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Participatory media new and old: semiotics and affordances of museum media

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ABSTRACT

The move from “old” to “new” media centrally involves a shift in participatory possibilities, through which individuals and communities differentially access and populate the public sphere, assume voice, and partake in open discussion and debate. This paper offers a rich ethnographic case study of new participatory media in the shape of commenting systems in museums. By portraying the similarities and the differences in communicative affordances between two museum media—traditional visitor books, on the one hand, and a digital and immersive interface, on the other hand—light is shed on how media invite and intervene in possibilities for public participation. Furthermore, with their emphasis on visual design and display, studying participatory public media in museums helps highlight the semiotic construction of the public sphere as such, and how the notion of the public and laypersons’ contributions are materially displayed. Analysis of communicative affordances reveals the politics of remediation, and supports recent hesitations with regard to the promise of newer and “smarter” media: digital media affords more interaction than their analogue predecessors, but participatory content-production via analogue media is found to be discursively richer on a number of grounds.

The move from “old” to “new” media centrally involves a shift in participatory possibilities and affordances, through which individuals and communities differentially access and populate the public sphere, assume voice, and partake in public debate. The familiar Habermasian (Habermas, 1962/1989) view holds that media is vital for the existence of the public sphere as well as for larger scale social structures, and that changes in the operation of media will result in changes in social and political spheres. In light of this, the notion of participation enjoys a resurgence in Media and Communication Studies, especially in recent prolific iterations regarding new media and the new participatory configurations they allow (Carpentier, 2009, 2011; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2008; Couldry, 2004; Livingstone, 2009). This recent wave of studies highlights participation as a central theme in new and not-so-new media studies, and points to the close relations between mediation, participation, and the public sphere. This study offers ethnographic data and discussion on participatory media and how media invite, shape, and intervene
in possibilities for public participation. I pursue this aim by examining similarities and differences in communicative affordances and uses between two—an older and a newer—commenting systems or media in museums.

The recent wave of studies into participation guides my inquiry also by rejecting a normative (evaluative) view of participation, a position which helps avoid slippage into the numbing dichotomies of good/bad and active/passive. Contra Jenkins (1992), for instance, current studies of participation do not necessarily see it as tied to agency, and agency, in turn, is not a-priori good or empowering. Scholars studying mediated participation look instead into the politics (power-relations) of specific public spheres, media, and media institutions. I am further guided by the distinction between interaction and participation, which helps avoid a simplistic view of the relation between the myriad forms of present-day interactions with the media, on the one hand, and the roles and capacities of participation in public sphere, on the other hand. Along these lines, Carpentier (2009) defines participation in the public sphere as occasions where laypeople are “effectively involved in the mediated production of meaning (content-related participation)” (p. 409), which, I would add, is recognized by all parties involved (the media and its users) as produced by laypeople for the public sphere.

Two clarifications are due before we proceed. The first is that soon after new media became widespread, the question of what exactly is new in “new media” beseeched scholarly attention. Following McLuhan (1964/1994), who observed that the content of a new medium is an older medium, Levinson (1997) suggests remediation as a term that captures how “new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies” (p. 104). Likewise, what characterizes new media for Bolter and Grusin (1999) “comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media” (p. 15), and how users find the “representation of one medium in another” (p. 45).

The second point concerns affordances and specifically participatory affordances. This concept was initially proposed by the psychologist Gibson (1979) in relation to ecological systems, and the material possibilities that they present to their inhabitants. One of the oft-quoted examples is how a stone comes to serve as shelter for a lizard. Shelter, in Gibson’s example, is what the stone affords the lizard. The concept is usually used in active and even proactive manner, and, unlike the older notions of “traits” or “characteristics,” which it replaces, it is inherently interactional. More than simply allowing certain actions (while restricting others), affordances are also viewed as inviting action. Hutchby (2001) importantly connects affordances and texts, addressing affordances as the “possibilities for action” (p. 449), that different technologies and designs present, leading more generally to the “technological shaping of social action” (p. 453). I find the concept helpful in terms of focusing on participatory possibilities and media materialities that allow—invite—both production and display of public discourse.

