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The dark side of online participation:

Exploring non-, passive and negative participation

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Abstract

Studies on the "second-level digital divide" explore the socio-economic antecedents and effects of (a lack of) user participation on the Internet. At the same time, some have criticized a normatively affirmative bias in online participation research as well as a one-sided focus on observable user activity. This contribution addresses the ensuing call for a more nuanced understanding of online participation in general, and online political participation in particular. We differentiate the online participation concept based on a focus group study among 96 Internet users from a broad range of social backgrounds in Germany. We derive a framework of eight types of online (non-)participation along three conceptual axes: *activity, agency* and *social valence*. Taking user experiences and terminology into account, we differentiate participation from non-participation, active from passive and positive from negative (non-)participation. The proposed typology allows for a more balanced evaluation and more focused exploration of phenomena such as destructive or involuntary online participation as well as online abstention, boycotts, self-censorship, lurking or digital exclusion.

Keywords: participation, digital divide, focus groups, participatory culture, social media

Introduction

In recent years, Internet users could consume an ever-increasing wealth of information through news sites, blogs, video platforms, social network sites, search engines, and many other online services. Of course, digital media do not facilitate only the consumption but also the creation, amendment, and sharing of content. In effect, facilitating the creation and sharing of content by lay audiences is a defining characteristic of social media, reflected in their occasional description as participatory media (Correa, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Schradie, 2011). Research is delving ever deeper into antecedents, forms, and outcomes of online participation in social domains across business, politics, culture, and education (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014). Studies of the social stratification of Internet use (digital divide), in particular, provide differentiated insights into causes and effects of participatory Internet uses (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010).

While there is a lively debate on the role of socio-economic antecedents in online participation (Blank, 2013; Correa, 2010; Hoffmann, Lutz, & Meckel, 2015; Schradie, 2011), the participation divide literature customarily applies normatively affirmative frames to active online participation. It considers participation as beneficial for both individuals and communities (Lutz et al., 2014; Jenkins, 2006). Analogously, a lack of online participation is predominantly seen as disadvantageous. This holds particularly true in the context of online political participation, which is widely described as desirable (Boulianne, 2015; Xenos, Vromen & Loader, 2014).

In line with work that provides a more contextualized understanding of Internet use (Sims, 2014), we argue for a more differentiated understanding of online participation. Our

conceptualization questions the presumption of activity or agency on the one hand, and the positive valence of participation on the other. Casemajor and colleagues (2015) have argued that the phenomenon of online non-participation requires scrutiny as non-participation may signify an active stance and well-founded user intentions. Boycotts and obfuscation through anonymization techniques, while non-participatory, could be qualified as active (Coleman, 2014). Conversely, not all forms of observably active online participation reflect user agency or intent (e.g, Fuchs, 2014; Morozov, 2011).

In terms of social valence, some forms of online non-participation may be considered beneficial, for example users renouncing a service to boycott harmful business practices. Online content creation, however, can be associated with significant individual and collective disadvantages. Users may become associated with causes they do not support. Participation might engender online confrontation, strife, incivility, defamation, bullying, persecution and stalking. Participatory Internet uses can significantly infringe on users' privacy and threaten their security through identity theft, phishing or virus attacks. In both democratic and autocratic regimes, online participation might render users vulnerable to surveillance and prosecution. Some individuals also participate for causes deemed detrimental to themselves or the wider community. In such cases, online non-participation could be preferable to participation.

In this article, we differentiate the notion of online participation and develop a framework that permits more nuanced analyses of the forms and benefits of online participation. Based on a review of current literature, we first discuss salient definitions and dominant framings of the topic, focusing on presumed activity, agency, and the social valence of online participation. We then identify biases in the prevailing discourse on political and non-

political online participation. Subsequently, we develop a framework of eight forms of online (non-)participation, based on a qualitative study among German Internet users. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing implications and suggestions for future research.

Background: Refining online participation

Rising interest in online participation

The rapid diffusion of social media since the early 2000s has sharply increased scholarly interest in online participation (Lutz et al., 2014; Rice & Fuller, 2013). Recent reviews show, however, that researchers' understanding of online participation remains vague, with empirical operationalizations differing vastly (Lutz et al., 2014). The interdisciplinary perspectives applied to the phenomenon further exacerbate the lack of a common understanding. This leads to calls "to develop a more refined vocabulary that allows us to distinguish between different models of participation and to evaluate where and how power shifts may be taking place" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 271).

