure regarding what is actively heard.

The examples of i-docs discussed here show the connection between cultural participation and democratic participation in the public sphere. In an interview with Henry Jenkins, media scholar Nico Carpentier explains that "participation in the cultural sphere" has a political-democratic dimension because it is linked to questions of "power and conflict" (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, 269). Rancière's approach, too, can be read in terms of democratic theory. He considers dissent to be constitutive of democracy, as it enables the excluded to claim the right to participate (Rancière 2010, 54).

Democratic Participation in the Public Sphere

One form of democratic participation in the public sphere is the expression of the excluded by 'counterpublics'. These can democratically expand the public sphere if they accept democratic values (Fraser 1990, 67). 'Counterpublic' is an alternative concept to the universal bourgeois public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas (1989). According to the philosopher Nancy Fraser, democratic participation requires practices that react to the exclusion mechanisms of the broad public sphere (Fraser 1990, 67). She describes "subaltern counterpublics" as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses [...]" (Fraser 1990, 67). In this context, participation would mean being able "to speak 'in one's own voice'" (Fraser 1990, 69). A further prerequisite for a counterpublic is to address strangers with the counterdiscourses (cf. Warner 2002, 424).

Nancy Fraser's concept of democratic participation implicitly distinguishes between 'taking part' and 'having a part'. Fraser criticizes Habermas' theory by pointing out that even if everyone formally could take part, "informal impediments to participatory parity" (Fraser 1990, 63) would exist, which, in my understanding, prevent

'having a part'. For example, public debate can exclude certain interests by invoking privacy with regard to a given topic (Fraser 1990, 73–74). The i-doc *Unquiet Voices* addresses this by creating a platform for the Romanian women's voices, which had not been heard publicly before the project due to "biased points of view" (Anais Association n.d.), although they had not been formally denied the right to take part.

Similar to Fraser, the political scientist Chantal Mouffe assumes that "a variety of agonistic public spaces" (Mouffe 2013, 95) that challenge dominant discourses can promote democratic participation. She explains that "[a] well functioning democracy calls for a clash of legitimate democratic political positions" (Mouffe 2005, 30). I argue that this clash of positions can promote democratic participation on two levels. The first level concerns the circulation of counternarratives *by* media projects such as i-docs. The second level refers to the clash of positions *within* the projects.

I have already illuminated the first level by outlining Fraser's approach. One example is the *Dadaab Stories* project mentioned above. It creates a counterpublic by expressing marginalized positions, differentiating itself from mass media practices by the use of self-representations, allowing the participants to speak in their own voice and language, and addressing an audience of strangers. The counterpublic created by *Dadaab Stories* offers an expansion of discursive space by sharing the stories worldwide using social media. However, there was a lack of funds to finance broad distribution, as the initiator Liz Manne explained in a personal conversation on September 29, 2021, referring to the exclusive funding of production processes. The small counterpublic of *Dadaab Stories* thus only circulated counterdiscourses to a limited extent and barely promoted democratic participation. Another obstacle to the refugees' participation in the public sphere was the lack of digital infrastructure in the refugee camp. When public debates arose in response to the videos, such as social media discussions (see #DadaabStories on X), the camp residents were usually excluded from participating because the internet connection on-site was very poor, as Manne told me. Accordingly, the refugees themselves were rarely able to watch the videos on the online platform. Manne explained that the funding of the project by the Tribeca New Media Fund was linked to the condition of innovative technology, which did not consider the needs of the camp residents on-site. This reinforced participation inequalities.

Looking at the second level of the clash of positions, namely *within* i-docs, further limits to democratic participation become apparent. On a theoretical level, Mouffe refers to the clash of positions as *agonism* instead of *antagonism*:

While antagonism is a *we/they* relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a *we/they* relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. (Mouffe 2005, 20)

According to Mouffe, “being bombarded by different views” (Mouffe quoted in Carpentier/Cammaerts 2006, 968) is a characteristic of democracy if everyone in the agonistic struggle is oriented towards democratic values such as equality, so that adversaries do not become enemies (Mouffe 2005, 20, 31). Matthew Jones addresses this with the criticism that “[...] insisting that participants view each other with agonistic respect may be difficult to achieve” (Jones 2014, 26). This can be illustrated using the example of an i-doc.

