DGPuK FAU Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg uniA UNIVERSITÄT AUGSBURG

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

Annual Conference 2027 · Sociology of Media Communication Section

University of Augsburg | 3–5 November 2027

Participation in the Context of Social and Technological Change – Power, Practices and Conditions of Participation

Participation is one of the key concepts underpinning modern societies. It is regarded as a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy, as the promise of an inclusive public sphere, as a principle of cultural production, and as a mark of quality for media, organisations and technologies. The practice of participation, however, faces numerous challenges that can be traced back to two fundamental processes of transformation. Firstly, digital technologies, platforms and AI-supported systems are fundamentally altering the nature of participation and engagement, for instance by translating social problems into data, technical solutions and commercial or administrative categories. Secondly, the social conditions underpinning democratic negotiation processes have changed. Political polarisation, the normalisation of populist and anti-democratic positions, and a dwindling basic consensus call into question the assumption of a society that is fundamentally open to dialogue and oriented towards compromise. This can be observed as a global phenomenon and was most recently documented in Germany by the electoral successes of the AfD, a party classified as a suspected far-right extremist organisation. The conference will examine various facets of participation in the context of social and technological change. The focus will be on how digital technologies and/or changing political conditions shape social participation, how decision-making power is distributed, and how dissent is dealt with.

The term ‘participation’ encompasses a range of practices from political and civil society engagement and institutionalised participatory processes to participatory media production, community practices, customer feedback, and the act of clicking, liking and sharing. However, not every opportunity for participation necessarily allows for influence over decisions. The question of the degrees of participation and the distribution of decision-making power (Arnstein 1969) is therefore linked to the distinction between access, interaction and participation (Carpentier 2015). At the same time, informal practices can generate social visibility or pave the way for collective action without necessarily influencing decisions directly.

Digital platforms and AI-supported systems determine who can participate and how. Interfaces dictate the options for action. Algorithmic systems and moderation rules influence the visibility of contributions. It is therefore necessary to examine not only usage practices but also platform rules, technical design and infrastructural dependencies (Li Vigni 2026). Political polarisation, anti-democratic positions and social trigger points raise questions about how to deal with dissent in participatory processes (Kumkar 2025; Mau, Lux & Westheuser 2023).

The conference aims to explore the various dimensions of participation, involvement and engagement, to identify commonalities and differences, and to discuss the possibilities and necessities of interdisciplinary research. We welcome theoretical, empirical, methodological and practice-oriented contributions from communication and media studies, sociology and political science, and related disciplines. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives are explicitly encouraged.

Possible perspectives and research questions

1. Concepts, semantics, degrees and limits of participation

Conceptions of participation differ in terms of whom they grant influence over which decisions and the extent of that influence. Papers may provide a theoretical foundation for these differences, systematise them or examine them historically. Examples of questions include:

- How can participation, engagement, interaction, involvement, collaboration, co-production and co-decision-making be analytically distinguished?
- Where does the line lie between symbolic, consultative and decision-influencing participation? When does participation become a mere label or 'participation-washing'?
- Who labels which forms of activity as participation, engagement, involvement or consultation – and with what normative expectations and claims to legitimacy?
- How do concepts and normative standards of participation change when viewed from a historical, cultural or international perspective?

2. (Media) Technologies, Platforms and Infrastructures

Technical design, platform rules and business models help determine which contributions are permitted, how visible they are and what opportunities for participation exist. Examples of questions include:

- Which forms of participation and involvement are enabled, restricted or prioritised by 'like', 'share', 'comment', 'rating' and 'voting' functions?
- How do affordances, recommendation systems, moderation and ranking influence the visibility and reach of contributions? What role do engagement metrics play in the management and economic exploitation of participation?
- What models of participation do citizen platforms, civic tech applications, participation apps or public-interest infrastructures implement?
- What new roles do generative AI and automated systems play in articulation, translation, moderation and decision-making – and what new dependencies, exclusions or expertise gaps are emerging?

3. Dissent, Polarisation, Extremism and Participation

Political and social change is altering the conditions for participation. Contributions may examine how participatory processes deal with dissent, polarisation and extremist positions. Examples of questions include:

- How do participatory arrangements mediate differing opinions? Which procedures facilitate understanding or a structured approach to ongoing dissent?
- What impact do a dwindling basic social consensus and a loss of trust in media and political institutions have on participatory practices?
- What normative ideas underpin participatory arrangements, and which ones are promoted by them?
- What role do participatory practices play in the formation or transmission of extreme political, gender-related or cultural positions?

