Children and youth cultures meet the challenges of participation – interview with Henry Jenkins

As culturas das crianças e dos jovens encontram os desafios da participação – entrevista com Henry Jenkins

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Henry Jenkins, the Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education at the University of Southern California, has been at the centre of several core discussions about the media and communication fields over the last 30 years. *Textual poachers* (Jenkins, 1992/2013) marked a decisive turn in fandom studies, stressing that fans and their (participatory) cultures can and should be discussed independently from the prejudices that had tended to prevail until then. In the early 21st century, while discussions about the concept of convergence focused on its technological destinies and economic imperatives, Henry Jenkins emphasised the need to pay attention to its cultural dimensions (in particular those deriving from, or inspired by, the increasing visibility and strength of participatory cultures). His research culminated with the publication of another book, *Convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2008). Not surprisingly, participation is still an important concept in Henry Jenkins' current research. This interview revisits some of the traditional ideas of his previous works and also discusses some of the most recent ones (such as civic imagination). Present and future theoretical and methodological dilemmas facing anyone trying to make sense of participation, as well as research gaps, are also discussed. The conversation was guided by the specificities of children and youth cultures in view of the challenges of participation.

Pedro Moura (P. M.): The concept of participation – as well as the idea of a (more or less) participatory culture – is central to your work. In a previous article (Jenkins, 2014, p. 271), while discussing what meaningful participation might be, you stated that it is urgent "to develop a more refined vocabulary that allows us to better distinguish between different models of participation and to evaluate where and how power shifts may be taking place". Since then, have we, in the academic field, advanced any further in relation to these objectives? Is it easier, nowadays, to understand and acknowledge the nature of "meaningful participation"?

Henry Jenkins (H. J.): Yes and no. The issue of meaningful participation is if anything more urgent today, due to crisis confronting democracies around the world, than it was in 2014. My blog, *Confessions of an aca-fan*[1] hosted a conversation amongst some

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[1] Available at https://henryjenkins.org/

30 different scholars in 2019 focused around the role of participatory politics in an era of global crisis. In an exchange with Nico Carpentier, I outlined some core questions we might ask about any form of participatory culture (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2019a):

- *Participation in what?* How do the participants understand their own participation – as part of a public, a market, an audience, a fandom, etc.? To what degree do they identify as part of a community or network which is larger than the individual?

- *Participation for whom and with whom?* Who is included and who is excluded? What mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization persist despite the increased opportunities for participation?

- *Participation towards what ends?* What are our participatory activities trying to build? What do we hope to achieve in working together?

- *Participation under what terms?* What constraints are imposed by the technological, economic, political, and legal systems within which we operate?

- *Participation to what degree?* What are the limits on the power that comes from a more participatory culture?

To which Carpentier added three further questions of his own (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2019b):

- *What makes participation possible?* Here, the focus is on the preconditions for participation, whether understood in terms of technological affordances, legal and governmental policies, corporate strategies, social structures, that enable participation.

- *What is the level of participation?* There is some overlap here with my question about "participation to what degree" which asks about how much people are allowed to participate but we could also think of this as a question of scale – how many people are participating.

- *And what does participation then do?* Again, there is some overlap with my question about "participation towards what ends" but I see this question as focused on the actual effects of participation – what changes in the world as a consequence of our participation?

Put these together and we start to have a framework we can use to better understand different forms of participation. We can ask these questions, I would argue, of participation at all levels – from highly informal and local interactions within a subcultural community to global interactions between nations, since in fact, it is through relatively informal modes of participation that we acquire the skills and mentalities which would enable us to participate in deeper, more substantial, forms. Carpentier has developed philosophically rigorous definitions which set borders on what counts as participation. I prefer messier, more fluid, definitions that allow us to identify the spaces where democratic participation is struggling to be born and where its ideal forms have not yet been achieved. But where we agree is that when we talk about forms of participation, we are really pointing to the intersection between democracy and the practices of everyday life.

P. M.: You are a member of The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP)[2]. Considering the network's research, what kinds of participation are we talking about? Is it possible to identify key prevailing trends or is the current situation marked by too many different types of participation?

