

From Participation to Power

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A 2010 *New Yorker* article by Malcolm Gladwell compared the civil rights activism of the 1960s to contemporary social media activism. He found the claim of a social media revolution wanting, and in particular that, unlike the civil rights activists of the 1960s who risked bodily harm, people who participate via social media in activist causes are engaged in a low-risk activity, unlikely to cause significant change in the world. The reasoning he gave for this was typically Gladwellian in its movement between anecdote and scholarly abstraction: because social media is a “weak tie” phenomenon, it does not demand sacrifice from people, and because sacrifice requires discipline it requires

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hierarchy, and as hierarchy is opposed to networks, and social media are network phenomena, an activism that relies on networks instead of hierarchies privileges only adaptability and resilience and not strategic and disciplined confrontation. Ergo if we rely on networks in the face of danger, we will not survive. Real change requires disciplined hierarchical organization; resilient adaptability is pyrrhic change. Gladwell concluded:

“The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo. If you are of the opinion that all the world needs is a little buffing around the edges, this should not trouble you. But if you think that there are still lunch counters out there that need integrating it ought to give you pause.”

Predictably, the blogs and tweets were alight for a 24-48 hours afterwards as people debated his conclusions, argued the issue and then ultimately moved on to the next issue (a proof in its own way, perhaps, of Gladwell’s argument about discipline). But none of the responses asked a simple question: *are networks and hierarchies mutually exclusive?*

Gladwell hypostatizes these abstract social forms, and he is not alone in doing so.

Insisting on such an opposition was a good way to stir up the hornets’ nest of social media users who perhaps surprisingly find no fault with the premises of the article, and instead exert their diffuse uncoordinated energy investigating flaws in the ensuing argument.

Like so much writing about social media, this argument erases distinctions rather than enabling more precise ones. Rather than encouraging the kind of collective, creative,

exploration and questioning that new media are often credited with, such a discussion blinds people to possibility of seeing things another way. *Are networks and hierarchies mutually exclusive?* Are they even the right terms of analysis for what is happening to participation today? What might the right terms be?

Scholarship of the last decade has proliferated terms and concepts to explain the effects of the Internet and new media on participation: terms such as 'peer production' (Benkler 2006), 'produsage' (Bruns 2008), 'the wisdom of crowds' (Surowiecki 2004), "prosumers/prosumption" (Toffler 1980; Jurgenson & Ritzer 2010), the 'network society' (Castells 1996; 2001), 'user-led innovation' (von Hippel 2005), 'recursive publics' (Kelty 2008), 'creation capitalism' (Boellstorff 2010), 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2006), 'organized networks' (Rossiter 2006 and Lovink 2005), 'wikinomics' (Tapscott and Williams 2006) or 'networked publics' (Varnelis 2008; boyd, 2009).

Clearly more is at stake than simply whether social media are hierarchical or network forms. But this list also suggests a different analytical problem. All of these terms refer to social media, the Internet, software, fan cultures and "knowledge societies," *but not to each other*: they are the scholarly equivalent of proprietary formats, they lack compatibility, interoperability or convertibility. In part this is a problem of lingering disciplinary allegiances—each analysis must pay tribute to the terms and debates of the disciplines from which it emerges, and in turn expects the others to join them in their pursuit.

What would it mean, therefore, to view participation in a *naturalistic* light: to simply present the practices and organizational formations of participation and ask, "what is

that?” How is Facebook different from Linux different from Second Life different from barackobama.com? How are they organized and for whom? Who do they interact with each other and how? And can we design a language that allows for comparison across diverse forms of participation today—and possibly across disciplines as well?

The Natural History of Participation

What is participation like today? How has it become newly important with respect to yesterday? One can identify a subtle shift with respect to participation by dwelling on one of the definitions provided by the Oxford English Dictionary:

The process or fact of sharing in an action, sentiment, etc.; (now *esp.*) active involvement in a matter or event, *esp.* one in which the outcome directly affects those taking part. Freq. with *in*. Cf. *audience participation* at [AUDIENCE](#) *n.* 7d.

In this definition, there is a loop: one participates because the outcome directly affects the one participating. Participatory democracy, by this definition, is not representative but direct—and direct in the sense that participating in democratic politics directly benefits the participant (with the implication that in a government of, by and for the people, it is a benefit to all).