Exploring shifts in participatory media, I ask two related questions: how media institutions replace and remediate older (analogue) media by newer ones, and what are the different possibilities of participation and display—conceived in terms of material/technological affordances—recent media offer and deny? My inquiry stresses a critical intervention within the larger ritual and cultural view of communication (Carey, 1989), intersecting with nearby fields such as cultural studies and cultural anthropology. The inquiry is conducted at the semiotically rich environments that museums and museum media supply, where I examine on-site commenting platforms. Commenting platforms
are media which offer public channels to communicate with the institution and through it to other visitors and the public more generally. My focus here is not on museums per se, but I believe that their dense semiotic qualities (multiple communication and signification mechanisms, see Eco, 1976), can enrich discussions of affordances and public displays of participation.

While my interest eventually lies in the analysis of participatory discourse, I take the space of this paper to patiently outline the affordances for the production of public discourse and its representation. I attend to the possibilities for discourse before attending to discourse itself, because often analyses gravitate too quickly towards the text (what is the massage/content?), overlooking the situated and technologically mediated character of discourse. I offer that discourse and rhetoric should be analyzed only once media’s materialities and modes of display and signification have been closely and critically considered (Noy, 2015a).

Studying participatory media and affordances in museums enriches our discussion also because, like media, museums too are “new” and “old.” From a media and communication studies perspective, museums are best seen as media institutions. Through a serious of practices, including collecting, categorizing, and eventually displaying, museums function as agents of mediation that “report” on the past. This is particularly true for heritage museums, where heritage is a “mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 7). The point is that this “production” occurs in the present, which is when audiences need to meaningfully experience the past—and the newer the museum, the more the audiences are invited to contribute to the narration via interactive installations (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007; Henning, 2006, esp. Chapter 3; Simon, 2010). Put differently, if the modern museum “broadcasts” information (one-way transmission, similar to modern forms of mass media), the postmodern museum is mediatic, interactive, and participatory.

Participatory media new and old: sites and methods

In this study I look closely at new media, in the shape of an interactive digital installation, and examine it against the backdrop of older media it remediates, namely visitor books. I previously studied in some detail visitor books in two heritage museums: the Ammunition Hill National Commemoration Museum in East Jerusalem, Israel, which focuses on heritage and commemoration (Noy, 2015a), and the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, which focuses on “History, Heritage and Hope” (as the museum puts it. See Noy, 2015b, 2016). My ethnography in Jerusalem took place between 2006–2012, and the visitor book I studied contained 1,032 texts, mostly in Hebrew and English. In Florida my research is in progress since 2012, and the visitor book I study contains 2,749 texts, mostly in English.

My studies employ the Ethnography of Communication approach (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Katriel, 1997; Noy, in press), which has centered on the notion of participation from its onset: “Ethnographic work,” Hymes (1972) initially observed, “shows that there is one general, or universal, dimension to be postulate, that of the participant” (pp. 58–59). Ethnography of Communication holistically brings together media (“channel”), participants, and the analysis of actual utterances or discourse, as these come together in specific communicative events. It treats discourse as social activity, which is performative, situated, and...
steeped in materiality (Duranti, 2003). The Ethnography of Communication approach allows us to deepen our discussion of the move between older and newer participatory media/environments, and how media, and the institutions that employ them, invite and intervene in the production of discourse.

The present study takes place at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH). The NMAJH was founded in 1976, and was relocated and comprehensively restructured in 2010. It is set in a large and beautiful building in the historic district of Philadelphia, where it hosts some 80,000 visitors every year. The museum narrates the history of Jewish immigration to, and livelihood in, the US from a liberal-progressive perspective, highlighting the integration of Jewish communities in North American culture while downplaying the Holocaust and connections to Israel. My first ethnographic visits to the museum took place in Fall 2011 (during a fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania). What immediately caught my attention at the NMAJH was the ambitious, tech-savvy environment that the museum supplied, embodied in its main interactive installation: the Contemporary Issues Forum (Forum, henceforth). I then studied the museum between 2011–2015, traveling there three–four times every year, for a few days each visit.