One recent literature review of online participation synthesizes different theoretical approaches to the topic by distinguishing four areas of discussion: political philosophy, cultural studies, art, and education (Literat, 2016). The author finds few cross-disciplinary reflections of online participation, but points out common themes such as the positive and empowering force of digital media. Another review, focusing on empirical findings, differentiates five disciplinary areas addressing online participation: participation in business, politics, culture, health, and education. Political participation emerges as by far the most extensive subfield

(Lutz et al., 2014). The authors find that many studies lack a clear definition of online participation. However, both reviews indicate that research on political participation provides the clearest and richest description of the participation concept. Political participation is defined as an "activity that is intended or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action" (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995, p. 7). This research stream also includes the most extensive empirical discussion of antecedents, forms, and outcomes of online participation. We turn first to online political participation (hence OPP) research, followed by discussion of non-political forms of online participation.

Insights from online political participation research

Research into OPP constitutes a well-established field of inquiry. A recent systematic analysis of the English peer-reviewed literature found more than 130 studies, most of which were published in the previous decade (Lutz et al., 2014), with the overall research domain of online participation dominated by analyses of political participation (Literat, 2016). Boulianne (2009; 2015) conducted two meta-analyses on how online media affect participation. Her findings reveal a significant, positive, but small, influence of online media on participation.

Activity and agency biases

In line with Verba et al.'s (1995) definition above, OPP is mostly framed as an intentional and explicit act. This becomes apparent in the operationalization of OPP. It is commonly measured as an index of activities such as writing emails to politicians, connecting with like-minded

individuals in online communities, sharing political content on social networks or e-voting (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; Hoffman, 2012; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005; Ward et al., 2003).

Observers thus stress the performative nature of political participation, frequently associated with speaking out and influencing others (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2007). Research on divides in OPP frequently refers to the "resource model" of participation (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995) which postulates that such performative activities require the availability of resources such as time, money, and skills. Intent or attitude alone do not suffice to constitute political participation. Users must consciously engage in visible behavior to qualify for most studies' understanding of OPP.

As mentioned, Casemajor and colleagues (2015) have recently challenged the activity and/or agency assumption of political participation research: "The digital sphere is increasingly characterized by an unwillful state of passive participation in which certain freedoms and information are surrendered to third parties" (p. 851). Such involuntary forms of passivity, the authors argue, should not be confused with cases in which users make a conscious choice *not* to engage in certain forms of digital participation. In these instances, "non-participation can be understood as a politically significant action: one which opens up possibilities for power shifts, resistance to dominant political structures, and emancipation" (p. 852). The authors describe three such forms of active political *non-participation*: obfuscation (i.e. withholding information), sabotage (i.e. disrupting the functioning of digital platforms), and exodus (i.e. avoiding or withdrawing from digital platforms).

Another prominent criticism leveled at the activity and agency assumptions of OPP rests on the performative quality of the concept. The *slacktivism* hypothesis (Morozov, 2011) presents political participation on social media as merely a form of self-staging, not translated into offline participation and not affecting political change. While provocative and, in some respects, exaggerated (Christensen, 2011), the slacktivism hypothesis highlights the need to examine the user agency in OPP more closely. In a survey of undergraduate students' political participation on Facebook, Vitak and colleagues (2011) found most common forms of engagement to be "somewhat superficial" (p. 112). Social desirability considerations thus heavily influence users' choice to engage in OPP. This goes to the core of the slacktivism thesis whereby OPP is not driven by conviction and commitment, but by self-staging and ingratiation desires.

Positivity bias

The political literature tends to frame active participation as a distinctly beneficial phenomenon, particularly on an aggregate level (Putnam, 2000). Based on the Habermasian concept of the *public sphere* as a communicative space for political discourse and formation of political will (Habermas, 1989), active political participation is seen as beneficial to the quality and legitimacy of political decision-making. Deliberative models of democracy are frequently associated with egalitarian implications, as equal access or uniformly high levels of engagement are considered quality attributes of a political system (Pateman, 1970; Carpentier, 2011). Accordingly, gaps or divides in participation constitute defects requiring remedy. The

emergence of online media has fostered hopes of invigorated political discourses in the "digital public sphere" (Dahlgren, 2005).

Much of the empirical OPP literature investigates whether new media mobilize traditionally disadvantaged or excluded groups such as youth, immigrants, and low-income citizens to become more politically engaged (e.g. Boulianne, 2009; 2015; Davies, Eynon & Wilkin in this special issue). Proponents of the *mobilization thesis* hold that the Internet could have a democratizing effect by facilitating more widespread participation (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). By contrast, the *reinforcement thesis* warns that the Internet would deepen existing divides, as high-SES users benefiting from higher resource availability offline will also do so online (Norris, 2001). Others suggest that online participation would mainly *supplement* existing forms of engagement, leaving the status-quo largely unaffected (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; Krueger, 2002; Norris, 2001).