But it is not only the participant’s perspective that is at stake today: increasingly, and for obscure reasons, those who provide the capacity for participation expect something as well. Participation is now a two-way street. Governments now *provide* participatory democracy, citizens are *engaged* by the government or corporations, and publics are constituted, consulted, and used to legitimate decision-making. Similarly, organizations

regularly solicit not just purchases or opinions, but participation in innovation, in marketing, and in the creation of lifestyles, cultures and loyalties.

Whereas participation is at first glance understood to primarily benefit the participants—whether conceived as a collection of individuals or a collective body, at second glance it is clear that participation is now expected to have an effect on the structures, institutions, organizations or technologies in which one participates. Participation is no longer simply an opening up, an expansion, a liberation, it is now also a principle of improvement, an instrument of change, a creative force. It no longer threatens, but has become a resource: participation has been made *valuable*.

Consider Gladwell's invocation of the civil rights movement. Two kinds of participation were at stake in that moment: participation in the movement itself (through networks of friends, churchgoers and neighbors) and participation in the process of local and national government itself, namely *enfranchisement* (a core goal of the movement). Civil Rights leaders provided a framework for participating in the movement (with elements of both hierarchy and networks) and as they expanded the networks, the benefits from participation accrued both to individuals and to the movement as it grew. The US government, by contrast, opposed participation by these very citizens—such participation was something to fear, to prevent, to mishandle or sabotage, whether that meant ignoring local laws concerning lunch counters, or blocking equal access to the voting booth. One organization facilitated and expected returns from participation; the other sought to restrict and delimit participation.

Contrast this with, for instance, the so-called Twitter revolution in Iran. In that case, there are at least three distinct forms of participation at stake: 1) participation in a movement to achieve democratization in Iran which took myriad forms, and consisted of many different structures that might enable that participation; 2) participation in the government of Iran (the goal of the movement); and 3) participation *in Twitter itself*. The first of these benefitted in many ways from the third, but they are not one and the same thing.

In both cases, civil rights and Twitter in Iran two different questions are collapsed and confused: first, what kinds of participatory structures do organizations, movements, or governments create? This is a question one can ask equally of the civil rights movement, the US and Iranian Governments and Twitter. The second, however, is how does participation in the civil rights movement, or in Twitter *affect or transform* the structure of participation in the US or Iranian government? This is a different kind of question, one concerned with the best possible strategies and tactics for achieving change in a particular structure (a national government). It is also a question that could be asked of the civil rights movement or Twitter (i.e. what is the best strategy for changing the structure of participation in Twitter?), assuming one wanted to protest, resist or transform those organizations. The confusion begins as soon as one sees participation in Twitter as tantamount to participation in the Iranian government. But Twitter encourages participation in particular ways, while the Iranian government discourages it in particular and often brutal ways. Participation is a pluralistic thing, and it helps to distinguish the good from the bad.

The expectation that participation will yield outcomes for both participants and those structuring participation takes many forms; it is impossible to assess the meaning and effect of participation without making some distinctions that might be useful across the range of social reality—and not only in those places where specific technologies or specific forms of organization are present. The goal of distinctions is to produce comparisons that allow one to evaluate claims about what a thing is and what it can do. Such distinctions cannot answer the question of whether Twitter is democratic or not, but they can help articulate why that might not be a meaningful question.

Structure: Platform as problematization

To understand the difference between forms of participation today, it is necessary to start with the question of organization. To be sure, the concepts of hierarchy, market and network are important—but they are not the only concepts in play today. As Tarleton Gillespie (2010) has recently pointed out, the major players in new media and social media don't talk much about hierarchies and networks, they talk about “platforms.” The work of a term like this should not be read referentially, but as a diagnostic: something about our existing terms and understandings of organizations, goals, boundaries, and their structure has been jostled loose—problematized. “Platforms” as Gillespie analyzes them are not websites, not companies, not technologies, nor the “social networks” themselves. The term is rhetorically allied with participation: it raises people up, it levels the field, it structures from below, not from above, and so on. But what it really reveals is a lack of words and concepts for making sense of the concrete assemblages and apparatuses that

respond to this problematization of participation and organization.² As Gillespie notes, platforms also have edges, and finding these edges requires careful analytical work.