While most of my time was dedicated to visitors’ interactions with museum media, I was also interested in how museum staff see the institution’s goals, and the role that participatory media play. I interviewed 18 staff members, ranging from the Chief Curator and the Exhibition Coordinator, to the docents and the volunteers. These interviews were recorded (three hours of audio-recordings), and I often asked the interviewees to show me around the museum, and to share their everyday experiences in the museum and their observations and views of the visitors.

Typical to museums, at the NMAJH most of the visitors I saw arrived with company (family members, or school and college classes), and I observed their interactions among themselves and with the museum. I observed an estimate of a couple of hundred visitors, and engaged in informal conversation with 82 of them. As in my previous studies in Jerusalem and Florida, I did not obtain systematic demographic data about the visitors via surveys (nor do the museums possess such data). I relied rather on my observations and interactions, which indicate that most of the independent visitors (not school students on organized day trips) to the US museums were white, educated, usually well-traveled, and lived in some vicinity to the museum’s location (more so in Philadelphia than in Florida). In Jerusalem, in comparison, all the visitors were of Jewish heritage, and included domestic tourists from Israel’s peripheral towns and rural settlements, mostly of marginalized communities, and international tourists, mostly North American Zionist Jews.

My observations at the NMAJH fill 300 notebook pages, to which I add various on-site brochures and online advertisements. Although analysis of visitors’ discourse lies beyond the scope of this paper, I note I documented 1,132 utterances (or texts visitors wrote on sticky notes, which I did by taking repeated photos at the Forum). In the three museums I introduced myself as a researcher studying media and visitor participation, and I wore a visible badge with my name and academic affiliation. I gave my business card with my contact information to everyone I interacted with, so they could contact me later if they wished to (a few did).

I begin by briefly introducing the medium of the visitor book, to then describe the newer media installation I focus on. I address three similarities these media share,
establishing how the newer digital medium remediates the analog visitor book. I then turn to highlight the differences between these media, diverse stressing affordances, and modes of display/representation.

The semiotics of visitor books

Visitor books emerged in Europe around the 16th–17th centuries, together with the emergence of early-modern museums (Noy, 2015a, pp. 16–17). Although they have since been ubiquitous in museums, hotels, galleries, and churches, and perhaps because of this ubiquity, they received precious little attention until recently—often viewed as corpus (what) rather than medium (how). Recent studies approach visitor books from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including discourse analysis (Stamou & Paraskevolpoulos, 2004), museum studies (Macdonald, 2005), and tourism and hospitality studies (James & Vincent, in press). These studies illuminate visitor books as situated, public, and institutional media, and show how museum audiences employ them. Visitor books are often defined laconically as “A book in which visitors may write their names and addresses” (Oxford English Dictionary), and, despite their “low-tech” quality, they emerge as intriguing sites of mediation because they function in effect as interactive installations: once inscribed, visitors’ texts are instantly added to the museums’ public display. Studying visitor books as media also points at the intricate connections between these books’ institutional and ideological functions, and the public discourse that they elicit and display. As media, the books serve as institutional means (“mobilized media,” Noy, 2015b, p. 23) by which visitors who choose to write in them are transformed into content-generating audiences.

The specifically situated operation of visitor books draws attention to two further points, which will soon become relevant to our discussion. First, visitor books are usually located near museums’ exits, where they elicit an “audience-contributed gesture of closure” (Katriel, 1997, p. 71). This location is important for understanding these books’ discursive function, because it is only at the end of the museum visit that audiences can comment on the narrative it mediates and the means through which it does so. Writing in visitor books, like writing responses on other on- and off-line commenting platforms, makes sense once participants have an idea of what it is that they are commenting on.

The second point relating to the situated nature of visitor books concerns their location in terms of museums’ spatiotemporal arrangement. Museums in general and heritage museums in particular are arranged chronologically, with the display progressing from past to present. Russo and Watkins (2007) call this “spatial storytelling,” and add that it provides museums with “an institutional sequencing of ideals” (pp. 158–159). The chronological layout of heritage museums temporally frames the location of visitor books near the exit, where they come to assume the moment of the present. With these points in mind I turn to describe a newer museum and a newer participatory medium.