Despite predictive differences, all sides of the mobilization debate share the normative assumption that greater active participation is desirable. Literat (2016, p. 10) recognizes this positivity bias in the literature: "In fact, as several scholars note, one of the principal problems with the discourses on participation is that it is almost always seen as a positive and empowering force". Concurrently, recent findings on the scope and quality of online political discussions call into question the idea of "rational, civil, consensus-oriented deliberation" (Schäfer, 2015, p. 322) on the Internet. Despite the overall affirmative tone in OPP research, both public and academic attention increasingly turns to the deteriorating quality of public discourses.

Time magazine recently ran a cover story on "Why we are losing the Internet to a culture of hate" (Stein, 2016). Shepherd and colleagues (2015) published a discussion piece calling for more research into "online hating", including phenomena such as discrimination, hate speech, trolling, flaming, and terrorist propaganda. George (2016) points out that aside from offense-giving, offense-taking or indignation may also have a chilling effect on public discourses, while serving to politically mobilize individuals. Online incivility has attracted significant research interest in recent years, often discussed in the context of "echo chambers" facilitated by selective exposure and group think within homogeneous online communities (Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015). Finally, there is extensive research on privacy and security threats associated with online participation, including biases in user perceptions of privacy threats and privacy protection behavior (Kokolakis, 2015; Smith, Dinev, & Xu, 2011).

Insights beyond Political Participation Research

Although the largest sub-field, OPP is not the only domain of online participation research (Lutz et al., 2014; Literat, 2016). Participatory Internet uses are also examined in the context of culture and arts, medicine and health, business or education. Despite contextual differences, common themes and biases can be identified throughout these strands of research.

Jenkins (2006, p. 7) defines participatory culture as a culture "1) with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; 2) with strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others; 3) with some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along

to novices; 4) where members believe that their contributions matter; 5) where members

feel some degree of social connection with one another."

Their research focuses on young and Internet-savvy communities deeply interested in popular

culture, for example gamers and fan fiction writers. In these contexts, the creative element of

online participation, expressed in forms of remixing or bricolage such as memes, fan videos

and GIFs, is especially prominent.

A focus on cultural participation can be considered particularly valuable, as empirical

analyses have shown that OPP remains a minority phenomenon (Kushner, 2016). In fact, only

a minority of users engages in active OPP such as sharing political content, participating in

online discussions, or organizing political events (Blank, 2013; Smith, 2013). We lack

comparative empirical research on different participatory domains, but online cultural

participation may be significantly more prevalent in the overall population than OPP, despite

more research interest in the latter. It is also interesting that the literature on cultural

participation tends to welcome or even advocate more widespread participation through digital

media (for a critique of Jenkins, see Fuchs, 2014, chapter 2).

Aside from political and cultural perspectives, other sub-discourses focus on the role of

online participation in business, education, and health. The marketing and management

literature discusses participation in the context of viral marketing campaigns, co-creation, and

crowdsourcing (Lutz et al., 2014). Educational studies explore Internet-mediated participatory

forms of interaction and production, such as participatory learning (Literat, 2016). Finally,

studies in a health context focus on mutual- or self-help among patients and a reduction of

information asymmetries vis-à-vis health professionals (Van Uden–Kraan et al., 2011).

Research outside the political domain emphasizes individual-level benefits rather than collective benefits of online participation. However, it shares the positive valence of the construct. Examples include studies on participation in minority online communities (e.g., sexual or religious minorities), highlighting outcomes such as greater self-acceptance, more self-confidence, and a reduction of perceived isolation (Alon & Brunel, 2007; Helland, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). A concept frequently applied across all disciplinary strands of online participation research is user *empowerment*. In the egalitarian vein, empowerment creates a more level playing field: between patients and physicians, companies and consumers, or between artists and audiences (Lutz et al., 2014). User empowerment is generally welcomed, due to normative egalitarian notions of participation in the public sphere, or because participation is considered a prerequisite for generating social capital (Correa, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012).

Few studies focus explicitly on the disadvantages of online participation. In the business domain, critical approaches draw strongly on Marxist theory to challenge commercial aspects of online participation, particularly prominent in discussions of digital and immaterial labor (e.g., Fuchs, 2014; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2014; Terranova, 2004; see Van Doorn and Duffy & Pruchniewska in this special issue), where online participation on mainstream social media platforms is seen as exploitative or alienating rather than empowering. Some studies on participation in cultural, educational or health domains find that users struggle to transfer online social capital to the offline world, with some neglecting offline relationships in favor of online ties (Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006; Rodgers & Chen, 2005).