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[2] The network's website is available at https://ypp.dmlcentral.net/

H. J.: I *was* a member of that network, which unfortunately ended its ten-year mission in 2016 just as the ground shifted under us here in America and many other places around the world. The group defined participatory politics as:

> interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern. Importantly, these acts are not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions. Examples of participatory political acts include starting a new political group online, writing and disseminating a blog post about a political issue, forwarding a funny political video to one's social network, or participating in a poetry slam. (Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh & Rogowski, 2012, p. VI)

Building on that definition, our book, *By any media necessary: the new youth activists* (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik & Zimmerman, 2016) mapped some of the ways that skills learned through participatory culture were being deployed by young people – in this case, mostly in the United States – towards participatory politics and since then, my research group has continued to trace those connections, including a recent case study of the "March for Our Lives" campaign (Jenkins & Lopez, 2018), organized by high school students, to end gun violence. We found that engagement with informal, social and subcultural forms of participation (such as fandom, gaming, crafts communities, religious groups, etc.) enabled youth to develop their own voices as cultural and civic agents, to acquire skills at organizing and mobilizing others. The new forms of participatory politics, which have been led by young activists around the world, display new forms of political organization (which are more horizontal, participatory and networked, often described as "leaderless" but really spaces where any participant can step into a leadership role as needed), new modes of political expression (which draw on popular culture for its vernacular), new tactics (which seek social change through any media necessary) and new political identities (which grow out of intersectional thinking).

We are seeing similar efforts around the world from the students in the streets of Hong Kong to the use of cumbia music as a rally cry in the political struggles in Chile. Since the YPP network disbanded, my research team has been focused more on what we describe as the civic imagination, looking at the ways different social movements imagine the futures they are working to achieve, their own civic agency and identity, their shared links with others in their communities and beyond, the process of political change, and the spaces where their activities occur. This research[3] includes both case studies – as reflected in our recent book, *Popular culture and the civic imagination* (Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro & Shresthova, 2020) – and workshops in communities around the world – as recounted in our other recent book, *Practicing futures* (Shresthova & Peters-Lazaro, in press). Our goal is to develop a cultural theory of political change, understanding the ways that people draw on shared resources (whether religious, folk, popular culture,

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[3] The project's website is available at https://www.civicimaginationproject.org/

or national history) to imagine other possibilities for themselves and to motivate their political action. We are increasingly interested in the civic as the social agreements which members of communities make to each other that enable the struggles over power and resources (i.e. politics) to persist without totally destroying the connections that hold us together, making democracy a possibility. We are interested in how those acts of the imagination may in some case precede or persist after the political structures of democratic participation have been usurped by more totalitarian forces. So, for example, what inspiration do Hong Kong students take from collectively singing "Do you hear the people sing?" from *Les Mis* as an expression of their aspirations for a more democratic culture or how might YouTube comedy provide a residual voice of student protest in Egypt following the collapse of the Arab Spring movement there?

P. M.: What about young people who do not engage in such activities, in particular the peers (e.g. schoolmates) of those who do participate? Has the MacArthur Research Network or any of your works identified any reasons that could explain why such young people were not willing, or able, to become involved in these acts of participation? How did the most participative people make sense of the absence of participation (at least as far as they knew) of other young people like them?

H. J.: First, we did find examples in our research for *By any media necessary: the new youth activists* (Jenkins et al., 2016) where young people who were active fans brought friends and others (who were not necessarily fans) into involvement with the "Harry Potter Alliance", the "Nerdfighters", and other fan activist efforts. Some join simply because they like the community and not necessarily the source materials.

Second, the "Connected Learning" network (Ito et al., 2013; Ito et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2018), also part of the MacArthur Foundation efforts, has spent more time focused on identifying those conditions which allow young people to translate skills, knowledge, and experience gained through participation in informal participatory networks into cultural capital which benefits them at school, work, and elsewhere. In general, their research recognizes the need for adult mentorship, people who are sympathetic to the ways young people benefit from online participation and know enough to offer ethical advice on the best way to deal with the risks and conflicts children and youth may encounter there. Without adult mentorship, some young people may not find their way into networks that engage their interests and passions or learn to deploy those experiences as gateways into other opportunities for growth and learning. Some young people find their mentors from fan or gaming or crafting communities – people who recognize something of themselves in these young people and are there to address some of the bumps along the way. We are starting to understand the many factors which limit young people's degrees of participation – from technological issues of access to the support system which value young people's participation to core literacy skills – but we know less about what might motivate one young person over another given the same conditions to choose to

participate given the opportunity. And we do not yet have a clear sense of how young participants think about youth who are not participating – what forms of peer pressure might point towards participation as opposed to being hostile to the geekier or nerdier aspects of participatory culture.