In the i-doc *Whiteness Project* (U.S. 2014, Whitney Dow), White people discuss what it is like to live as a White person in the USA. While the protagonists of the project express their opinions in individual videos, visitors to the website can click on a “Discuss” button on the right of the screen, which moves the comment area in front of the video, allowing them to participate themselves. Different opinions on the topic collide *within* the project and its open comment section, which seems to facilitate democratic participation. However, the democratic dispute – the agonism between *adversaries* – occasionally gets out of control and turns into antagonistic relations between *enemies*. For example, the user Emerson Sanders comments “Don’t care for other People. White America!”. Sanders does not acknowledge the legitimacy of other positions. In another example, Jim Hamilton insults Erin Writes, calling her a “lunatic” and an “idiot” after she has accused him of making racist remarks. Clearly not all the participants in *Whiteness Project* recognize the legitimacy of other positions. The freedom to participate by making comments, which will not be checked, therefore has the downside of potentially enabling disrespectful treatment of other people.

In the aforementioned project *Question Bridge: Black Males*, by contrast, no antagonistic relations arise. This may be because users must create an account and upload a video of themselves. Most importantly, however, there is a common goal that counteracts antagonism, namely, to *collectively* demand participation as Black men (“About”, *Question Bridge*). Some participants discuss, for example, whether it is acceptable to use the N-word. Even if they hold very controversial views, they don’t attack each other but recognize the legitimacy of other positions. One explanation for this could be the sense of community created by the Black men’s similar experiences. For example, some men share that they have a problem with “eating chicken, watermelon, and bananas in front of White people” (question by Eternal Polk). In her theory of agonistic democracy, Chantal Mouffe states: “[T]he political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification, since in this field we are always dealing with the formation of ‘us’ as opposed to ‘them’” (Mouffe 2013, 4). “Us” in this context refers to Black men, “them” to White people, whose prejudices the Black participants discuss. Their discussion contributes to collective subjectivization. This shows that the transition to community participation is fluid.

Participation in a (Virtual) Community

A virtual community is characterized by the ongoing interaction of people with a shared interest on the web, resulting in a social network of relationships (Deterding 2009, 118). The architecture of the web, social networks, and cultural practices influence each other (Deterding 2009, 129). Social scientist Howard Rheingold further explains: “Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 2000, XX). Thus, forming a virtual community requires long-term social interaction.

A rare example of an i-doc that fostered a virtual community over a long period is *Corona Haikus* (Colombia/UK 2020, Sandra Tabares-Duque and Sandra Gaudenzi). The project began during the Covid-19 pandemic and participants were very active for over a year. *Corona Haikus* started as a Facebook group, which is not unusual for i-docs (cf. Ryan and Staton 2022, 6). The aim of the project was to feel connected worldwide in times of social isolation. Participants in the project were able to contribute “visual haikus” to the Facebook group, consisting of three images and a short text expressing their current situation, emotions, and concerns (see the “Info” section in the Facebook group). Other members of the Facebook group frequently commented on the haikus, so that a dialogue took place. This almost daily exchange over a year was very caring. Participants expressed their solidarity, which, along with the shared aesthetic practices, led to the emergence of a virtual community (cf. Kermanchi 2022, 92–93). Numerous contributions from participants point this out. Maria Christoforou’s haiku from May 21, 2020, in which she addresses the fact that she feels uncomfortable going outside, was commented on by Valentine Goddard from Canada with “I hear you too. [...] Take care, big cyberhug”. In a haiku in the final phase of the project, Gilbert Calleja wrote: “Thank you all for being fantastic companions during this trip. Farewell dear friends”. This inclusive form of address expresses a sense of community. As project participant Maria Christoforou explained in a personal conversation on June 23, 2022: “I was very close to everyone even though I didn’t know them”. Being part of this virtual community, however, required creativity in dealing with the documentary-poetic form of expression, which is probably one reason why many participants were media makers.

