The Many Different Ways of doing Journalism. An Interview with Nico Carpentier

Nico Carpentier: *"We should acknowledge that there are many different ways of doing journalism, and many different identities possible"*. Leading media participation scholar argues that *"arts and media can give voice to people but at the same time they can be radically oppressive."*

Interview by Dinara Tokbaeva for JOCIS

JOCIS interviewed Nico Carpentier on the elements necessary for a healthy media ecology; the relationship between media, arts and democracy; and recent trends in European academic research on media.

We're doing a series of interviews with academics about media. It is interesting to talk about social and political aspects of media participation. You've written a book on the topic in 2011. How relevant is it nowadays?

Nico Carpentier: The book *Media and Participation*[1] was published in 2011. It contains a lot of work from earlier periods that I was updating. It covers several years. What the book was trying to do is create an idea and a particular way of looking at participation. There is a lot of debate about this notion of participation simply because it's a political concept. And political concepts are part of ideological struggles themselves, which also sips into our academic work. We too are not outside ideology, of course. And the main struggle - I would like to argue again - is whether we use an approach which I would call a sociological approach; where we use participation as taking part. Or whether we use a more political studies

approach where we see participation as co-deciding and exercising power. These are very different approaches, and there also translate in different academic definitions of participation. It simply is a matter of what to include when talking of participation. And the book, in that sense, is at the essence of this debate: it defends the second approach and the definition that participation is decision-making. It also explains some consequences of that approach because then you have to acknowledge that participation is not the same as interaction, and that participation is not the same as access. These are very different things. I argue that we should talk of participation when there is a moment of decision-making involved. So, it's a restrictive definition. But then we should also acknowledge that there are different participatory intensities. There are very different levels of participation. We can also find this idea, for instance, with Sherry Arnstein, who called it a ladder of citizen

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participation. There is more than one way to share power. I distinguished between more minimalist versions of participation and more maximalist versions of participation. What I've argued is that in society there is a permanent struggle. Different groups want to minimise participation. Others want to maximise it. If we want to understand participation, we have to look at this as an ideological struggle. That's the main idea of the book. Is it still relevant? Yes, because the struggle hasn't changed. Is this relevant within the context of media? Yes, because a lot of our colleagues are putting an emphasis on social media as necessarily participatory, and we might need to be more careful

What are the current perceptions about media and participation in Europe? What are the key debates related to this political-ideological struggle that appeared since the book was published?

One of the key trends, obviously, is the rise of social media. What has happened is that we've started to focus on social media as an ultimate site of participation. The ultimate fantasy has been realised, some seem to think. Historically, that is simply not accurate. We, as academics, have to be a bit more careful, as we have too easily forgotten that there may be many different versions of media participation, many ways of organising participation. If we critically analyse this fantasy that we reached the point of full participation, I don't think we should accept it. When you start analysing the participatory intensities of social media, you should immediately take it into consideration that we don't get to decide on the policies of social media like Facebook. It's Facebook that decides, as a company. Participation in Facebook, as an organisation, is very modest. There are attempts to involve users and users have tried to engage with Facebook, using

activist strategies, yes. But users don't have the strong power position towards Facebook as a company. So there are these contemporary debates on participation that are more recent than the book.

The second main change is that the political context has changed. It's a dramatic and deeply problematic change. Our societies are getting more dragged into the logic of violent conflict. The way that our societies have responded to terrorist activities is a reason for concern. The fact and the ways that western countries are getting involved in wars, in different continents, is deeply troubling. And that is only strengthened with the coldness that Europe has exhibited in dealing with refugees. So we've evolved into a much harsher society, a society that is a society driven by anxiety. That's not a fertile ground for participatory logics. It pushes us into stronger leadership models. It pushes us into non-participatory models, with people looking for leaders that need to be strong and decisive. This is not helping to further the democratisation of our society. It is actually inversing it. Some of these conflicts were already there when the book was written, but the anxiety and anti-democratic consequences have increased considerably in the past years.