As illustrated by Jenkins and colleagues' (2006) definition of participatory cultures, online participation research beyond the political domain does not only share the positivity bias with OPP research, but also tends to focus on active and intentional Internet uses. Lutz et al. (2014) summarize the prevalent definitions of online participation across social domains as "the creation and sharing of content on the Internet addressed at a specific audience and driven by a social purpose". Accordingly, few studies focus on low-threshold (Dutton & Blank, 2014), passive or involuntary forms of participation. Research on lurking has shown that a large proportion of users do not contribute content themselves (Kushner, 2016). However, lurkers can still invest considerable cognitive and emotional effort into their interests pursued online. In many cases, lurkers may also eventually become active participants (Ewing, 2008).

In summary, this review of research into political and non-political online participation illustrates some common frames and biases in the literature. Online participation research predominantly focuses on observable acts of content creation or dissemination when analyzing the concept. User motivation or intent, in most cases, remains unquestioned as observable behavior is assumed to indicate agency. In addition, online participation studies predominantly apply affirmative frames and see more widespread or equal participation as beneficial – quite independently of the social domain under scrutiny. In the remainder of this paper, we address increasing calls for a more differentiated understanding of online participation by developing a typology of online participation derived from empirical data.

Methods

The empirical analysis draws on focus groups and subsequent online discussion groups among 96 German Internet users. In terms of Internet connectivity, Germany is typical for European countries: According to the latest available ITU data (2013), 84 percent of the German population use the Internet (including mobile access). Facebook is popular in Germany (around 22 million users or 28 percent of the population; Statista, 2015). However, Germans tend to report high levels of privacy concerns compared with other EU countries (Eurobarometer, 2011). OPP is relatively low (Lutz et al., 2014), which, again, is in line with other European countries.

The aim of this study was to discuss and explore users' experience and understanding of online participation. Twelve focus groups were carried out in September 2014 in two large German cities (Berlin, Frankfurt), with eight participants per group. Each focus group had a different age and social profile. The groups were recruited by the market and social science research service Sinus based on a representative typology of German Internet users that differentiates seven user types or Internet milieus (DIVSI, 2012). This milieu categorization goes back to the Sinus-Milieus®, which were developed in the 1980s. Subsequently, the Sinus-Milieus® were applied in many contexts, mainly in the German-speaking world (Gröger, Schmid & Bruckner, 2011; Otte, 2004).

Two of the seven types (Internet-distanced outsiders and law-and-order outsiders) are categorized as "digital outsiders", i.e. as elderly people who hardly use the Internet and are cautious in using online applications. These two types were analyzed with one focus group each. The remaining five types have more open attitudes towards the Internet (Lutz, 2016).

They are categorized as either "digital natives" (immersed natives, selective natives, entertainment-oriented natives) or "digital immigrants" (detached immigrants, skeptical immigrants) and were analyzed with two focus groups each. Appendix A gives an overview of the seven milieus/types and Figure 1 shows a graphical depiction (in German). Two experienced employees of a cooperating German social research institute moderated the focus groups.

The online discussion groups were conducted over the course of 10 days in October 2014 and included the focus group participants, plus a small number of additional typology representatives to ensure lively online discussions and replace dropouts. Each day, participants carried out a small task such as describing their daily Internet use or discussing a statement on Internet use. A detailed description of the focus groups and online communities as well as the results of the overall project is available in Hoffmann, Lutz and Poëll (2015).

The focus groups were recorded on video and audio and transcribed. Three members of the research team manually scanned the focus group transcripts and online community logfiles to identify distinct understandings of online participation. We relied on the focus group guideline as the main structuring element (Appendix C), selecting and labelling sections that relate to users' understanding of online participation from each transcript. From this selection, we derived categories that distinguish forms of online participation along three dimensions: valence, activity and agency. The original quotes were in German and translated to English for this article.

Results

The analysis revealed lively discussions on what constitutes online participation and how it could be distinguished from other forms of Internet use. In most cases, the surveyed groups did not reach an agreement on clear-cut delineations, but rather described sub-categories of participation. For some users, a simple connection to the Internet constitutes participation. Others describe substantive requirements for actions to qualify as participation, e.g. a social cause or a minimum quality and quantity of content created.

