Alexander Wilson and Mark Tewdwr-Jones. (2022) *Digital Participatory Planning: Citizen Engagement, Democracy, and Design.* Abingdon, Routledge, 292 pages. $34.36 (paperback)

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The idea that technological advances can facilitate better public participation in democratic decision-making is a long-standing and seductive one. Nearly half a century ago, political scientists discussed the possibility of placing computer consoles in every living room to allow the public direct input into democratic decisions (Macpherson, 1977). Today, advancing digital technologies offer enticing opportunities to close the gap between the often slow, technical, and legalistic process of planning cities and the fluid and dynamic way in which we experience them. *Digital Participatory Planning* provides an insightful account of how participatory planning has developed in the UK and how existing and emerging technologies can facilitate wide-ranging discussions on the future of places.

The book is built around three case studies of "tangible prototypes" of digital participatory tools studied "in the wild" (p128). The first considers citizen discussion of place on social media via an analysis of 11,000 tweets pertaining to public transport in the North East of England. That the often "reductive, knee-jerk, and torrid" (p155) social media content fails to align with the exigencies of professional planning is perhaps unsurprising, but the case study remains instructive by demonstrating that the wicked problems involved in encouraging the 'right' kind of participation are replicated in the digital spere.

The second case study explores the development of an app, ChangeExplorer, run on the Apple Watch and linked to a counterpart on an iPhone: this enabled users to feedback on proposed changes to the built environment *in situ.* The wearable/app approach proved effective in simplifying feedback as participants moved through specific locations, but the same simplification led to participants reporting immediate issues rather than developing long-term or visionary thinking.

The third case study is more novel. Rather than simply mirroring traditional methods via a digital platform, JigsAudio uses simple, game-like media – the creation of digitally-enabled jigsaw pieces – to encourage participants to express their views through drawing and speech. Combining digital and non-digital tools in this way reduces barriers and fosters "the sharing of complex feelings and ideas towards urban place" (p196) that traditional methods often fail to inspire. The authors caution however that such approaches require more interpretive work from planners, not less – a circle that is hard to square with the Pollyannish rhetoric found elsewhere that argues that digital tools will simplify, speed up, or refine participatory processes.

A great strength of the text lies in going beyond planning scholarship to deepen its contribution. The book is located at the intersection of urban planning and Human Computer Interaction (HCI), a field of literature that concentrates on how technology exists within society, rather than on simply 'the computer' and 'the user'. Building on this, Marres' (2015) work on material participation is fruitfully employed to foreground how citizens encounter participatory technologies and how this in turn influences the nature

of their input. The concentration on a digital tool's "politics" (its design, how it is intended to be used, and who it is designed for) and the use of materiality as a means to understand the abstracted concepts that abound within planning usefully broadens our interpretation of participatory technology. This encourages readers to think about how technology and the participatory process can develop together, allowing for more nuanced, expressive engagement, rather than simply duplicating traditional methods on digital platforms.

The book places far less emphasis on *who* designs and owns new participatory technologies however. As the authors note, digital technology is "no longer the preserve of computer experts, academics, design consultants, and professional planners; it is beyond the ownership of the state" (p240). Returning to our futuristic computer console, Macpherson (1977: p95) remarked on the inevitability that any question asked of the public would have to be decided by some government body or other, "this could scarcely be left to private bodies". Yet, Wilson and Tewdwr-Jones note that in the 2020s, formal government agencies have been slow to embrace digital participation, and now need to catch up in both their understanding and application of digital tools. There are thorny issues here concerning transparency, trust, accountability, ownership, privacy – in short, the ethics of digital participation – yet we know very little about those leading the digital planning revolution, their ethical and professional codes of conduct, or their ultimate impact on planning outcomes. The authors are right therefore to call for transparency in, and broad ownership of, digital tools, but as computer scientists, engineers, software companies, and programmers become more and more interested in the relationship between digital technology and urban infrastructure, planning itself will need to develop new ways to conceptualise this brave new world and planning's purpose within it.

What *Digital Participatory Planning* does particularly well is to embrace the unfinished nature of (digital) participation: always a messy, hopefully reflective, practice that works best when it is as concerned about future opportunities for meaningful participation as it is about instrumental, short-term goals. Digital participation is no panacea, but with careful, critical reflection, there is hope for more meaningful engagement with planning's many publics via innovative digital technologies. This book then makes a timely intervention in what will be an ever-growing field of study. Its critical perspective on the possibilities and limitations of participation effectively situates digital planning in the mountains of scholarship on participation to provide an important, empirically-grounded antidote to overly optimistic accounts of digital planning.

References

Macpherson, C.B. (1977). *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Marres, N. (2015). *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*. Palgrave Macmillan.