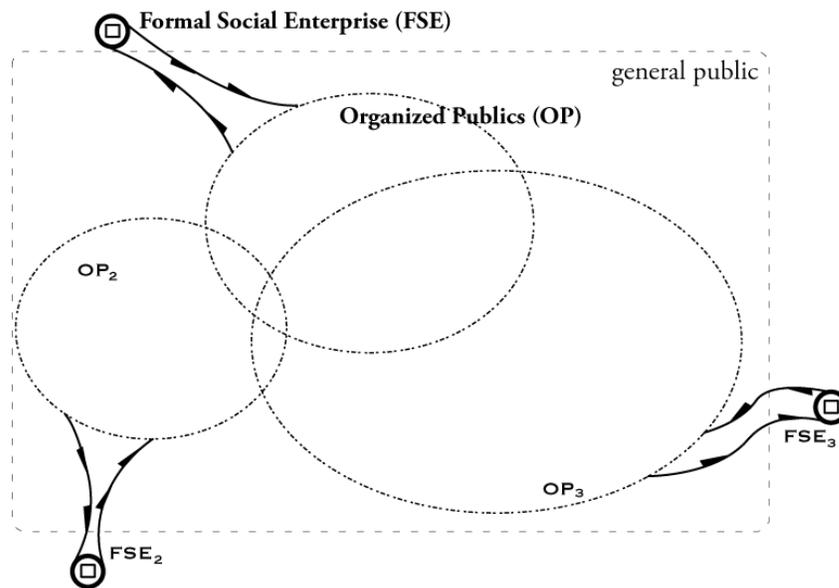
Wikipedia, for instance, is alternately referred to as an encyclopedia, a website, a cult, a platform, a community, a public and a project. It is not referred to as a corporation or a non-profit organization, though it does have various members who deal with financial issues of sustainability and practical issues of organization and planning—separated out as an official foundation called Wikimedia. Clearly it possesses elements of both publics and organizations, communities and non-profits, hierarchies and networks.

An abstraction that helps to capture this is presented in Fig X. In this figure we suggest a distinction between a Formal Social Enterprise (FSE) and an Organized Public (OP). The point of this distinction is to capture first, a simple and arbitrary distinction between formal and informal organization. On the one hand, a Formal Social Enterprise (FSE) is defined as any organization with a formal, especially a state-sanctioned legal and/or regulated existence: such as a for-profit or non-profit organization, a foundation, a university research center. Members of the organization are contractually obligated to it, and those obligations mediated by legal and technical tools like salaries and employment contracts, ID cards, offices, letterhead and email addresses, a sense of identity as an insider, a role as a manager, an employee, a consultant, a board member, an advisor etc. Such enterprises can be organized horizontally, vertically, loosely networked or densely

² On the terms *problematization*, *apparatus* and *assemblage*, see Rabinow 2003:44-56.

and hierarchically controlled. FSEs limit social access and define decision-making power. In this sense they are clearly on the “organization” side of the organization/public divide.

Opposite the formal organizations with their contracts and historically recognized modes of belonging are Organized Publics (OPs). OPs differ because belonging and membership in the OP is informal, temporary, and constituted primarily through attention. Depending on one’s commitments and capacities, one could belong to several different OPs at the same time (and, hence, there may be more or less overlap across any given set of projects, as depicted in Fig. X). Warner (2002) defines publics as *ad hoc* entities that come into existence only when addressed and exist only while they pay attention to that address. In his definition the form of address is classically discursive: constituted through speech and writing addressed to an imagined public that can read and respond, directly or indirectly. But that address is also technical in the sense of mediated by the forms and technologies of address and circulation. Participation in a public is at some level structured by “platforms.”



Given the opposition between formal enterprises and organized publics, what do the cases of the civil rights movement and Twitter in Iran look like? On the one hand, the students at the lunch counter in Greensboro North Carolina were very much part of an organized public: addressed by, and paying attention to, movement leaders, journalists, national op-eds and local discussions. They are not, at least not initially, formal representatives of organizations like the NAACP or SNCC, and one might see the history of the civil rights differently by using this distinction to ask how participation in the movement was structured. In the case of Twitter in Iran, there are two different relations at stake: one is the relationship between the heterogeneous groups of public protestors and any formal organizations that might have represented themselves as part of an opposition; the other is the relationship between Twitter, Inc. and twitter users, in Iran and elsewhere. In the first case, participation was not structured by any particular FSEs—indeed, formal organizations contesting the regime are illegal in Iran, and exist primarily outside of the country. In this respect, there was perhaps very little “organization” to the public, and what little there was came through the technical affordances of Twitter, facebook, email, cell phones and the other local media that allow a public to loosely coordinate its actions, or prevent it. The absence of formal organizations of protest and participation are compensated with a politics of technical capacities.