> *Whenever I click on the Internet icon, I'm an active participant of the Internet, I'm a user, and therefore a miniscule part of the Internet. Even if you go on to create a website or found a forum or write mails, it all begins with logging onto the Internet.* (entertainment-oriented native, Berlin)

> *If I just sign-up for a service because I want to read something, then I'm a completely passive participant. But if I sign-up and write something myself, then I'm active.* (entertainment-oriented native, Berlin)

The most commonly mentioned criterion for differentiation centered on the level of effort or *activity* displayed by users. From the users' perspective, this constitutes a continuum where more exertive activities signify higher levels of participation and lower levels of activity or inactivity constitute non-participation. Accordingly, the level of activity distinguishes

'participation' from 'non-participation' – for example in the context of civic engagement or within fan communities:

> *Sure, 'liking' content can be a form of participation, but it doesn't embody participation. Participation would be donating money for a cause, posting pictures and starting a social action, like a flashmob, or signing a petition. Just 'liking' content is like blowing your nose.* (skeptical immigrant, Berlin)

> *To participate, you have to blog, you have to help others in a forum, you have to collect donations, so be really active online. That's what I consider participation.* (skeptical immigrant, Berlin)

User *agency* was frequently discussed as an important characteristic of participation. Digital outsiders in particular often described instances of involuntary participation in economic or cultural contexts. Truly 'passive' forms of participation were described as such where users were not aware of their participation or were drawn into unwilling participation. Most first-hand experiences of passive participation were described as annoying, or even threatening. Instances where users chose to engage, instead, were described as 'active' participation.

As an active Facebook user, I'm regularly drawn into participation anew by receiving

messages (…), by receiving advertisements. I can try to turn that off, but I'll be

participated nonetheless. (skeptical immigrant, Berlin)

Among active forms of participation, users quickly pointed out the need to differentiate the *valence* of online participation. Independently of familiarity with the Internet, the participants described an ambivalent stance towards online participation. Many pointed out that participation cannot be seen as a uniformly beneficial phenomenon. Low-skilled users, however, were more vehement in their criticism of online participation, pointing out dangers and potential harms associated with participatory uses. Accordingly, beneficial forms of online participation were labeled as 'positive', harmful ones as 'negative'. While participants discussed a number of political threats, most personal accounts of negative participation referred to non-political contexts, for example fan- or self-help forums:

There are a lot of trolls – people who enjoy provoking others. As soon as they get some

reaction, they will fill the forum with spam, which will have nothing to do with the initial

topic of the chat. (entertainment-oriented native, Berlin)

Participation can lead to recruitment. Iraq, Syria, etc. – how many Germans are now

fighting for IS? Those people have been recruited somehow. (skeptical immigrant,

Frankfurt)

These initial findings indicate that online participation cannot be distinguished from non-participation only in terms of effort or activity level. It can be further differentiated along two axes: the *agency* axis and the *social valence* axis (see Table 1). The differentiation between participation and non-participation is mainly based on observable activity associated with distinct Internet uses. While participation denotes an action, non-participation denotes an inaction.

Yet, as highlighted by Casemajor and colleagues (2015), inaction is not necessarily associated with a lack of agency. The *agency* axis, therefore, distinguishes intentional ('active') from unintentional ('passive') forms of (non-)participation, where unintentional forms are frequently either unconscious or involuntary, and intentional forms are characterized by conscious choice.

Finally, the *social valence* axis differentiates forms of (non-)participation that are deemed either desirable/beneficial ('positive') or undesirable/harmful ('negative'). The latter category is naturally contentious due to its normative character. It could be argued that the valence of online (non-)participation is socially constructed and therefore contingent upon community, culture, and time. Some individuals consider posting selfies on Instagram as meaningful and beneficial acts of online participation, for others it might be a waste of time. Criteria frequently applied to distinguish positive from negative forms of (non-)participation were harm and the application of force. Lack of assent was uniformly rated as harmful. Despite its complexity, the empirical analysis highlighted the importance of the valence differentiation from users' perspectives.

INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

In the following paragraphs, we discuss the resulting eight types of online (non-) participation substantiated by illustrating quotes.

A.1. Positive Active Participation

Positive active participation is the form most frequently discussed in the literature. Here, users actively choose to engage audiences online for a purpose commonly accepted as beneficial, e.g. engagement in democratic processes, participation in online learning, and health-related self-help communities. Among focus group participants, this form of participation was widely accepted as an ideal type. However, few participants reported engaging in positive active online participation themselves, predominantly referring to non-political contexts.