P. M.: A 17-year-old teenager, Greta Thunberg, is currently able to set, at least in part, the international agenda on the climate emergency. As far as I can see, it seems safe to identify at least two broad reactions: one enthusiastic, amidst more progressive circles, and one antagonistic, namely among more conservative people. How can we make sense of this mixed reaction? For instance, does repeatedly stressing her age as an argument, by commentators from either of these two trends, reveal how unaccustomed we are to listening to, and being confronted by, the inputs of children or teenagers?

H. J.: When I think about the political voices that have inspired me the most in the past year, they have been young people – from Greta to the Parkland high school students to Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in the United States House of Representatives. Here, we see something like what we experienced in the 1960s when young people questioned their elders and demanded a better future for themselves. Yet, you are right that these are some of the groups and individuals who have been most demonized on the right. Our research found that right-wing organizations tend to be more hierarchical, less participatory, less open to active youth voice and engagement, despite rhetoric which suggests they are somehow closer to the people than so called "liberal elites". The right (at least in the U.S. context which we were studying) are more likely to recruit young intellectuals from elite universities into their think tanks than to support young people creating their own organizations to work for social change. The Tea Party which is often put forth as an example of a more participatory movement on the right skewed much older with little to no space for youth leadership. The alt-right has been somewhat more aggressive at recruiting angry young white males from fan discussion forums and gaming platforms, but the conservative political establishment has sought to keep these young people in their place. So, we should not be surprised when right wing commentators tell young activists to go back to school and wait until they are older to engage in the political process. Such comments are consistent with various strategies of voter suppression in the United States which, among other groups, target student populations. For sure, we, whether on the left or the right, do not provide meaningful outlets for young people to share their political concerns with adults which are why these moments where youth leaders break through and disrupt politics as usual are so remarkable. But we are seeing more such moments around the world as a result of young people's active participation in online spaces which amplify their individual voices and make collective action easier. And it is exciting when, for example, Greta emerges at *Time*'s "Person of the Year", because it does suggest the power of these alternative models of political leadership to make a difference in mainstream media conversations – at least some of the time.

P. M.: I would say that another of your key ideas is transversal to this conversation so far – that these informal, interest-driven, and many times online-media-based groups may be viewed as the activities of knowledge communities. Do you agree? Is this concept still able to represent some of the most relevant forms of collective participation? In the case of young people, how do these or other forms of participation relate to more traditional instances of socialisation – such as families or school?

H. J.: The concept of knowledge communities is still very important in understanding the bridge between participatory culture and participatory politics or learning. In a knowledge community, nobody knows everything but people pool resources, alerting each other to new developments, evolve shared vernaculars for expressing their shared concepts, and mobilize quickly in responses to changes in their environment. This is precisely what we find when we look at youth organizations that have been effective at moving young people towards activism. For example, we've seen young people in the "Dreamer" movement or the "March for Our Lives" movement track state and local laws which are under debate and direct collective responses and resources towards sites where they may do the most good. The "March for Our Lives" movement has been successful at changing more than 55 gun laws across 26 states (Jenkins & Lopez, 2018). The "Black Lives Matter" movement also operates as a knowledge community which identifies patterns of racialized police violence by using a shared hashtag to accumulate information about local examples which might have otherwise escaped notice but collectively, point towards systematic problems. In terms of your last question, I would not want to argue that these networks replace other instruments of socialization, though they no doubt do for some youth who might otherwise fall through the cracks. They are effective in part because such groups attract youth and adults, alike, and thus facilitate a range of informal and formal mentorship relationships which would not occur otherwise. This is why panic about adult threats to youth online are so tragic. We all know that it takes a village to raise a child, as the old expression goes, but sometimes we are so busy protecting children from the village that we fail to recognize and support the values of these kinds of cross-generational exchanges. If we acknowledge the power of these kinds of supportive relationships, we need not see the online world as a threat to schools and families. The "Connected Learning" network (Ito et al., 2018) have offered us models of how learning can take place at the intersections between school, home, and peer culture.

P. M.: As I already mentioned, some of your research into youth participation and activism departs from fandom and contents such as transmedia stories; from the premise that attempts to participate in this sort of popular culture can be viewed as a threshold before entering into other kinds of participation (Jenkins, 2008, 2012a). After all these years of research, what overall conclusions do you draw? Are non-fans also using, in any way, the participatory opportunities provided by pop culture?