The emergence of such virtual communities through taking part in i-docs is rather rare, as the duration of the users’ presence on online platforms is usually temporary. In the following, I will therefore focus on *situational community experiences* using the writings of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Although Nancy uses the concept of community for considerations of an ontological and political-ethical nature, a transfer of his approach to a media-philosophical perspective allows one to grasp the specific dynamics of community experiences in i-docs, as he advocates

for thinking of community as relational and performative (cf. Spöhrer 2013, 87). His approach can help to clarify the relationship between ‘taking part’ and ‘having a part’.

Nancy explains that community cannot be built, but only experienced through what he calls “sharing” (Nancy 1991, 31). As a translation of *partager*, the term refers to both a separating and a connecting momentum (Nancy 2000, 194). According to Nancy, no self-contained *subjects* exist, but rather *singularities* that are plural in themselves (Nancy 2000, 32). The prerequisite for the feeling of being part of a community would be the exposure between singularities through “sharing” as a “mutual interpellation of singularities” (Nancy 1991, 29). This does not imply that a community becomes unified in the sense of eliminating all differences (Nancy 1991, 25, 30). Rather, it means that distinguishable singularities expose their own identity and how they are different from others through “sharing” – or, as I argue, through taking part based on interactions (cf. Schwarzmantel 2007, 462). As I explained above, participation and interaction cannot be separated. Being part of an emerging community experience results from taking part, circulating that which is shared (cf. Hebekus and Völker 2012, 107), or more precisely, from the “between” of singularities (Nancy 1991, 29). In Nancy’s thinking, community experiences also arise from sharing with technology and other *non-human* actors (Nancy 2000, 18). In the context of i-docs, it is the platforms in particular that influence facilitating a sense of togetherness. Drawing on the approach of media scholar Beate Ochsner, in the following, I will focus on the media as a space in-between, in which singularities can expose their differences in a way that allows them to experience community (Ochsner 2018, 131–132).

Following Nancy, ‘having a part’ in a community experience constitutes the participating singularities by contributing to their individualization. He states that “these singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather spaced, by the sharing that makes them others [...]” (Nancy 1991, 25). As this passage explains, singularities change through sharing. One example is the case of the participants in *Question Bridge*. Sharing experiences with other Black males and the interactions of asking and answering questions enabled the participants to perceive themselves differently and to define the “difference between them and somebody else”, as the initiator Chris Johnson explained in an interview recorded in 2012 (Talks at Google 2012, 19:45–19:56). The participants placed themselves in relation to the other Black men and exposed their “being different”, for example, through identity tags on the online platform such as “writer”, “humorous”, “golfer”, or “activist”.

Another example where ‘taking part’ facilitates ‘having a part’ in emerging community experiences is the i-doc *The G Word: Transforming Gender Norms, One Story at a Time* (U.S. 2015, Ishita Srivastava), which concerns gender discrimination and gender-based violence. Its website collects video, audio, image, and text contributions from those affected and promises they can become part of a community by shar-

ing their experiences. The i-doc presents these posts, which the participants tag, in clusters, forming a narrative network. In line with the project's motto, "Stories unite us" ("Story Guidelines", *The G Word*), the i-doc uses various strategies to highlight the connectedness of the participants' experiences. This includes linking posts with the same tags so that the i-doc shows the connections to similar experiences when a user opens a post in the narrative network. In addition, these "connected stories" also appear in every contribution under the content of the post. Emojis allow users to express their empathy with those who share their experiences. There are also "comment" and "add your story" buttons under each post. For example, the following comment was made by "Alina" on January 22, 2016, as a response to the post by "Alex, 23, from Texas" (orthography and formatting retained from the original):

honestly ... i cried when i read this. ive been through this and hearing stories that hit close to home brings back painful memories but also strengthens my resolution. thank you for leaving him. thank you for taking care of yourself. and thank you for being alive. You're strong and beautiful and if you can get past this you can do so much more. stay strong!