> *I'm running several self-help sites, so I participate. I offer people a place to go to for information and contact to others. I provide the platform.* (entertainment-oriented native, Berlin)

I'm very active in online forums, I enjoy hearing diverse opinions. I learn from others and contribute myself, too. I also write reviews online, that is also a contribution. (immersed native, Berlin)

A.2. Negative active participation

In the case of negative active participation, users actively choose to engage for a purpose widely considered harmful or undesirable. As in the case of positive active participation, this form is characterized by users' efforts to reach and affect audiences. While few participants reported encountering this form of participation themselves, each focus group spent considerable time discussing the challenges associated with such 'abuses' of the participatory affordances of digital media. Instances of negative active participation most frequently discussed were propaganda for extremist ideologies and child pornography – yet personal accounts tended to focus on fan- or hobby-oriented online communities, but also health forums. Though rarely discussed, forms of sabotage might also count as negative active participation, including hacking attacks or harassing and censoring other users.

Anything that's positive can also be negative. We just talked about this beautiful YouTube video about women's rights, but there's also a lot of right-wing extremist propaganda. These small minorities that used to be at the margin and couldn't do much

harm now suddenly are much more important because they can use these media to spread their message. (immersed native, Berlin)

There's a lot of confrontation, or even – horrible topic – child pornography, platforms were pedophiles can share pictures. There are just as many bad sides as good sides to the Internet. (selective native, Frankfurt)

B.1. Positive passive participation

Positive passive participation refers to situations where users 'are participated', i.e. moved to engage by others without any genuine intention or motivation, but in ultimately beneficial ways. Personal experiences of positive passive participation centered on economic applications, such as job applications or user ratings, with few instances of political participation:

I only started using the Internet in 2010 (…) I wanted to benefit from the chance to apply for a job online, that's just easier per e-mail. But it wasn't really voluntary. (law-and-order outsider, Berlin)

Most participants included low-involvement forms of participation in this category, such as a 'Like' on Facebook. Following the 'slacktivism' thesis, this low-level action was seen as

ineffectual but ultimately not harmful, possibly even helpful. Some participants reported instances where they were drawn into low-involvement forms of participation by being invited, tagged or prodded by other users.

> *Once, I was invited to provide a rating. Finally, after two weeks I managed to do it, I just wrote two sentences. I was engaged because I had to do something although I really didn't feel like doing it.* (selective native, Berlin)

The positive valence of this category also derives from the potential of passive turning into active positive participation.

> *You get these news about online petitions on your smartphone. If that tickles my interest, I might choose to support this petition. And then you're being kept up-to-date about the petitions you signed.* (detached immigrant, Frankfurt)

B.2. Negative passive participation

Negative passive participation, conversely, can occur when users are drawn into forms of participation deemed detrimental, or when they are involved involuntarily. In this category, political participation tended to be more salient than economic or cultural contexts.

I can participate and I can be drawn into participation. Voluntarily or involuntarily. Participation means actively taking on responsibility. Being participated means being forced to do something, responsibility being pushed onto you. (skeptical immigrant, Berlin)

One example frequently cited by participants was being tagged on Facebook against their will, with ensuing privacy invasions. Suddenly users find themselves being drawn into situations they consider threatening or harmful, possibly necessitating more active forms of participation to counter perceived threats.

When I'm on Facebook, I'm constantly being participated, I'm always contacted with these messages – 'we're missing you...', 'maybe you're interested in...'. I'm bombarded by ads, even if I try to turn it off. (skeptical immigrant, Berlin)

C.1. Positive active non-participation

Positive active non-participation describes voluntary, intentional, and constructive forms of not engaging online. Users can choose to refrain from an activity to further a cause considered socially desirable (Casemajor et al., 2015). A prominent example in an economic context are boycotts against undue practices from platform providers. In some cases, former users publicly declare their abstinence, protesting against unethical practices or community

violations. Such cases can create productive discussions, eventually improving participatory practices. Users can also consciously refrain from providing data online to protect their privacy.

> *I'm going to use less of that [service]. I don't want my search history to be accessible. If I collect information, I don't want to leave a footprint behind – and with them, you always leave a footprint.* (detached immigrant, Frankfurt)

The positive valence of this category derives from how users carefully reflect upon their behavior, considering potential consequences – for example in political debates:

> *Visibility... sometimes with petitions or reader comments, I pause and ask myself if I really want my name to be associated with that. Would it be ok if someone asked me about that a year from now?* (immersed native, Berlin)

C.2. Negative active non-participation

With negative active non-participation, users also intentionally refrain from online engagement due to perceived pressure or threats, e.g. cyberbullying, incivility or surveillance. Here, constructive participation is curbed and potential benefits cannot be claimed due to limiting or silencing influences, resulting in a negative valence of this category. Accounts cover a variety of contexts, such as health, education and culture.

