

## **Ioana Literat**

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Response for **Connected Viewing** Session

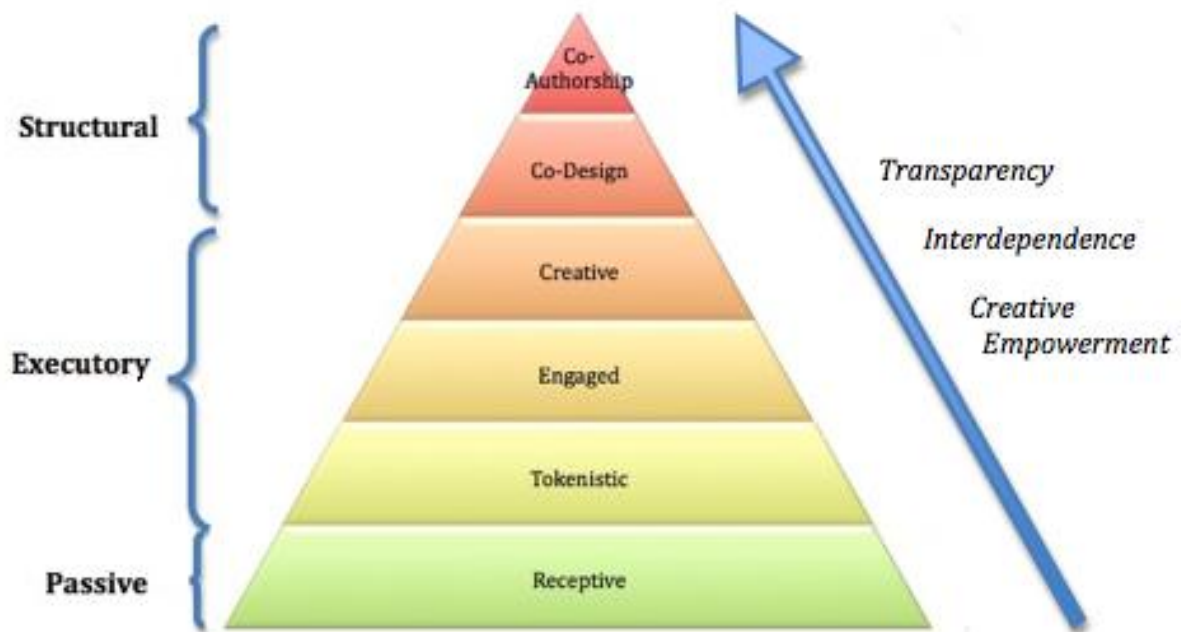
The television industry, which has – throughout its history – been a quintessentially closed and regulated domain, is now in a period of redefinition, amidst an abundance of transmedia opportunities for increased viewer participation. Today’s television audiences live, work and play in a participatory culture that is open, interactive, expressive and generative. While broadcast television will continue to play a vital role in the American media ecosystem, it is important to acknowledge that the values and the logic of this system are in flux. The shift from “TV for” to “TV with” has crucial implications for television marketing and content production.

### *The Levels of Participation: Structure and Agency*

Building on the concept of relational aesthetics and on the participatory culture paradigm, my research qualifies user engagement with television shows according to the structural features of the shows. Thus, I am suggesting a “pyramid of participation”, which distinguishes between receptive, executive, and structural modes of user engagement.

As art critic Dave Beech aptly notes, “there is a temptation, within this earnest tradition of participation, to treat it as a solution to the problems endemic to the whole range of established forms of cultural engagement, from the elitism of the aesthete to the passivity of the spectator, and from the compliance of the observer to the distance of the onlooker.” The main proponents of the participatory turn in television and mass media often tend to see participation and sociability through an optimistic, micro-utopian lens, and their discourse generally omits any trace of conflict or hierarchization.

In reality, there are subtle degrees of participation in mass media culture. Participation cannot be used as a blanket term or as a panacea, since it does not account for the complexities of creative agency, commercial hierarchies, access and capital. A close analysis of media engagement in regards to television audiences reveals a complex ladder of participation, and I therefore suggest a more nuanced model of understanding these various levels of engagement, highlighting the different affordances of receptive, executive, and structural participation. The diagram and table below illustrate this model.



Type	Defining Features	Examples
Receptive	Consumption-based: audience receives a finished artistic product	Watching show
Tokenistic	Individual small acts of participation around a media program	Tweeting about favorite characters, or commenting on the show's FB page
Engaged	Collaborative but highly top-down participation in a pre-designed project	Participating in an ARG created by media producer
Creative	Transparent, reflective and expressive participation in a pre-designed project	<i>Star Wars Uncut</i> ; <i>Life in a Day</i> (YouTube documentary)
Co-design	Authors invite participants to help shape design or structure of the project	Radiohead fans decide what songs go into the album
Co-authorship	Participants' structural contributions are formally recognized and rewarded	Fan fiction?

**Receptive participation** requires the lowest degree of creative engagement under this model, and refers to the process whereby the viewer or audience receives a finished artistic product. Many crucial voices in cultural studies and media scholarship have pointed to the active elements of consumption and spectatorship, noting that the spectator is more than a passive consumer, and takes an active role in interpreting or decoding the artwork. The notion of receptive participation, as

employed here, accommodates this view, acknowledging the space for active interpretation and creative consumption.

**Executory participation** is the task-based, generative participation in a pre-designed project. It is analogous to entering a contract by agreeing to its specific terms and conditions: when deciding to participate in the artistic process, the contributor accepts the parameters of participation, but has no structural agency or, in other words, has no power to challenge or modify these parameters. According to their level of transparency and the space allowed for personal expression, executory crowdsourced art projects can be tokenistic, engaged, or creative.

Finally, with **structural participation**, participants have a say in the conceptual and/or artistic design of the project; in other words, they are allowed to demonstrate structural agency. In *co-design*, participants are invited to weigh in on the structure of the project, while in the case of *co-authorship*, in addition to their conceptual input, their contributions are formally recognized and rewarded. Both co-design and co-authorship reflect a more genuine desire for openness, and they tend to function as statements on alternative *modes* of creative production.

Looking at recent television shows that claim to offer innovative opportunities for audience participation across a variety of platforms (such as ABC's *Glass House*, for instance), I question whether these opportunities are indeed meaningful chances for viewers to exert their agency, or whether they are relatively tokenistic. Using the same scale of participation, I am also interested in the role of user-generated content within this new television era of connected viewing. What are the ethical, aesthetic and economic implications of the participatory turn in television? And where does this trend fit within the larger context of grassroots media production and collaborative engagement facilitated by the Internet?