In many comments like this one, the participants collectively cope with their experiences. It is important to note that the initiators review comments and contributions before publication (cf. Ding n.d.). They therefore have just as much influence on potential community feelings as the participants, who are given a safe space for interaction on the platform but nonetheless have to expose themselves publicly in order to 'have a part'. The exposure between singularities means, in this case, making oneself publicly vulnerable at the same time.

The user-to-user interactions of those who nevertheless open up allow for mutual support. The participants share their stories with others who, in many cases, have experienced similar situations. Processes of sharing arise, in Nancy's sense. Through the relational processes of contributing and commenting, i.e. taking part, participants can experience being part of a community and may draw strength from this. Seeing how other people in similar situations cope and what their advice is can contribute to processes of change for some participants. Beyond the goal of documenting, therefore, we can speak of socio-psychological functions. Alina, for example, who was quoted above, explained that Alex's contribution strengthened her resolution. The 19-year-old participant Anne explains in her feedback to Breakthrough, the production company that made *The G Word*:

I cannot express how much it means to me to know I have a safe place where I can be heard. It's the most uplifting thing I have done for myself in such a long time. Thank you. (Anne, quoted in Breakthrough U.S. 2015)

What the participants have in common, in other words, what is shared and circulated, is the “gender story” (Srivastava quoted in Ding n.d.). However, it is also part of the sense of community that the differences between the experiences are recognized. Everyone can feel part of the group – from rape victims to people who were pressured as children to prove their masculinity in sports. The tags with which the participants of *The G Word* label their posts contribute to the individualization described by Nancy. This happens through sharing with other participants but also through sharing with the interface. The tags result from interactions with the platform and express what distinguishes each contributing person from the others. For example, 20-year-old Danielle posted the tag combinations “rape/military/mental health”, while 19-year-old Will used “gender norms/religion/LGBTQ”, and 25-year-old Berta tagged her contribution “violence/state violence/parenting”. Following Nancy, I argue that the platform, its interface, which presents a narrative network, and its affordances shape the feeling of being part of an emerging inclusive community. However, this community experience is temporary and lasts only as long as the practices of taking part continue. It does not constitute a longer-term ‘having a part’.

Conclusion: Why Taking Part Does Not Necessarily Mean Having a Part

The theoretical model presented in this chapter enables a differentiated consideration of the practices of ‘taking part’ regarding the prerequisites for ‘having a part’. The operationalization of the philosophical and political-theoretical approaches suggests that media scholars should conduct affordance analyses and aesthetic analyses in combination with analyses of the performative practices within media projects. For example, the practice of content-related participation alone says nothing about the promotion of cultural participation if we do not examine the concrete representations at the same time. As I have shown, promoting cultural participation through i-docs requires access to technology, a critical awareness in dealing with the technologies, and a reflective design of media (self-)representations to question an aesthetic order characterized by phenomena such as stereotypes.

The examples discussed have demonstrated that media participation as ‘taking part’ does not per se lead to cultural, democratic, or community participation as ‘having a part’. Various human and non-human actors, including initiators, participants, platforms, affordances, aesthetic strategies, funding institutions, and economic conditions, foster or hinder participation. Enabling media participation does not mean that the intention of the project will be achieved. For example, participatory i-docs don’t necessarily promote the cultural visibility of marginalized positions, even if they fulfill all the key conditions, simply because they often don’t achieve the required visibility in the online attention economy. To challenge stereo-

typical images in the hegemonic public sphere of the mass media, i-docs paradoxically need to access this public sphere, from which they distance themselves.

An interdisciplinary approach, as proposed in this article, is indispensable for questions concerning 'having a part' and enriches media studies. In the future, the taking part–having a part model can be expanded in terms of both active and passive forms of participation, for example, by considering forms of media participation in the context of games and forms of inclusion as discussed in disability studies. The model is also transferable to other phenomena, such as collective narratives in social networks and weblogs, video activism in social media, participatory video projects, and participation in and through games.

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