I know the site and have found it helpful myself. But to write something, you have to create an account, so that won't happen. I don't want to give away my data – but I think it's great that others participate on that site. (skeptical immigrant, Berlin)

I'd like to participate more on YouTube, publishing tutorials or just fan-videos, but (a) it's technically too cumbersome, and (b) I think I would be embarrassed because I don't want to be seen as a lonely weirdo with a need to broadcast myself, and (c) YouTube can be a very rough environment with harsh criticism from the anonymous masses. (immersed native, Frankfurt)

Negative active non-participation can harm thriving online communities and lead to polarization effects. Self-censorship may limit users' freedom of expression, leading to homogeneous, one-sided online spaces – particularly in a political context. Users may wish to contribute to a cause or take a stance against harmful initiatives, but do not dare for fear of repercussions or due to context collapse (i.e. the overlap of distinct audiences in a personal online network, Marwick & boyd, 2011). For example, an uncouth comment suitable for a private audience may be seen as inappropriate by a wider audience.

You can easily be mobbed or defamed. Even when you say something completely normal, you're instantly pushed into some corner. There's a real problem with free speech, you have to be careful what to say. (selective native, Berlin)

D.1. Positive passive non-participation

Positive passive non-participation occurs when users do not see or are not aware of any need to engage in an activity. Here, users remain inactive because no issue moves them to become engaged. It can be a sign of contentedness, but also complacency, depending on the perspective. The social valence is complex. Other users may regard the lack of participation as variably beneficial. In some cases, users remain inactive because they do not see the benefits of participation. Others may then strive to engage the non-participants to trigger passive or active participation. Positive passive non-participation most clearly occurs when users could be tempted or lured into negative forms of participation but cannot be bothered or remain unaware of this opportunity (i.e., lack of agency). An example sometimes cited in the focus group discussions was minors abstaining from participating on platforms that could otherwise expose them to harmful content.

I really don't participate online because I don't have a cause, currently. I'm very content at this point in my life, so I don't see a need for some particular kind of engagement. (entertainment-oriented native, Berlin)

Some participants also subsumed the selective consumption of content, i.e. lurking in online forums or communities, under positive passive non-participation. Here, users benefit from the content created by other users without actively participating themselves. They do not actively decide against contributing, but rather lack the motivation or incentive to participate. In these cases, users display a positive, grateful attitude towards the platform and the active participation of others (i.e., positive valence) – in some cases even leading to a guilty conscience due to their non-contribution. Others may wish for a more active participation of lurkers but still be satisfied with their presence on the platform.

> *I feel a little bad because I benefit from that site. They have nice recipes and good recommendations. I think that's great and I really enjoy cooking. But I wouldn't write something myself, I don't sign up. I just derive benefits, very egoistically.* (law-and-order outsider, Berlin)

D.2. Negative passive non-participation

Negative passive non-participation is typically the subject of digital divide studies, occurring when users are excluded from participating despite the potential usefulness of participation. As highlighted by the resource model of participation (Brady et al., 1995), there

can be a number of causes for this form of non-participation such as lack of material resources, opportunity, time or literacy. In each case, the threshold of participatory Internet uses is perceived as prohibitively high. Most frequently, this form of non-participation was described by elderly digital outsiders who would see the benefit of more extensive online engagement in economic and cultural contexts but do not feel able or knowledgeable enough to reap these benefits. Socio-economic obstacles to online participation were not mentioned by any participants.

I'd like to participate in a travel forum, write my own reports about my trips, share pictures and recommendation. But I simply cannot find the time. (detached immigrant, Frankfurt)

I'm very insecure, whenever I turn that on I think 'hopefully you don't make a mistake, hopefully you don't press the wrong button…'. Mostly I keep my hands off that. (Internet-distanced outsider, Frankfurt)

Discussion and conclusion

This paper challenges the widely shared affirmative framing of online participation by differentiating the concept based on an empirically derived typology. It is one of the first to use qualitative data from a broad range of Internet users to delineate forms of online participation from a user perspective. The analysis therefore responds to calls for a more differentiated

understanding of online participation (Jenkins, 2014) that takes into account a number of biases in the prevailing literature. Recent analyses have pointed out a one-sided focus on observable activity in online participation research (Casemajor et al., 2015) as well as the predominantly positive depiction of online participation (Literat, 2016).

