

Participatory Cultures and Implications for Theological Education

by Eileen D. Crowley

INTRODUCTION

In 1900, George Eastman put into the hands of ordinary people a cardboard and wood box with which they could easily capture the moments of their lives. It was the Brownie box camera. It cost \$1 and contained pre-loaded film, enough for 100 images. Even children could operate this camera. Produced by the Eastman Kodak Company, The Brownie created a mass market for amateur photography and introduced the 2 ¼-inch-square “snapshot.” Eastman’s slogan for this very popular product was, “You press the button, we do the rest.” Professional and amateur photographers today often credit the gift of an inexpensive Brownie camera in their childhood as the spark for their ongoing interest in photography.

Today, many children in the U.S. and other countries are snapping their first photos on cell phones. By 2003, more people were buying cameraphones than cameras. As of 2006, half of the world’s cell phones contained digital cameras for making still and video images. By 2008, more than a billion cell phones had an image-taking option.

One hundred years after the release of the Brownie, the creation of the World Wide Web and the introduction of web browsers that followed have made the possibility of digital communication of media art an option for ordinary people. Not only is it easy to focus and press the button, the digital images appear immediately on-screen, can be edited if desired, and can then be instantly e-mailed to family and friends or uploaded to online webalbums, Facebook, or other social media sites.

The ease with which today’s consumers can create digital still and moving images and share them online is a factor in the development of what media and cultural studies scholars refer to as “participatory culture.” It is a confusing term, since people hearing it can respond, “Why, of course, we participate in making our culture. So what?” The significance they are missing is this: Before the advent of digital cameras, of cameraphones, of software programs and applications for photo, audio, and video editing, and of online means for sharing digital media, the means of media production and distribution were primarily in the hands of media companies and media professionals. Those companies and professionals were the *producers*, and most people were simply expected to be *consumers* of their work. However, because of digital technologies, the ranks of producers now can include you, your children, and your grandchildren.

Today, the fruits of an amateur media producer’s creative labors might appear on a blog, a webalbum, YouTube, or other social media platforms. Today ordinary people can be their own media producers and distributors. Not only that, they can also use today’s digital communications technologies and networks to participate in other ways in this digitally connected culture. They can now distribute and sell their own music. They can serve as citizen journalists and report on disasters as they are happening. They can document and map voter suppression, disaster relief fraud, and the advance of contagious disease in an area. They can raise awareness, create online organizations, and raise money for people and causes they have never met. They can organize protests that topple nations. They can engage people in conversation in digital ministry and invite them to create media arts for liturgy and faith formation. All this is possible because the tools of today’s participatory culture can be literally “at hand,” as close as someone’s smartphone, e-tablet, or laptop.

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Two scholars who have been tracking and commenting upon this new empowerment of ordinary people are Henry Jenkins and Clay Shirky. Authors of a new college textbook on participatory cultures (plural, that is) have also provided insights into this phenomenon. In this essay I will introduce these scholars and suggest implications of participatory culture for theological education's students, faculty, and librarians.

THE WORK OF HENRY JENKINS

The best portal for entering into the vast field of participatory culture is the website of the very prolific scholar Henry Jenkins, "Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins."¹ In this blog he introduces himself as the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. He began teaching at USC in Fall 2009 after spending the previous decade as the Director of the [MIT Comparative Media Studies Program](#) and as the Peter de Florez Professor of Humanities.

Jenkins' blog entries begin in June 2006. His archive of entries is helpfully organized for those looking for a particular topic related to participatory culture. He offers a list of links related to thirty-two topics, projects, and researchers in the field. As you will see from a scan of the titles of his blog entries, Jenkins' research interests are extensive and international, his network of colleagues discussed and interviewed are interdisciplinary, his writing style is playful while being very informative, and the number of books he has written and edited and the projects with which he has been associated might make one wonder how a single person could be involved in so much.

Of particular pertinence to theological educators, though, is actually a very small book Jenkins produced as the principle investigator for a research project sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation. It is *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (2009).² This white paper has very big implications for educators of any age group.³ While this report is focused on the education of children and teens, I see the implications of its findings for theological educators of adults and for ministers and religious educators who teach and communicate with any age group. Its executive summary sets the stage: "According to a recent study from the Pew Internet and American Life project, more than one-half of all teens have created media content, and roughly one-third of teens who use the Internet have shared content they produced. In many cases, these teens are actively involved in what we are calling *participatory cultures*."⁴ The report goes on to offer this definition of a participatory culture as one with:

1. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others,
3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,

¹ Henry Jenkins, "Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins," <http://henryjenkins.org>.