Which elements, in your opinion, are necessary for the existence of a healthy media ecology for creative people to think and create within?

There are so many elements. I can only share a few modest ideas. Focusing on the media field itself, I would argue that diversity is a key component, both in stimulating creative work but also in ensuring social relevance, which I think is extremely important for media field in order not to be disconnected from society. So, one of the issues with diversity we have in Europe, but also more and more
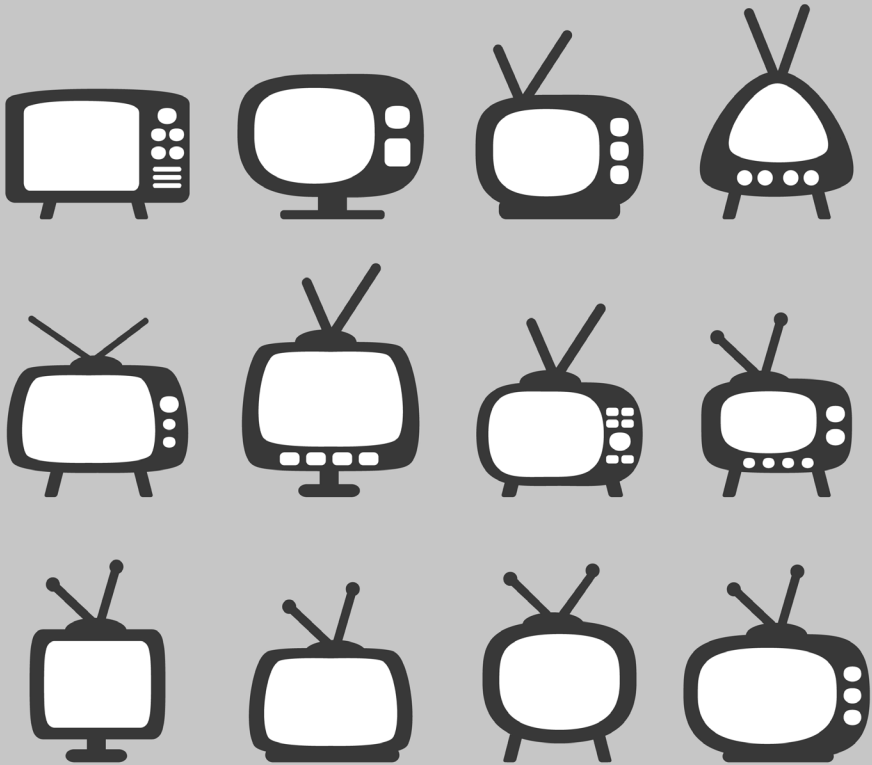
globally, is that particular ways of doing media are very hegemonic. The ways that we expect media professionals to behave and the ways that media professionals identify themselves is rigid. And here, I would argue that we need more diverse practices and at diverse identities. These diverse practices and identities still need to be committed to a number of core values. A very simple illustration of this is that we should probably talk about journalisms, in plural, and not journalism. We should acknowledge that there are many different ways of doing journalism, and many different identities possible. I, at least partially, come from community media studies background so I am interested in alternative journalisms. I think these alternative journalisms are precious and really complement the more mainstream versions of journalism, that are, for instance, very much driven by the classic notion of objectivity. But it's not the only model of journalism that qualifies as good journalism. There are many variations.