In the second case, however, Twitter, Inc more or less autocratically structures participation in Twitter. They can pull the plug if they want to, they can succumb to the pressures of national governments, they can fall victim to hackers and other direct attacks. Twitter users have very little say in how Twitter is structured, and no option for

changing that other than to opt out of using it. One can imagine then, the interlocking effects of 1) participation in the green revolution in 2009 and 2) participation in Twitter, without reducing one to the other—and both possess elements of hierarchies, networks and markets.³

OPs and FSEs can in turn distinguished from a “general public” (or in Warner’s terms as “a public” rather than “the public”). A General Public or “The Public” is not an actual entity, but only a virtual entity in the imaginations, plans, designs and expectations of people and associations of people. Specific publics (collections of protestors in Iran for instance) act in the name of an imaginary Public yet to come. What is important about this notion is that the boundary between a general public and an organized public is porous, and the boundary between a general public and an FSE is not (represented in the Fig X by the path of the dashed line). To put it more precisely, OPs become actual

³ Often social media are referred to as amorphous, anarchic or self-organizing, but much research contradicts this: Free Software communities evidence clear, but highly variable, organizational structures (Weber 2004, Feller et al. 2005). Wikipedians have over time evolved a “hidden order” (Viegas, Wattenberg and McKeon 2007) that is enforced through apprenticeship, communication of norms and censure. FOSS projects are frequently governed by norms and moral imaginaries that are communicated horizontally amongst participants. Some projects have formalized the apprenticeship process, as in the case of the Debian New Maintainer Process studied by Coleman (2005).

instances of a virtual “General public” instantaneously: as soon as a group of individuals begin to pay attention to something, and continues so long as they interact with others who are also paying attention. This could mean watching a video online, signing up for an account or joining protesters in the street, etc. Almost by definition, OPs are defined such that “anyone can join”—anyone can sign up for a Facebook account; anyone can edit a Wikipedia page; anyone can shoot and upload a YouTube video; anyone can don a green armband.

By contrast, FSEs are not formed as instances of a General Public; they are not formed by mere attention but by formal two-way recognition. Signed employment contracts, salaries, membership cards, titles and roles, or other forms of official recognition are the relevant signs of participation in an FSE, whereas attention and address are those of participation in an OP. Needless to say, a select few can be members of both.

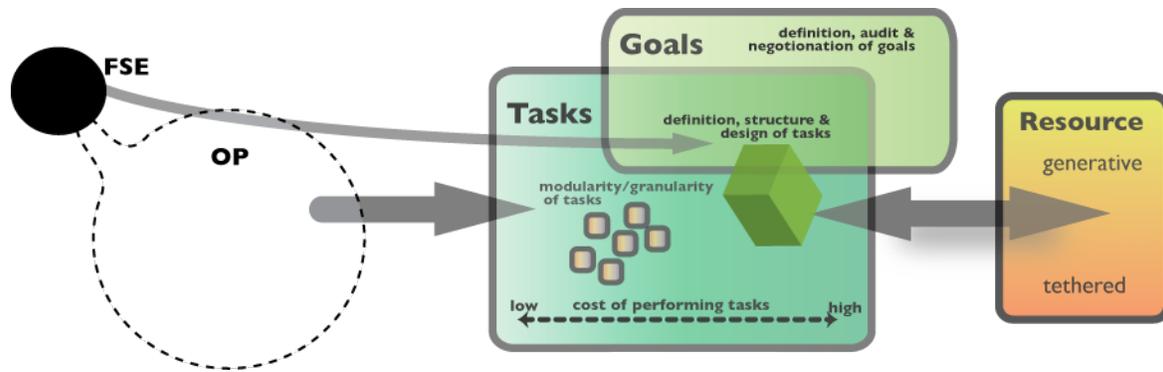
Comparing classic political participation to participation in social media or Free Software or fan fiction today reveals that there is not always a strong coupling between formal organizations and organized publics. Some publics—like civil rights protestors or Iranian protestors—are very loosely coupled, or sometimes completely unconnected to, formal organizations. But examples like social media, free software, or American political campaigns almost always evidence a much tighter coupling between a structuring FSE and a participating OP.