² Henry Jenkins with Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigle, Katie Clinton, and Alice J. Robinson, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009).

³ Jenkins serialized this paper in his weblog. The entire document is also available online as one of the eleven MacArthur-funded "Reportson Digital Media and Learning," <http://www.macfound.org/programs/learning>. Jenkins is also the principal investigator for Project New Media Literacies (NML), a group which originated as part of the MacArthur Digital Media and Learning Initiative.

⁴ Jenkins, *Confronting*, xi.

4. members who believe that their contributions matter, and
5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).⁵

Many subsequent writers have latched onto this definition and repeat it in whole or part. To the above definition the report adds this caveat:

Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued.

In such a world, many will only dabble, some will dig deeper, and still others will master the skills that are most valued within the community. The community itself, however, provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation.⁶

To engage in today's participatory culture, the white paper reports, young people need to master a set of new social skills and cultural competencies.⁷ The researchers, though, point to three threats to young people's being able to gain these skills and competencies:

- **The participation gap:** unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow.
- **The transparency problem:** challenges young people face in learning to recognize the ways that media shape perceptions of the world.
- **The ethics challenge:** the breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants.⁸

While *Confronting the Challenges* is directed toward what K-12 educators and social policy makers need to do about the education of children and teens, I suggest that these same social skills and cultural competencies need to be taught to graduate students in our schools of theology and ministry and in our seminaries. While some of our graduate schools have "digital natives" in their population (born after 1982), in many schools the larger population is made up of "digital immigrants" (born before 1982). Many graduates of our seminaries and schools of ministry serve in communities whose population is at a serious disadvantage because of the "participation gap," whose young people and their parents have not had the advantage of learning new media literacy skills, and whose members would benefit from being more skilled in ethical media-making and media interpretation related to civic discourse. However, they are not the only population for whom this report has implications. The faculty at most schools of theology and ministry is comprised of "digital immigrants" who learned well the pedagogies of their academic mentors. They may have more recently learned how to teach distance education courses, but they may not have been brought up to date on pedagogies being developed by researchers and teachers, such as those involved in [Project New Media Literacies](#), an organization whose tagline is "learning in a participatory culture" and whose banner's key words are "create, circulate, connect, collaborate." They most likely are not familiar with

⁵ Jenkins, *Confronting*, 5-6.

⁶ Jenkins, *Confronting*, 6.

⁷ They are play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation. Jenkins, *Confronting*, xi-xiv. These terms are unpacked through examples provided in the course of the report and throughout Jenkins' many books and ongoing blog.

⁸ Jenkins, *Confronting*, xii-xiii.

the resources offered by the [Participatory Culture Foundation](#) and other non-profit groups that are trying to close the participation gap and to provide access to media for people living with disabilities. Given that faculty at schools of ministry and theology will increasingly have classrooms – face-to-face and online – that include more and more “digital natives,” they need to be introduced to the pedagogies appropriate for teaching in a participatory culture even if the insights are being offered by teachers and researchers now working at the K-12 level.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURES

Henry Jenkins’ broad definition of “participatory culture” is helpful in that it includes so many possible aspects of our culture. He sees the continually evolving and expanding landscape of our participatory culture. For the rest of us, understanding participatory culture is like the Indian fable of the six blind men each touching one part of an elephant in order to describe it. Our view of participatory culture is limited to where we stand. To help broaden our view is the task of a new interdisciplinary textbook, *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, edited by Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (2013). Its multiple authors sort out the diverse facets of participatory culture that have arisen from “the seismic shifts” in digital technology that are now integral to today’s media landscape “in which knowledge is originated, created, distributed, and evaluated in radically new ways.”⁹ Delwiche and Henderson, two communications professors, have dedicated this collection “to everyone who believed in the power of participation, long before the rise of the Internet.”¹⁰ In their introduction, they immediately cite the 2006 white paper funded by the MacArthur Foundation (cited above) and the definition that report provides. They note that the Foundation spent \$50 million to launch this initiative to explore “the ways digital media were transforming the lives of young people.”¹¹