H. J.: This is where our concept of the *civic imagination* gains some of its power. Fan activism represents one form which the civic imagination may take, where people tap the infrastructure established through fandom in order to organize for collective action. I have been watching a recent case in point. J.K. Rowling recently made some statements that have been read as reflecting prejudice against transgender people. The news quickly spread online as a consequence of the existing network of activists that has grown up around Harry Potter through the years. And Jackson Bird (2019), formerly of the "Harry Potter Alliance", wrote a powerful editorial in *The New York Times* expressing his disappointment as someone who came out as trans through the support of the Harry Potter fan community. Jackson is one of a generation of young activist who found their political voice through Harry Potter and are now working for social change across a range of other social causes. That shared history makes it possible for these groups to work together when the times call for intersectional action. But fandom is only one kind of participatory culture through which people can acquire skills to work towards social change. And cult media represents simply one source from which activists may draw shared vocabulary through which to express their vision for a better world. In some cases, memes are taking root in one community and spreading outward across the culture. In many cases, protests deploy a broad range of popular mythologies in their signage and speech. All of this is to say that fandom represented my starting point for exploring these connections but today, everywhere we look, politics is being shaped by expectations of participation and language drawn from popular culture. This is touching many people who would not call themselves fans *per se* but who are inspired through even casual consumption of popular culture to see the world through different eyes. And while we see popular culture as a key vernacular for today's young activists, we also see forms of activism that take roots through faith-based organizations, whether immigrant rights groups rooted in the American Muslim community or anti-poverty campaigns emerging from southern churches.

P. M.: The public dissonance between the most recognisable author of a transmedia franchise and part of the latter's fandom is something that deeply resonates with my own condition as an aca-fan, to use another of your expressions. This recent example within the Harry Potter franchise, discussed in a quality newspaper such as *The New York Times*, or, something that is closer to me, the controversies and accusations (on both sides, from misogyny to hidden agendas) surrounding the reasons for the divisive reception towards Disney's *Star Wars*, show how much visibility fandom has achieved since the publication of your seminal work *Textual poachers* (Jenkins, 1992/2013). As you have mentioned, these stories may fuel participation, by inspiring actions, by providing symbolic resources, etc.. But is there a dark side to any of this?

H. J.: We now have a deep body of scholarship showing the broad array of literacy, social, civic, and technical skills which fandom can help to foster (Jenkins, 2019). But

I am as concerned as anyone about some of the increasingly toxic aspects of contemporary fan cultures. The "#gamergate" controversy, which directed mostly male anger against women's participation within the gaming world (as players, designers, and critics), heightened our awareness of these tensions around race, gender, sexuality, and other differences within these online communities (Gray & Leonard, 2018). The mostly white male backlash against *The Last Jedi* is another example of how these communities can act out against anything they regard as a threat to their entrenched privilege (Proctor, 2019). Some research (Bay, 2018) suggests that these tensions are being fed by outside groups – Russian hackers, for example, seeking to tap wedge issues in American culture in anticipation of the 2016 elections, alt-right and white supremecist groups seeking to recruit younger white males have both been documented as playing a role in intensifying and sustaining *The Last Jedi* controversy.

There has also been a tendency to over-state some of these tensions through news coverage, focusing attention on the most hateful aspects of fandom, while under-reporting the efforts of fans to support more inclusive representation, say. Right now, for example, I am watching fans rally around the actress Kelly Marie Tran, since she was first bullied aggressively online during *The Last Jedi* debates and now, many feel, she was sidelined from *The Rise of Skywalker* as a result of the Disney corporation's efforts to appease the angry fan boys. We should be concerned about these darker sides of participatory culture, but we should also be aware of the ways fandom has become a testing ground for alternative ways of representing race and sexuality (Jenkins, 2017) or an advocacy group in support of greater diversity in the entertainment industry (Lopez, 2012). Those of us who care about meaningful participation need to speak out when certain fan or gamer communities turn toxic, but we also need to help contextualize such developments so that they do not taint all forms of participatory culture. Again, we need to develop a deeper understanding of different forms of participation as we seek to help young people find their ways into communities that may best support their interests and aspirations.

P. M.: In a previous case study with Portuguese young people, developed within the framework of the "Transmedia Literacy" project, the authors found a discrepancy between formal and informal learning (Pereira, Fillol & Moura, 2019). While pop culture content, such as videos by YouTubers, were relevant learning sources, they were never discussed during classes. The students' informal learning practices were not valued or even referred to; some young people also considered that their teachers' lack of knowledge or interest regarding their media practices was perfectly "natural". Does your research, in a context that is distinct from the Portuguese context, also suggest that media (and a large part of children/youth cultures) lies outside the classroom?