And to use my new book, *The Discursive Material-Knot: Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation*[2], as example. The book is based on an ethnographic study of one particular community media organisation in Cyprus, called the Cyprus Community Media Centre (CCMC) and their community radio station, MYCYradio. It's a study of how that radio station functions in a participatory way, how it allows Cypriots and non-Cypriots to express themselves, complementing the Cypriot mainstream media that are very elite-driven. In Cyprus, this is particularly important. Cyprus is a divided island. The two main communities, the Turkish Cypriots and the Greek Cypriots, live in different parts of the island, divided

by a buffer zone which is controlled by the United Nations. The CCMC is literally in that buffer zone. It is giving voice to these two and many other communities on the island. In that sense, it's a wonderful example of what alternative media can do in a context where mainstream media fail. In many cases, mainstream media fail to be participatory and they also fail to contribute to peace-building, become of the nationalist sentiments they communicate.[3]

So, we have to think about different levels of knowledge, plural, different levels of expertise, plural. This applies to all media, whether it concerns traditional mainstream media, social media or alternative, participatory media. Media contribute in some cases to the destruction of democracy itself, they are serving hyper-nationalistic agendas, organising exclusionary practises, and are sometimes using symbolic violence. Think about the tabloids or the radical, right-wing social media, where apparently, it's normal to create new enemies and argue for their destruction. We need media that are committed, not only to truth, but also to justice, to human rights and to peace. Again, there is a broad range of examples that raise concerns nowadays, and we do have a problem with creating a healthy media environment that is democratic and that allows for others to be different.

What is the relation between democracy, arts and media – how can they cooperate and share knowledge?

I've just come back from the Documenta[4] arts exhibition which was hosted this year in two cities, Athens and Kassel. Documenta

2 - http://nicocarpentier.net/dmk/

3 - Nico Carpentier is currently curating the Respublika! arts festival/exhibition: http://respublikafest.org/, in Cyprus

4 - http://www.documenta14.de/en/

is very much about political art. One of the key connections between democracy, arts and media is that the latter two can be locations of critical, alternative ways of thinking within society. Arts and media offer that opportunity, which allows them to support democracy. Of course, they are different, they use different repertoires and languages, but they have a similar critical potential. Self-expression is a key component of democracy. Without people speaking out, we would not be able to have democracy. What both art and media can do, at least potentially, is to produce more inclusive discourses. The Documenta exhibition, for instance, strikingly had a lot of voices from the Global South, voices that we rarely hear in the West and that are important to be heard.

We shouldn't forget, though, that arts and media can give voice to people but at the same time they can be radically oppressive; they can restrict ideas; and they can be tools of propaganda. So, they have creative potential but also destructive potential. Our job, as citizens, is to strengthen arts, media and academia and try to counter the destructive potential. That's our task, as citizens, which is becoming more and more important.

What are the recent trends in academic media research based on ECREA mailing list serve you are running?

I started the commlist[5] before ECREA itself was founded. It's driven by an idea that we need to learn what others are doing in a European context. Europe is defined in a very open way - what is relevant to European scholars. The commlist is driven by the idea that we need to exchange knowledge. In order to exchange ideas, we need to know about the different events, publications, but also job opportunities.

We should be intellectually and physically mobile. We shouldn't be locked in one particular location for our entire lives. We should use the opportunities to travel that the academia provides us with. Having that information circulating, at the European level was very important to me, and it's one of the reasons why I started the commlist. My second point is that we also need to acknowledge that we are members of the Media and Communication Studies field. It is important to identify ourselves as such. One of the things I like about the list is that it shows how active and diverse we are as Media and Communication Studies scholars. We do a lot and we should take pride in ourselves as being part of our field (and discipline).

The commlist also gives an idea about what is changing in our field. The most important and reassuring change is in the increase in job opportunities. A few years ago, the job offers disappeared. And in the past year, we've seen an increase in employment opportunities at different levels. It is extremely good news. It is very important, especially for young scholars, that there are good job offers again.

Looking at content, what we learn from the list is that not so many new large themes come up, but that the existing fields of interest, within the community of media and communication scholars, are strengthening. For instance, journalism studies, political communication, and audience studies have strong positions. Of course, we've seen the rise of social media studies, and we've also seen this field becoming more critical and less celebratory. It's a very good thing that there is much more critical reflection brought into this field now.

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5 - http://commlist.org/

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