To date, communication scholars and media literacy educators have focused primarily on the implications of participatory creative cultures, but this is just one aspect of a much larger cultural movement. Our world is being transformed by participatory knowledge cultures in which people work together to collectively classify, organize, and build information – a phenomenon that the philosopher Pierre Lévy characterizes as the emergence of collective intelligence.¹²

Beyond the educational world, “We are also witnessing the accelerated growth of participatory economic and political cultures.”¹³

The authors call participatory culture “an emergent, interdisciplinary project” and then present an excellent historical overview of “Four Phases of Participatory Culture,” with comments about the aspects of the culture that have attracted the attention of scholars.¹⁴ “Phase One. Emergence (1985-1993)” included the entry of personal computers into people’s homes and offices, the advent of design software and laser printers that made self-publication easier, the growth of a nascent computer subculture, and the possibility of creating “virtual communities.” During “Phase Two. Waking up to the Web (1994-1998),” web browsers made surfing the net easier, and technology companies introduced web-based electronic mail, Yahoo, Amazon, Craigslist, eBay, and Google. “Phase Three.

⁹ Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, ed., *The Participatory Cultures Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 2013), i.

¹⁰ Delwiche and Henderson, *Handbook*, v.

¹¹ Delwiche and Henderson, *Handbook* 3.

¹² Delwiche and Henderson, *Handbook*, 3.

¹³ Delwiche and Henderson, *Handbook*, 4.

¹⁴ Delwiche and Henderson, *Handbook*, 4-7.

Push-button Publishing (1999-2004)” involved the rise of user-friendly publishing systems, such as Blogger and LiveJournal, and the emergence of social media platforms, including Napster, the iPod, Second Life, MySpace, Yelp, and Facebook. Researchers like Jenkins studied online communities devoted to popular culture and the phenomenon of increasingly complex video gaming. During “Phase Four. Ubiquitous Connections (2005-2011),” people took advantage of widespread broadband Internet connections to engage in sharing videos on YouTube and to produce other user-generated media for diverse personal and civic purposes. New technology – new smartphones and the iPad – added to what the editors describe as “a revolution.” The editors then present essays by scholars from a wide range of disciplines on understanding fan cultures, leveraging participatory creativity, building cultures of knowledge, fostering participatory civic cultures, encouraging participatory activism, rethinking education in the age of participatory culture, and challenging the boundaries of participatory culture.

This college textbook would provide a way for theological educators and graduate theological students to dip into an aspect of participatory culture pertinent to their interests and then to follow the literature references provided to go more deeply into some aspect of this cultural phenomenon.

THE WORK OF CLAY SHIRKY

Clay Shirky, a social media theorist and journalist, is a distinguished writer in residence and assistant arts professor at New York University. He introduces his students and his readers to what can happen when people voluntarily connect on the Internet to do something positive together. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (2008) provides story after story of collaborative publishing, production, non-institutional charitable fundraising, collective action, and other ways people are using the Internet to connect to solve social dilemmas.¹⁵

He followed this work with *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers into Collaborators* (2010) about how “we no longer need to ask for help or permission from professionals to say things in public.”¹⁶ This change in media access and production capability has triggered social change. “This ability to speak publicly and to pool our capabilities is so different from what we’re used to that we have to rethink the basic concept of media: it’s not just something we consume, it’s something we use. As a result, many of our previously stable concepts about media are now coming unglued.”¹⁷ He points to research that indicates that media practices have changed as more and more people, especially young people, are spending less and less time viewing broadcast or cable television and devoting more and more time to connecting with others on their computers and personal devices.¹⁸ Because we are now connected through the Internet, “One thing that makes the current age remarkable is that we can now treat free time as a general social asset that can be harnessed for large, communally created projects, rather than as a set of individual minutes to be whiled away one person at a time.”¹⁹ The term Shirky gives for “the free time of the world’s educated citizens in the aggregate” is “cognitive surplus.”²⁰

The social uses of our new media tools have been a big surprise, in part because the possibility of these uses wasn’t implicit in the tools themselves. A whole generation had grown up with personal technology

¹⁵ Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

¹⁶ Clay Shirky, *How Technology Makes Consumers into Collaborators* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 52.

¹⁷ Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 52.

¹⁸ Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 11.

¹⁹ Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 10.