Resources, tasks and goals

The FSE/OP distinction can serve as a starting point for exploring in more detail the *relationship* between the two, and ultimately the way that relationship distributes rights,

power and resources under the label of “participation” or “democratization.” For every FSE/OP there is at least one *resource* valued by both the FSE and the OP. The choice of a deliberately vague term is intended to resist equating the object of value with a technology or consumer product or service—it could just as well be knowledge, volunteer hours, political power or editorial decisions. Perhaps it makes less sense to talk about the shared “resource” of a civil rights movement (attention? political power? critique?) than it does to speak of cases like Wikipedia or Apache Software Foundation, where the resource is a product (software in the case of Apache, collaborative articles in Wikipedia) or process (“liking” or “Digging” as tools of moderation and promotion in Facebook or Digg). The more valuable a resource, and the more clearly identified it is, the more likely there will be Formal Social Enterprises coupled to Organized Publics.

Despite the fact that a great many resources are “free” in one or more senses (*gratis* and free from restrictions), they must nonetheless be actively governed to be of value—anything else is simply an abandoned project. A basic abstract schematic of the structure of organized action can be represented as a process whereby an FSE and OP set goals and engage in tasks in order to produce a resource. (Figure XX)



This abstract diagram represents a set of questions that could be asked, or further specified, of any given instance of participation: what is/are the resource(s)? What rights to a resource do people in an FSE have vs. the rights of those in an OP vs. those of everyone else (the general public)? Who decides goals and who has ultimate authority over a resource? Who manages tasks, assigns them or encourages participation? How modular/granular are tasks? What is the cost of performing a task? Who can use, change, fork or make claims about a resource? Who takes legal responsibility for a resource? Who is the maintainer of last resort? How, for instance, is a piece of free software (governed by a copyleft license) different from a Current TV broadcast (owned and controlled by Current) from an iPhone App (owned by its author but controlled by Apple)?

Zittrain (2008) has refined this approach somewhat by distinguishing *tethered* and *generative* resources. In addition to copyleft licenses, Zittrain's distinction concerns the management of the infrastructure through which resources are available. *Generative* resources are easily available, without the permission of any FSE, for re-use, improvement, or transformation, whereas *tethered resources* are managed at the sole

discretion of the FSE and require either legal or technical permission in order to be modified.

The distinction between goals and tasks is intended to separate out participation in the governance of a project from participation in the outcomes of a project. It is one thing to be invited to design a game for instance, and quite another to be invited to play it. It is one thing to design a strategy for public protest, and another thing to be a participant in that designed protest. Some projects that emphasize participation blend these two activities (as in the Wikipedia “discuss” pages, which can be *de facto* sites of policy discussion) and some try to keep them separate as in the case of online gaming environments and virtual worlds.

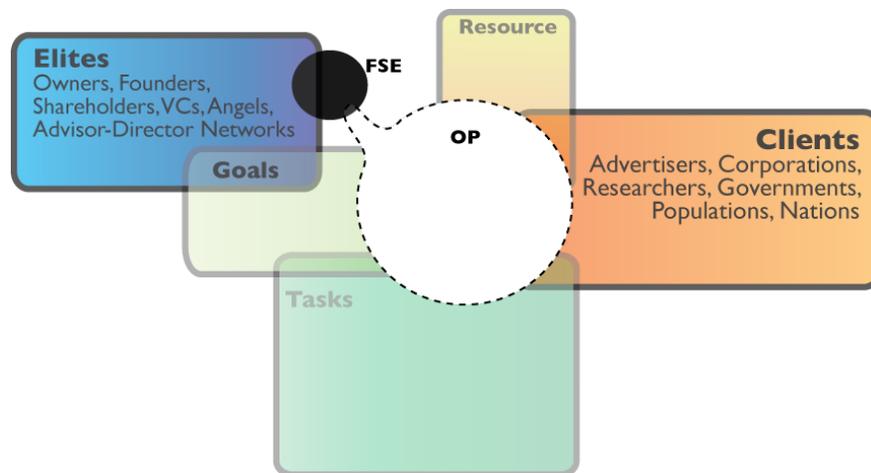
Goals may be implicit or explicit, and tasks can be *voluntary* (self-chosen tasks that require some minimum level of conscious effort), *assigned* or even *involuntary* (tasks which people may not know they are performing). An interesting contrast emerges between a case like the civil rights movement and a Free Software project. In the former, like most social movements, goals are explicit, frequently discussed (integration, suffrage, economic and political self-sufficiency) and often the bases of disagreements about the appropriate means (the tasks) for achieving those goals (NACCP vs. Black Power). In most Free Software projects, by contrast, goals are implicit, diffuse and discussed much less than the practical problems of creating software (the tasks at hand).