“Join in and lend your voice!”: three semiotic resonances

The NMAJH is replete with digital devices that mediate the past and make it accessible and engaging. Dozens of screens, touch-screens, and projectors of different sizes populate the
galleries, offering immersive experience and assorted visual, tactile, and auditory stimuli. As a Washington Post columnist describes it, the museum is “a state-of-the-art museum-education-entertainment space,” of which exhibitions “focus on ephemeral multimedia displays” (Kennicott, 2010). Much of this effort centers around the visualization of texts, and the core exhibition is brimming with original handwritten artifacts and their reproductions. From a list of inventory of a 17th century Philadelphian butcher named Asher Levi, to Estée Lauder’s executive planner, the most widespread category of items on display are handwritten documents, reproductions, and remediations.

It is within this semiotic context, where handwritten documents are extensively displayed and visualized as authentic markers and bearers of “heritage,” that the museum offers the Forum. The Forum is a darkened interactive museum hall, on which four questions are brightly projected on the dark grey walls. Two such questions appear in Figure 1: “Does America have a responsibility to promote democracy abroad?” (wall on right), and “Is there a connection between morality and religion?” (wall on left).

The questions are usually composed by the museum’s curatorial team, and often revolve around current public affairs with an attempt to sustain a rational, open, and democratic (Habermasian) discussion. A large, round table occupies the center of the room, and offers visitors colorful sticky notes (see Figure 2). These notes are 4.5 × 4.5 inches, made of thick paper, and have three colors: pink, yellow, or blue. The colors correspond with the text that is printed at the top of the notes: No, Yes, and Um, respectively.

Visitors enter the hall from the right and exit from the left, and see the many handwritten texts that are posted on the walls. Visitors are invited to use the writing utensils to
inscribe their own texts on the notes, and then stick/post them on the appropriate wall, near the question they chose to answer (Figure 3 and 3(a)).

The Forum is also equipped with four scanners (one for each wall), where visitors can scan their notes, at which point their texts are instantly projected on the walls (three such images are visible in Figure 1). The scanned texts are uploaded to the Forum’s website, where they are available on-line (http://cif.nmajh.org). Additionally, video cameras record visitors’ activities inside the hall, and the short recordings are replayed on a small screen mounted on one of the walls and on the web. In this way, visitors on-site and viewers online can see other visitors talking, reading, writing, and posting notes in the hall.

The Forum offers a rich case study for exploring the “newness” of contemporary participatory media. I begin by outlining three semiotic resonances—resonances in modes of representation and signification—between the “smart” museum installation and the analogue visitor book. The first resonance concerns the location of the Forum in the museum’s spatiosemiotic arrangement: it is located at the very end of the museum’s core exhibition, exactly where visitor books are typically positioned. Visitors descending from the museum’s fourth floor, where the exhibit begins, to the second floor, where it ends, must pass through the space of Forum hall on their way out of the core exhibition.

The second semiotic resonance concerns the institutional framing of these media as participatory public media. Museums do not simply present visitor books to the public, but invariably frame them by supplying instructions informing visitors what they are and how to engage them. These texts reveal how the museum views its visitors and how it seeks to shape their discursive contributions. In the two previous museums
I studied in Jerusalem and in Florida, signs located near the books instruct (respectively): “Students, Soldiers, and Visitors. Please indicate your impressions in a concise and respectful manner. Kindly, regard the guest book in a manner appropriate to the site”
(originally in Hebrew. Noy, 2015a, p. 49), and “Tell us about your Museum experience!” (Noy, 2015b, p. 203). These texts are what Gitelman (2006) calls “media protocols” (p. 16), and they are aimed at explaining the use of the media as well as framing them semiotically. Among hundreds of museum texts and labels, these are the only instances I observed where museums address their audiences explicitly and directly. They do so by employing directives (“indicate” and “tell us”), and explicit and relevant membership categories (“visitors” and “students”).