²⁰ Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 9.

from the portable radio through the PC, so it was natural to expect them to put the new media to personal use as well. But the use of a social technology is much less determined by the tool itself; when we use a network, the most important asset we get is access to one another. We want to be connected to one another, a desire that the social surrogate of television deflects, but one that our use of social media actually engages.²¹

In both books, Shirky gives examples from around the world of Internet-enabled collective action, from the creation of open-source software and Wikipedia to the tracking of outbreaks of ethnic violence and voter suppression. When theological educators speak of the Internet, I wonder whether they ever cite these examples. I could imagine engaging ministry students in theological reflection on the Holy Spirit moving through these online collaborators. But that can only happen if theological educators read the work of Carl Shirky or watch his TED presentations.²²

Henry Jenkins and Clay Shirky tend to see participatory cultures from the proverbial glass-half-full perspective. They call for people to take responsibility for their part in today's participatory culture, to find ways to give disadvantaged youth and adults access to participatory culture, and to improve our understanding of and ability to interpret what we may encounter within the matrix of the many participatory cultures that Delwiche and Henderson present.

Alongside books about participatory culture, though, every theological library should carry the work of experts on the topic of how we engage with technology and each other, in particular, Sherry Turkle and Howard Rheingold. Sherry Turkle is Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT and the founder and current director of the [MIT Initiative on Technology and Self](#). I recommend her thought-provoking *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011).²³ Her research findings and provocative questions should prompt theological educators, students, and librarians to face tough questions about the impact of their own media practices on their relationships, personal and communal. Howard Rheingold, a researcher and commentator on modern communications media and the person who coined the term “virtual community,” has been writing about our interaction with new technologies for three decades. His *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (2012) gives pointers on “how to make use of online tools without being overloaded with too much information” and how we “can use digital media so that they make us empowered participants rather than passive receivers and grounded, well-rounded people rather than multitasking basket cases.”²⁴ Who of us doesn't need that help?²⁵

I recommend that any theological library have available “how-to” books on the new media literacies and cultural competencies.²⁶ Two books I bought based on Henry Jenkins' blog recommendation are Jessica K. Parker, *Teaching*

²¹ Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 14.

²² Shirky's TED presentations are available at http://www.ted.com/speakers/clay_shirky.html.

²³ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

²⁴ Howard Rheingold, *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012). Summary quotation is from the book jacket.

²⁵ For summaries of their latest work both scholars can be viewed giving talks at TED conferences, <http://www.ted.com>. “TED is a small nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading. It started out (in 1984) as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: Technology, Entertainment, Design.” http://answers.wikia.com/wiki/What_does_the_acronym_T.E.D._mean.

²⁶ I recognize that these kinds of books are a problem because libraries would need to keep buying updated versions of them as technology options change. Somehow, though, this kind of basic “how-to” information needs to be made available in theological education.

Tech-Savvy Kids: Bringing Digital Media into the Classroom, Grades 5-12 (2010),²⁷ and Will Richardson, *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (2010).²⁸ Why would I turn to them? As Richardson points out:

In order for us [educators] to prepare our students for what is without question a future filled with networked learning spaces, we must first experience those environments for ourselves. We must become connected and engaged in learning in these new ways if we are to fully understand the pedagogies of using these tools with our students. We cannot honestly discuss twenty-first-century learning skills for our students until we make sense of them ourselves.²⁹

While I may be a graduate-level educator, I am still a digital immigrant who wants to make sense of our participatory culture and to improve my own new media literacy skills. Because mine is a school of theology and ministry that does not have a school of education associated with it, I need books that offer the basics of these new media literacies. I can translate the insights from these K-12-level books to their application in my graduate teaching. The creativity of and examples from media-literate grade-school and high-school educators can inspire my own creativity as a professor. In addition, though, these are the kinds of books that I would want available in our library so my students could consult them in order to improve their own pedagogies and communication skills for their work in religious education, faith formation, youth and campus ministry, and social justice. As Henry Jenkins writes:

Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. A focus on expanding access to new technologies carries us only so far if we do not also foster the skills and cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those tools toward our own ends.³⁰

Another book that should earn space on the shelf of a theological library is Elizabeth Drescher and Keith Anderson, *Click 2 Save: The Digital Ministry Bible* (2012).³¹ These authors have created a book that addresses both the how-to and the why of the use of social media in ministry as platforms for the media fruits of people's media production. Christian ministers and educators need to be wise and discerning in using these communications media. These dialogical media should not be used as media of religious propaganda but rather as platforms from which to offer invitations to ongoing conversations about what most matters in people's lives. Drescher and Anderson warn:

...digital ministry is not the same as digital marketing. Very much at the center of the challenges facing the church is the challenge of communicating what the Gospel means – how it invites us to live in the light of God's grace in relation to one another and creation – with new generations of seekers

²⁷ Jessica K. Parker, *Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids: Bringing Digital Media into the Classroom, Grades 5-12* (Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin, 2010).

