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Representing participation in ICT4D projects

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A B S T R A C T

How do the discourses of participation inform deployment of information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D)? Discourses here mean narratives that assign roles to actors, and specify causes and outcomes for events. Based on the theory and practice of international development we identify two dimensions to participation and ICT4D: whether participation 1) is hierarchical/top-down or agent-driven/bottom-up, and 2) involves conflict or cooperation. Based on these dimensions we articulate four ideal types of discourse that permeate ICT and development efforts: stakeholder-based discourses that emphasize consensus, networked efforts among actors collaborating in network arrangements, mobilization discourses that account for contestation over meanings of participation, and oppositional discourses from 'grassroots' actors that also include conflict. We conclude that ICT4D efforts, depending on the context of their implementation, are permeated by multiple discourses about participation. Our four ideal types of participation discourses are, therefore, useful starting points to discuss the intricate dynamics of participation in ICT4D projects.

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1. Introduction

Discourses about participation – involving people and civil society in the governance and deployment of technology for development purposes – challenge an older representative model in which science and technology were expertize driven, with implicit or explicit support from political and commercial institutions. Discourses here mean narratives in scholarly or policy-based writings that assign roles to actors, and specify causes and outcomes for events. The dominant scientific discourses believed science and technology to be value-free and objective, resting upon rigorous method and empirical observation, and 'protected' from everyday politics (Brown, 2009). Governance and power in these technological practices were often imagined as top-down (Sarewitz, 1996). Such hierarchical orderings informed governance in the form of a techno-state, which created and enforced the underlying collective understandings about technology.[1]

Despite the hierarchical understandings about technology, participatory discourses have become increasingly salient in the global governance of information and communication technologies for development. In the 1970s, this took the form of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which questioned the global imbalances in information flows and corporate ownership especially between the North and the South (The MacBride Commission, 1980). NWICO devolved into a feisty cold-war and North–

Table 1
Representing discourses of participation.

	Structured/hierarchical	Agentic/horizontal
Consensual (state-dominated)	*Stakeholder discourse* *Literature*: United Nations, International Organizations, Governments *Examples*: ICT4D at World Bank, Government-led initiatives	*Network consensual discourse* *Literature*: transnational and national societal networks *Examples*: networks of service delivery in ICT4D projects, crowdsourcing
Conflictual (societal pressures)	*Performative mobilization discourse* *Literature*: advocacy and performance strategies *Examples:* World Summit for Information Society; social movements' use of ICTs and social media.	*Oppositional discourse* *Literature*: critical theory, organizational behavior *Examples:* Community radio, community content creation

South ideological contest featuring proxy battles between what the West and its 'free' media, and what the East called its state-led 'responsible' media (Singh, 2011). Nevertheless, it was one of the first international instances of a global debate on the norms and rules governing information technologies. In our current era, the global debates on Internet governance and the World Summit on Information Society have been similar even if less feisty than the NWICO counterpart, and much more focused on participation as a key principle (Frau-Meigs et al., 2012; Flyverbom, 2011). World Bank's *Infodev* division, at the forefront of implementing an inclusive ICT4D agenda notes: "We do this in partnership with other development programs, with World Bank/IFC colleagues, and with stakeholders from the public, private and civil society sectors in the developing world" (Infodev, 2012). A conservative estimate of community-driven development projects at the World Bank calculated them to be $85 billion in the last decade (Mansuri and Rao, 2013:ix).

How does the discourse of participation inform the deployment of information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D)? The 40 years of global advocacy from a variety of actors to make technology-driven development more inclusive offer a unique opportunity to assess participatory discourses. As an academic field and development priority, ICT4D is still in the making, and we have limited empirical knowledge of how participation and ICT4D intersect. Therefore we need integrative research efforts (such as literature reviews and analyses) that can enhance our understanding of the ICT4D-participation nexus, as well as innovative suggestions for future avenues for research in this area. Reflecting on scholarly and policy literatures on the topic, we identify two dimensions or tensions that underpin contemporary discussions of participatory development and ICT4D: whether participation is hierarchical/top-down or agent-driven/bottom-up, and involves conflict or cooperation among actors. Based on these dimensions we forward four ideal types[2] of discourse that permeate ICT and development efforts: 1) *stakeholder discourses* that emphasize mostly top-down interactions and consensus among participants; 2) *networked discourses* focusing on similarly structured, but more horizontal interactions and collaborations based on shared interests; 3) *mobilization discourses* highlighting agent-driven or bottom-up efforts and interactions that involve contestation over the meanings and effects of participation, and; 4) *oppositional discourses* stressing conflict among actors and 'grassroots' and other bottom-up and agent-driven forms of participation .

This article contributes to research on participatory development and ICT4D in two parallel ways. First, it shows that there are multiple understandings of participation at play. We argue that these understandings can be understood as discourses that allow for a variety of policy positions affecting the role of actors and infrastructural options or development efforts. Second, our four ideal types seek to show the relevance of taking into account both dimensions to the major debates in the literature on participatory development: the extent to which participatory development is hierarchical or bottom-up agent-driven, and if such participation is consensual or conflictual (see Table 1).

The focus on discourses is important: instead of showing the 'effectiveness' of various forms of participation, our intention is to show how governance and policy formation revolves around, and leads to, different discourses about participation. Conventional approaches treat the 'problem' (such as participation) that policies are intended to solve as given or pre-existing, and evaluate their effectiveness. However, our research sees the very identification of problems and suggestions about solutions as a more intricate affair, and stresses the productive and constitutive role of such articulations in the making of new approaches to development. Thus, attention to the role of discourses and 'problematizations' (Foucault,1991; Bacchi, 2009; Baiocchi, Heller, & Silva, 2011) helps us note that "in many cases it is the constitution of these issues as sites of policy which are at stake" (Larner and Walters 2004: 11). In the case of participation, the focus on representations, 'problematizations' and discourses opens up questions about the identities of the issues and actors involved, and allows us to capture the varieties and intricacies of participatory efforts. Rather than a monolithic model, our argument, in fact, is that participatory discourses in ICT4D take multiple shapes and must be studied in a pluralist manner. Methodologically, our pluralist, discourse-oriented approach revolves around careful attention to the ways in which different initiatives are informed by, produce and problematize particular understandings of participation, to the ways in which actors are included or excluded in these representations, and to the ways in which ICT4D is shaped through such articulations.

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[2] By ideal types we mean analytical constructs that articulate features of a given phenomenon in an abstract and exaggerated form for the purposes of analysis, in line with Max Weber's original formulation (Jupp, 2006).