4. Power, inequality and the ambivalences of participation

Participatory opportunities create unequal chances: social position, available resources and digital skills determine who can participate and be heard. In doing so, participation can reproduce, reveal or challenge structures of power, knowledge and authority. Exemplary questions include:

- When is non-participation the result of exclusion or being overwhelmed – and when is it an expression of deliberate withdrawal, or of refusal as a political practice?
- Which old and new inequalities arise or disappear as a result of participatory media and processes?
- Under what conditions do participatory opportunities expand societal knowledge and challenge established hierarchies of authority – and when do they delegitimise (scientific) expertise?
- How can promises of inclusion, empowerment and community be assessed against the risks of instrumentalisation, exploitation and the shifting of responsibility?

5. Impacts, evaluation and methods in participation research

The number of participants or their contributions says little about their influence on decisions. We are seeking contributions addressing the empirical measurement, comparison and evaluation of participation. Examples of questions include:

- What individual, collective, organisational, media-related or political impacts can be attributed to participatory processes?
- How can opportunities for expression, responsiveness, learning processes, influence on decision-making and control over resources be measured empirically? How meaningful are platform metrics for these dimensions, and which aspects are overlooked?
- Which methodological approaches and combinations are suitable for comparing different forms and levels of participation without levelling out their inherent logic?
- How can participatory research, co-research and citizen science be designed in a reflexive manner? What ethical issues arise, for example, in relation to consent, data ownership, remuneration and the return of results?

Submission and Review

In addition to presentations and thematically aligned panels, we invite proposals for open formats that facilitate discussion on the conference theme with non-academic stakeholders. Possible formats include workshops, World Cafés, fishbowls, barcamps and other participatory formats.

Submissions will be assessed according to the following criteria: relevance to the conference theme, the proposal's relevance and originality, and the clarity and comprehensibility of the presentation. For presentation contributions, the plausibility of the theoretical or analytical underpinnings and the appropriateness of the methodological approach will also be taken into account. For open formats, the focus is on the plausibility of the format concept and its potential for a productive and participatory exchange.

Please describe your proposals for presentations and open formats in an abstract of no more than 800 words and submit this by email to **mediensoziologie@imwk.uni-augsburg.de** by **31 March 2027**. Abstracts must be submitted in anonymised form as an editable text document (e.g. a Word file .docx or an OpenDocument file .odt). Please also submit a separate cover sheet containing the

title of the contribution, the authors' names, contact details and information on whether, in what form and for what purpose generative AI was used in the creation of the contribution. We aim to publish the contributions following a peer-review process shortly after the conference.

Workshop for Doctoral and Postdoctoral Researchers

In the run-up to the conference, a two-hour workshop divided into two parts will take place on Wednesday, 3 November 2027:

Pizza and a chat – During the first hour, there will be an opportunity to discuss topics such as grant applications, conference presentations or publications with experienced colleagues. The setting is deliberately informal and is intended to provide an opportunity to ask questions that may seem trivial at first glance, but which all researchers have faced at some point. Suggestions for topics can be submitted by 28 February 2027. The specific topic will be published in the FG newsletter in spring 2027.

Work in Progress – During the second hour, participants can present current problems that have arisen in their own research. Possible solutions will then be discussed in a collegial exchange. Those wishing to present a problem should please send a brief description (max. 2 pages) by 31 July 2027. The descriptions will be made available to all participants in the run-up to the workshop.

Proposals for topics, descriptions of problems and registration for the workshop should be sent by email to Steffen Göths, the section's representative for early-career researchers: steffen.goeths@fu-berlin.de

Organisation

Organisers: Prof. Dr. Peter Gentzel (FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg), Dr. Paula Nitschke, Prof. Dr. Jeffrey Wimmer (University of Augsburg)

On behalf of the specialist group: Dr. Rieke Böhling (University of Bremen), Dr. Paula Nitschke (University of Augsburg) and Steffen Göths (Free University of Berlin)

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Mau, S., Lux, T. and Westheuser, L. (2023). Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft. Suhrkamp.