But in both cases, the relationship between the FSE and its OP determines the level of involvement in both goal-setting and task-execution.⁴

The Macrostructures of Power

Questions about the structure of participation, or about the resources, goals and tasks, are best directed at the internal workings of specific projects and comparison amongst them. However, when it comes the question of sustainability, profitability and power, a macrostructure of relationships must also be distinguished. Because participation has been made valuable, a number of other roles emerge, specifically those of elites and clients (Fig XXX).

⁴ Tasks can be further be distinguished by their degree of modularity and granularity (Benkler 2006), and the subsequent cost of performing the task. At one extreme of modularity and granularity are tasks whose effort is low, a simple Mechanical Turk task; at the other end are those which are intensive and time-consuming (writing a device driver for Linux, producing a documentary about the Gaza strip for Current TV); there may also be room here for considering the risk involved with completing a task (i.e. joining the lunch counter vs. signing the petition).



On the one hand all successful projects appeal to elites of one form or another: venture capitalists, advisory boards, founders, shareholders, political allies, etc. Such elites may emerge through participation (as frequent contributors to Free Software projects or Wikipedia often do) or approached independently (beseeched in the case of venture capitalists or invited to oversee in the case of advisory boards). Participatory structures differ depending on the nature of how these elites are chosen, elected or organically evolved. Often elites have more direct say in the governance of goals, and less interest in participation at the level of tasks.

On the other hand, *clients* form a category separate from both elites and participants (FSE and OP). Clients are often those for whom participation is valuable but who may or may not provide structures of participation themselves: advertisers, corporations, researchers, non-profits, or governments. YouTube, for instance, has increasingly developed partnerships with clients—entertainment companies, advertisers, universities and so on—that determine specific aspects of how uploaded videos are treated, how or if they will be promoted, branded, or categorized and from and to whom revenue for advertising will flow. Or to take a very different example, the Linux Foundation (which now oversees the

development of the Linux kernel) has clients such as Google and IBM who contribute via donations in order to support the development by programmers (participants) some of whom may well be salaried employees of those companies. Clients influence the structures of participation in ways that are different from the influence of participants themselves, or of elites. It might be said that they have a more direct access to the governance of tasks as opposed to the outcomes of those tasks.

Conclusion

Participation is a plural thing, and its relationship to power is continuously being obscured. The forgoing distinctions are avowedly abstract, but such distinctions are necessary in order to diagnose the problems of our contemporary moment.

“Participating” in Facebook is not the same thing as participating in a Free Software project, to say nothing of participating in the democratic governance of a State. If there are indeed different “participatory cultures” then the work of explaining their differences must be done by thinking concretely about the practices, tools, ideologies and technologies that make them up. Participation is about power, and no matter how “open” a platform is, participation will reach a limit circumscribing power and its distribution. Understanding those limits requires carefully describing the structures of participation, the processes of governance and inclusion, the infrastructure of software, protocols and networks, as well as the rhetoric and expectations of individuals.

Part of this analysis is the testing of cases, and the rectification of distinctions. The Civil Rights movement, for instance, or the Twitter revolution provide material to think with not only in static, generalizing terms, but in specifically historical ones as well. The

media situation of Civil Rights activists in the 1960s is in fact much different from that of the Twitter users in Iran in 2009. For one, participation has been made more tractable and concrete. Protest becomes feedback, deliberation becomes interactivity, voting becomes liking and digging. But to suggest these forms *replace* one another is to miss the ways in which they actually *supplement* each other. We proliferate ways of governing ourselves and others as we proliferate these tools, technologies, platforms or networks—and in the process changes what it formerly meant to interact, vote, and protest. Participating in Twitter, or Facebook or Free Software is not the same thing as participating in democracy, but it does change what democracy will become.

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