At the NMAJH, the Forum’s media protocol is displayed at the entrance to the hall: “History is filled with debate and discussions and those conversations continue to be relevant today. Join in and lend your voice!” (Figure 4). Under this opening, a more elaborate description of what is found in the hall and how visitors are expected to interact once inside is supplied:

Expression and debate are essential to American and Jewish culture. Here, you will find four questions projected on the wall. Each weaves together key themes from this exhibition, and current issues we face. What do you think? Pick a question and browse the comments posted by your fellow visitors. Write your own response and add it to the conversation. There are no right answers, only discussions.

The text serves to frame museum media by explaining and guiding media use. The verbs “pick,” “browse,” “write,” and “add” are directives that designate appropriate participatory activity on behalf of the visitors as seen by the institution; and “we” is a membership category term that suggests an alignment between the parties (the museum and the visitors face the same “current issues”). The text informs visitors what to expect at the Forum and what to do once inside. Importantly, it also ensures a *semiotic connection and continuation*
between the core exhibition, where the past is narrated, and the moment of participation, where visitors’ roles are enacted and publicly documented at the moment of the present.

The last semiotic resonance concerns the technologies and activities directly involved in visitors’ on-site content production. As the media protocols instruct, visitors are encouraged to write their responses. In regards to both visitor books and the Forum, handwriting is how participation is to be accomplished. While sharing oral impressions about the display is surely also a mode of participation, what heritage museums are asking for as legitimate tokens of participation are not ephemeral and private interactions, but the production of an enduring and public handwritten ("authentic") sign. When I asked about the planning of the Forum hall, the museum’s Chief Curator told me that already in the early experiments (in 2007–2008) it was clear that “the activity of writing would be essential for visitors’ experience,” and that from the museum’s perspective, writing “creates a commitment on behalf of the visitors” (interview with J. Perelman, November 7, 2014). Visitors’ handwritten texts function as lasting gestures of participation that join the display, and the more the environment is mediated—the more authenticity is accredited to handwriting as a trace of visitors’ embodied actions.

The three resonances I outlined—location, framing, and activity (writing)—stress the similarities that exist in both function and meaning between newer and older participatory media, suggesting the latter as a remediated form of the former. Qualitatively, nearly half (42%) of the visitors I observed at the Forum both read and wrote notes, and about a third (31%) read the notes intently (they stopped walking for this purpose and took their time in the hall). The remaining visitors (27%) did not read or write, and those I asked indicated various reasons: most were at the end of their visit and in a hurry, whereas a few were critical of the display and therefore avoided writing. The figures in the heritage museums in Jerusalem and Florida are lower: approximately 10% of the visitors both read and wrote in visitor books (which is identical to the findings reported by Macdonald (2005, p. 125) in a Nazi heritage museum in Nuremberg, Germany), about a third read them, and the large majority seemed not to notice them (Noy, 2015a, p. 74). If the three resonances I outlined stress the similarities between newer and older media, the question, then, is what accounts for the differences between them?

**Adhesive participation**

I now turn to describe the differences between the media, or how the Forum deviates in function and meaning from visitor books. Evidently, the Forum is more than an artifact and it possesses what visitor books rarely enjoy: an entire hall dedicated to the medium. More accurately, the Forum is located inside a space as much as the medium is itself spatial. What gives the Forum its “smart” appearance is not only digital scanners and video cameras, but also that visitors are engulfed within media-space (evoking the immersive characteristics of new media and the public spaces that they incorporate. Berry, Kim, & Lynn, 2010; Couldry & McCarthy, 2004). When writing in visitor books, visitors engage in participatory activity from the “outside,” as it were, yet with the Forum visitors are engulfed within the installation. The visitor, as Poster (1999) observes of the subject in the age of new media, “no longer subtends the world as if from the outside but operates within a machine apparatus as a point in a circuit” (p. 16). The Forum’s designated special media-space suggests that it is as much part of the exhibit as it is a surface to
comment on it, and participatory activities are not simply performed on the way out, as with visitor book, but are integral to the activity of the visit.