²⁸ Will Richardson, *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin, 2010).

²⁹ Richardson, *Blogs*, x.

³⁰ Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges*, 8.

³¹ Elizabeth Drescher and Keith Anderson, *Click 2 Save: The Digital Ministry Bible* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012).

and believers. But communicating is sharing language, ideas, stories, images and so on with others, in community, in service of the common good. That is, in relationships of mutual respect and caring. In communion.³²

Drescher and Anderson advocate putting great thought into how “the arts of digital ministry” can be offering hospitality, caring for others, forming disciples, and making public witness. Theirs is an approach that avoids an instrumentalist understanding of social media and focuses on a relational understanding. I applaud their clarity and insight, their examples, and their glossary of terms. They provide an overall perspective of how digital ministry is part of our larger participatory culture in which people of diverse ages can be invited into creative communion.

Fully two-thirds of American adults are active in social networking communities. Nearly 100 percent of teens are actively online and 80 percent regularly use social networking sites. The bulk of both teens and adults use their digital participation as a vital and vibrant part of their relationships with friends and families. Digital engagement is now the reality of human experience in America and in most of the world.³³

This book is an example of how understanding participatory culture might impact our understanding of ministry and of how we might be preparing graduate students for their ministries. I have previously outlined how participatory culture -- as played out in the process of Communal Co-Creation of liturgical media art -- can bear much spiritual fruit for those church members who produce media for their local worship, as well as for those in the assembly who experience their creativity as gift.³⁴ I am convinced that we need to be teaching our seminarians and other ministry and theology students about their role in today’s participatory cultures and about how they might foster the creativity and engagement of believers and seekers through communal art-making and social action. Theological librarians have an important role to play not only in providing books on participatory cultures and teaching about responsible copyright practices and ethics, but also in making available the media tools and expertise that faculty and students may require in order to engage fully as active members in the participatory cultures of today and tomorrow. As Barbara Fister notes in “Participatory Culture, Participatory Libraries”:

There’s a choice academic and public libraries face. One is to focus entirely on providing access to the published information that our community members want. The other is to make libraries a platform for creating and sharing culture.... The fact is, academic libraries should be all about participatory culture. They are labs, they are workshops, they are studios for making new ideas inspired by old ones.³⁵

Who knows...Perhaps my students or those from your school will be among the pastoral leaders who not only use today’s social media, but also encourage media-making and community action as part of their participatory culture-oriented ministry. They may be the ones who will offer after-school and other programs that will help reduce the

³² Drescher and Anderson, *Click 2 Save*, 175.

³³ Drescher and Anderson, *Click 2 Save*, 175.

³⁴ Eileen D. Crowley, *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), an academic book that includes a history of this phenomenon, along with my analysis of the situation and a framework for Communal Co-Creation; Eileen D. Crowley, *A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship* (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), a pastoral book that provides examples throughout the liturgical year, in dialogue with the *Principles for Worship* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

³⁵ Barbara Fister, “Participatory Cultures, Participatory Libraries,” *Library Babel Fish* (Blog) on *Inside Higher Ed*, August 14, 2012, <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/participatory-culture-participatory-libraries>.

participation gap that the research funded by the MacArthur Foundation highlighted. In their leadership of their religious education and youth ministries, they might inspire students to be creative media-makers as a natural part of their formation programs. Perhaps they will be among the community leaders who will help young people and their parents better understand how their interaction with media and their participation in producing social media can shape their sense of the world and their relationships. Perhaps they will engage Christians and others in online and face-to-face dialogue about how to become more “net smart” and how not to be “alone together.” Perhaps they and those with whom they serve will use their new media literacies, cultural competencies, and cognitive surplus to good ends to collaborate with others in creating liturgical media art and advancing social justice. “Thus says the Lord...I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43: 16a, 19a).