H. J.: Yes, this is a concern which has been raised again and again. School culture has been shaped by older models of politics (ones which emphasize governmental structures rather than grassroots social movements) and culture (ones which stress

traditional high culture rather than popular culture). Some of these constraints come from a good place such as the desire to make the schoolhouse a non-commercial space which leads some educators to distrust popular culture as mass culture. Even from that perspective, though, these attitudes are of limited use since they do not provide a meaningful context for fostering media literacy as a set of skills which encourage young people to discern the motives and messages coming from the media industries. But they seem progressively out of touch with a world where young people are finding their voice and fostering change through their meaningful engagement with networked communications and their creative remixing of popular culture resources. It is important for young people to learn from other youth around the world who are taking media in their own hands and using it as tools for social change. The current situation can be profoundly disempowering since young people are taught to feel guilty about strategies that are successful for them outside the classroom, to distrust their own judgements and devalue their own participation under the withering eyes of their teachers.

P. M.: Participation and production are dimensions of the European Commission's definition of media literacy, alongside more classical concerns such as access, use, and critical understanding (Recommendation 2009/625/EC). However, assessing and understanding different kinds of production – distinguishing degrees of commitment, production values, awareness and critical thinking, this time in relation to young people's own creative works, etc. – can be a challenging task for researchers (Pereira & Moura, 2019). Once again, we are talking about meaningfulness: what a meaningful creation can be, and how to recognise and make sense of it, from the researcher's perspective, when the corresponding cultural codes may separate such works from young people. What are the challenges of studying young people's production practices?

H. J.: The questions you ask here could not be more urgent. We need to search beyond those kinds of informal learning communities that look most like the forms of knowledge that adults already value. Such networks are also apt to be the communities that attract students who already benefit from the resources of conventional education. If we are not careful, support for these kinds of informal learning opportunities may simply be another kind of privilege enjoyed by the middle and upper classes. We should also be careful about imposing structures that transform the mechanisms for reward and advancement in these communities into those which are adult-controlled and policed. This is a reason why I have historically opposed the trend towards badging or credentialization which was a fad in the digital media and learning world a few years back (Jenkins, 2012b). Again, such mechanisms could be off-putting to those who often feel marginalized or discouraged within school culture and need alternative spaces where they can thrive and learn. Ideally, we can be open-minded enough to ask questions about why activities or materials that may not necessarily be meaningful to us may matter very much to young people, especially those on the margins or at risk. This approach, as you

suggest, requires us to learn to read cultural codes which may not be simply alien to us but which were designed to be cryptic in our eyes as a way of protecting a space for youth autonomy. We need to understand before we seek to assess the forms of learning which takes place here. The ultimate judge of their meaningfulness rests with the young people involved and the ultimate challenge for educators is to listen to what they have to say about their value, even when the youth themselves do not speak the language of school culture very fluently.

P. M.: One of the articles I mentioned earlier (Pereira et al., 2019), as well as some of your most recent works (e.g. Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro & Shresthova, 2020; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik & Zimmerman, 2016), are more or less based on case studies. Is it possible (or even desirable) to go beyond these narrowly focused approaches? What kinds of methodological approaches do you envision for future research into children and youth cultures?

H. J.: Thankfully, we have researchers who are approaching this question from both directions – larger generalizations give us shared vocabulary we can use to draw meaningful comparisons across case studies where-as case studies allow us to deal with the complexities and contradictions that arise as we attempt to apply our theories. My own bias as a researcher is towards case-study based approaches, as I enjoy the process of discovery that comes from looking closely at something which is happening on the ground. Through these case studies, I can find examples of cultural and political innovation and reminders of the agency of ordinary people to collectively change their own conditions as they negotiate with real world constraints. Our theories are always going to be inadequate before the messy business of everyday life and so we test and refined them through close engagement with case studies. But we often need those theories of templates around which to structure our descriptions of what we observe and as means of communicating our discoveries to other researchers who are asking similar questions. As we do that work, we also need a mixture of critique (which helps to identify where current circumstances fail to meet basic human needs) and advocacy (which allows us to articulate alternatives to the *status quo*). There's a tendency for progressive academics to overvalue critique at the expense of advocacy, where-as I see my work as seeking to map and argue on behalf of creative alternatives that better address our desires, hopes, and aspirations for a better world. I see that work as counterbalancing the pessimism which is so often the unintended consequence of an academic discourse focused almost exclusively on critique.

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Acknowledgements

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