In relation to both visitor books and the Forum I’ve seen users negotiate what to write, but in the latter visitors actually moved inside (new) media-space: talking, writing, scanning, and posting. On one occasion I saw a father lifting his daughter on his shoulders, from where she posted the note she wrote at the very top of one of the walls; on another, a male adult visitor first wrote on the table four separate texts, and then walked around the hall, sticking each of them on the corresponding wall; on a third occasion, two families and a third unrelated individual were all writing on the large round table simultaneously. These observations suggest that the extension that the Forum hall offers is not only a matter of size and space (the books’ pages compared to the hall’s walls), but rather affords and prompts a different repertoire of co-presence and participatory activity. The collaborative activity embodies a shift in modes of communication, from one-to-many (visitor book) to many-to-many (Forum).

But the most salient difference between visitor books and the Forum in terms of participatory affordances concerns their writing surfaces, namely the use of notes versus the use of book pages. Historically, these notes originated in index cards, used by European librarians at more or less the time that visitor books began appearing in early-modern museums (Krajewski, 2008). They became ubiquitous in modern office environments and begun serving bureaucratic functions in the 19th century, through a democratization process that continued all the way to the second half of the 20th century. It was during the 1970s, that the small sticky notes became widespread and known as everyday “stationery” (initially called Press ‘n Peel and then renamed Post-it™ notes in 1980). In this way, the notes made their way from “back-stage” archival functions, where they served as cataloguing and mnemonic devices (index cards), to “front-stage” functions, serving as visual and rearrangeable media, while retaining their earlier capabilities. This multi-functionality further accounts for the Post-its’ seamless migration into digital spaces (“stick-e notes”: Windows 7 Sticky Notes, Stickies in Mac OS, and many more).

I elaborate on sticky notes because their communicative affordances touch on newer (versus older) participatory affordances: sticky notes are not digital, yet like digital technology they present small chunks of data that are highly mobile. In any case, digital technology is not, in itself, a defining feature of new media (Peters, 2009, pp. 16–17). The way these notes function at the Forum, even before scanners, projectors, and the web were introduced, contributes to an ambiance of newness. More so because they are in fact simulations of sticky notes: the museum does not purchase generic Post-it™ notes, but similarly looking notes designed especially for the Forum. The differences are small but not insignificant: the Forum’s sticky notes are larger and made of firmer paper, their adhesive material is stronger, and they contain text. They are thus not semiotically neutral anymore. On one occasion I heard a girl complaining to her grandmother, “I want to write Yes, but on a pink note,” to which her grandmother replied emphatically, “[but] that’s how they set it up.” Furthermore, the museum notes are designed to have a small triangular addition at the bottom (visible in Figure 3(a)), which symbolically suggests them as speech bubbles. These five little differences show that the NMAJH adopted and adapted Post-it notes technology and appearance to its participatory needs and forms of display.

Another important set of distinct affordances sticky notes possess is their movable and rearrangeable qualities. Unlike visitor books, which are immobile, sticky notes’ adhesive
material is actually re-adherable because they need to be repositioned. The communicative implications include a disjunction between acts of writing and acts of displaying. If, with visitor books, visitors simply write their texts in the book, at the Forum, after writing, visitors still need to post their texts where they want them to appear. In other words, with visitor books writing is displaying, while with notes, as with new media in general, writing is one activity and posting or displaying is another (consider the function that activities such as send, post, publish, and share perform). This dual-action structure is something that the museum encourages, because it offers visitors more participatory activities to engage in and requires investing more time. The Director of Public Programs told me that the longer the visitors stay in the hall (“even a few more seconds”), the better it is for the museum (interview with E. August, February 14, 2014). This calls to mind the effort that online platforms invest in trying to keep visitors engaged in their websites.

The Forum’s dual-action structure is reflected in many interactions I observed: walking into the room, a mother tells her son eagerly, “you can write a note and put it on the wall, Max … you can stick it up on the wall.” Another mother asked her daughter, after she completed writing, “where do you want to put it?” On other occasions, parents directed their children to the “correct” wall for posting their texts (“this note goes on that wall”). The dual-action structure is manifest also in cases where one visitor read the questions (looking at the wall) to another visitor, who was writing the reply (leaning on the table). More activities require more expertise, and the question now isn’t only what and how to write, but also whether to scan and where to post. Scanning, too, is an exciting activity for visitors, which the movable notes enable, and which was usually performed by male visitors (mostly fathers). These observations show that different surfaces and interactions are involved in writing, posting, and scanning, and that these activities are often pursued collaboratively within the media-space that the Forum provides. The dual-action structure might also explain why younger children tend to interact more with the Forum than with traditional visitor book: the Forum is more playful and colorful, offers more collaborative activities, and allows for lower levels of literacy.

The notes’ adhesive affordances also contribute to the distinctly visual character of the Forum hall, which rests on the vertical design of the display. Visitors’ texts are not presented horizontally, as with visitor books (and Western script in general), but vertically. In this way the Forum’s visual design accords with the museum’s mode of display, where artifacts hang on walls, as well as with screens, paintings, and other visual media. In order to achieve this visual design, the texts need to be displayed vertically (hung), which the adhesive material affords.

The visual designs of the Forum hall and visitor books differ also in terms of what is visually accessible to viewers: when visitors enter the hall they instantly face all the texts, while with visitor books only a single, two-page opening can be viewed at any given moment. Now it is the analogue medium, and not the digital medium, that requires more (inter)actions (browsing through the pages). These two factors—vertical design and visual accessibility—account for the essentially visual character of the Forum as a whole, and explain a puzzling difference I grappled with in the ethnographies: while I never saw anyone take pictures of visitor book pages (which I found visually appealing), at the Forum these activities occurred regularly.

The notes’ movable and re-arrangeable qualities entail that, as they can be posted, so they can be moved or removed (Preston, 2013, p. 147, remarks that Post-its’ weak adhesive
was considered a deficiency by Spencer Silver, the engineer who designed them, who sought a strong adhesive material, seeing no possible benefit in a weak glue!). Since texts and notes hold a one-to-one relation, disposing one means disposing the other. Visitor books are a different story, and both the book and the texts cannot easily be moved or removed. My observations reveal different ways of marking off unwanted texts from visitor books: visitors cross out other visitors’ texts (which happens rarely), and sometimes also their own words, for example when they want to rephrase what they wrote or correct a mistake (self-repair). In both cases, traces of the erasing action are observable, and the original text is often still readable. On other occasions these are the museum employees who intervene, which also occurs infrequently. There was at least one occasion that was brought to my attention in each of the museums I studied, where a visitor book page was ripped out of the book (always by staff and not by visitors; Noy, 2015a, p. 112). Different media have different editing affordances, and the point is that removing a text/note from the display at the Forum is easier and leaves no traces compared to visitor books. While the museum’s curatorial team presents a liberal attitude that opposes the removal of texts, employees and volunteers do remove notes on occasion. When I asked, they said that they do so when they find the notes to be “irrelevant” or “inappropriate.”

The last affordance I mention is the space that sticky notes make available for writing, which is considerably smaller compared to visitor book pages. This material feature has two effects: first, the average length of texts on notes is significantly shorter than in visitor books, with an average of 10 words compared to 16 and 16.3 words in the visitor books I studied (Noy, 2015a, p. 58; and Noy, 2016, p. 6, respectively). Second, inscriptions on notes are considerably less visual than in visitor books, and they contain fewer graphic signs such as smilies and drawings. In the books I studied, approximately 34% of the inscriptions contained at least one graphic sign, and every second visitor book page displayed at least one drawing (balloon, flower, combat soldiers, national and military symbols), which amounts to an overall multimodal display. At the Forum, only 14% of the notes contain graphic signs, and only 2–3% contain an actual drawing. An interesting visual feature that is missing from the notes is signs that visitors draw to demarcate their texts. Because visitor books’ pages are shared, visitors often encircle and underline their texts to distinguish them from others’ texts. This does not happen in the Forum, presumably because the texts are written on discrete notes to begin with. Visitors use visual signs (and colorful writing utensils) also to highlight their texts, so they are more attractive and competitive. Note that the Forum is equipped with its own highlighting mechanism, in the shape of spotlight projectors which highlight individual notes (visible in Figures 1 and 4). These highlighters do the work that in the visitor books the visitors themselves pursue. To sum, compared to visitor books the Forum’s distinct participatory affordances rest on its spatial-immersive structure and on the special affordances of its writing surfaces, namely the sticky notes—both of which are consequential in terms of communicative practices, message content, and institution-visitor power-relations.

**Conclusion**

This study outlines similarities and differences in affordances that newer and older participatory media possess. It responds to recent calls within the cultural view of
communication for the study of the “richly contextualized processes” of mediated participation, which can “usefully highlight the artifacts and practices used to communicate … [and offer] analysis of the social and organizational arrangements through which mediation is instituted” (Livingstone, 2009, pp. 3, 12). The main two lessons concern, first, the consequences that newer versus older affordances bear on audiences’ mediated participation in the public sphere, which take the shape of visitors’ discourse. I haven’t attended to discourse itself here, but rather outlined its conditions. The second lesson concerns the material-visual design of the public sphere itself, and how laypeople’s participation is displayed. Here at stake is not visitors’ texts, but how they are intentionally arranged and presented.

As for mediated participation, scholars of new media express criticism and skepticism with regard to promises for interactivity, reciprocity, and the facilitation of open public sphere. Papacharissi (2002) notes an illusionary “democratic utopia” (p. 260), and Carpentier (2009) points it is an “object of celebration … detached from the reception of its audiences and decontextualized from its political ideological, communicative-cultural and communicative-structural contexts” (p. 408). This study’s findings confirm these hesitations: while the new medium I explored is digital, immersive, user-friendly, enjoys many “moving parts,” and is aesthetically appealing—all new media characteristics, the question of participation and the actual production of discourse in the public sphere remains open. True, more visitors (especially younger ones) interact with the new media installation, and the Forum offers its users a wider spectrum of activities and interactions that extend beyond writing—including posting, scanning, walking about. Yet these play into the assumption that activity correlates with agency (visitors can do things, visitors “have a voice”), and that interactivity correlates with participation. As Carpentier (2009, 2011) argues, interaction and participation are distinct analytical terms that shouldn’t be conflated.

While the newer Forum promises “discussions” and “conversations”—evoking a sense of connectedness so often associated with new media—none of the texts I’ve seen posted presents replies to other texts, nor is there back-and-forth exchange between the institution and the visitors. This is true largely also of visitor books, yet without the “messianistic” aura that surrounds new media (Carpentier, 2011). Indeed, the museum as a media institution uses new media to invite and display public participation, but inevitably involves issues of media control, and the aligning of both the Forum’s content and display (aesthetics) with that of the museum. Consider that various features of the Forum, such as its “moving parts,” allow greater institutional intervention in the display of public expression, including easier and traceless removal of visitor discourse or their visual rearrangement.

We saw that visitors’ discourse in new media settings is shorter and less multimodal. These quantitative differences point at different discursive configurations of participation. Two examples: shorter discourse means less elaboration in terms of addressivity, which is how the texts constitute their authors as citizens and who these texts have as their addressees. Shorter discourse also means less elaboration in terms of entitlements, or the capacity in which visitors see themselves as participants who are allowed or entitled to publicly express their views on the matter at hand. So the implications of shorter and less multimodal discourse are not just that the texts have “less words”, but concern quintessential discoursal configurations that establish participation (see Noy, 2015a, 2016).
As for the material-visual design of the public sphere itself, in the Introduction I pointed out that if the modern museum “broadcasts” information, contemporary museums are more “mediatic,” interactive and participatory. Kjolberg (2011) observes a growing museal thread of “using visitors’ responses in a more creative way than the traditional comments book” (p. 120). The issue of the public assumption of voice is central here, and in museums this interestingly concerns the representation of voice. Museums’ participatory media are not about “giving voice” as much as they are about displaying it: voices from the past and voices of the present. Thus viewed, the Forum offers a culturally specific (North American) tangible design or embodiment of the Habermasian public sphere. So while communicative affordances are essential for understanding mediated participation, the semiotics of participatory designs too ought to be considered.

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