Based on an analysis of user perceptions and terminology, we differentiate online participation along three axes: (1) activity, (2) agency, and (3) social valence. While future studies may refine the terminology, the resulting typology constitutes a step towards a more differentiated understanding of online participation. A number of implications for research and practice can be derived:

As Casemajor and colleagues (2015) indicated, the prevailing focus of participation analyses on observable behavior may contribute to a blind spot in terms of inaction, the measurement and interpretation of non-participation. While users do differentiate participation along an activity axis, with higher levels of activity or effort corresponding with higher levels of participation, non-participation cannot be equated to non-engagement. The reasons or motivations for non-participation are diverse, ranging from lack of awareness to disinterest, abstention and exclusion. Lumping all these forms under the umbrella of non-participation may create misunderstandings as to the agency and valence of behavioral patterns. Given the vibrant field of participation research, it would be worthwhile to pay more attention to the exploration of non-participation.

In terms of agency, not all observable forms of (non-)participation involve user intent. Users report engaging in participatory behavior without conscious reflection or even involuntarily. Similarly, non-participation can result from fear or unwilling exclusion. In the

case of active non-participation, it can also signify high levels of engagement, motivation and intent. Both scholars and service providers should therefore be careful when interpreting observable (non-)participation and strive to gain a deeper understanding of the agency underlying observable behavior. This also goes to the heart of the "slacktivism" debate (Morozov, 2011), with questions about the effectiveness, sustainability and significance of participatory Internet uses.

Finally, taking the social valence of online participation into consideration facilitates a particularly important differentiation for future research. As documented, the current discourse paints a normatively affirmative picture of the online participation research. Frequently, it applies egalitarian frames with calls for more equal and widespread active participation. Clearly, users do not share this rosy view. In fact, they are quick to point out undesirable forms of (non-)participation. Increasingly, research and praxis take note of harmful or destructive forms of online participation, such as blasting, incivility, hate speech, bullying and indignation (George, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2015). In general, users appear more quick to point out the 'dark sides' of online participation, including confrontation, defamation, stalking, or observation. While there is ample research on online privacy, future participation studies could better integrate insights from this research – as privacy threats are clearly related to participation in the users' perspectives.

Unavoidably, our study bears a number of limitations. First, our data was collected in the context of a developed Western economy, with its specifics in terms of Internet use and online participation. Germany, while in many regards a typical "Internet country" has a few peculiarities, such as relatively high levels of online privacy concerns (Eurobarometer, 2015).

This may have a bearing on the attribution of specific uses to categories, such as active/passive or positive/negative. Undoubtedly, the examples and use contexts cited by focus group participants are contingent upon current topics discussed in the German public. Future research is encouraged to compare user perceptions and attributions across cultural contexts. Second, our typology conceptualizes online participation and the different forms categorically rather than as a continuum. Future research may want to apply a continuous understanding of the three axes, for example by using mixed methods designs and sentiment analysis to gauge the social valence dimension. Finally, we did not address the temporal or process dimension in depth. In reality, many users reveal different online participation behavior depending on the online context and their current life situation. Future research with longitudinal designs should investigate how users move from certain forms of online participation to others (for example from positive active participation to negative passive participation in the vein of losing control of one's social media profile and becoming the target of an online campaign) or how they combine participation forms into repertoires.

Combining the axes of differentiation pointed out in this analysis may prove fruitful, particularly for participation divide research. A more nuanced understanding of non-participation, its agency and valence, may lead to new interpretations of available data on digital divides. In some cases, non-participation may well be considered unproblematic or even beneficial, while various forms of active or passive participation may have to be qualified as undesirable. Policy makers should think about facilitating both constructive forms of participation *and* non-participation, while discouraging negative forms of participation and overcoming negative non-participation. In this context, established theoretical foundations,

such as the resource model of participation, may have to be reconsidered as constructive forms of non-participation may require only few resources, while resource availability may fuel harmful Internet uses. It should be noted that since our typology was theoretically and empirically founded on explorations of both political and non-political online participation, it may serve to inform future research in a wide variety of social domains, including culture, education, health or business.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Description of the Internet Milieus

The Internet milieus were first established in a large-scale German-wide study on Internet use in Germany (DIVSI, 2012) and subsequently reaffirmed in a follow-up survey one year later (DIVSI, 2013). The focus group participants in this article were recruited along the Internet milieus by the cooperating market and social science research institute. The Internet milieus are largely in line with the older concept of Sinus-Milieus®, developed in the 1980ies (Otte, 2004; Gröger, Schmid & Bruckner, 2011). The Internet milieu typology was originally developed in two steps: with 60 qualitative interviews in a first step and a large face-to-face (computer-assisted) survey with 2047 respondents in a second step. The survey was representative of the German population aged 14 and older. The Internet milieus were constructed with a cluster analysis from the quantitative data, based on three main factors: Sinus-Milieu® membership, Internet use, and data protection/privacy attitudes. For more information on the methodological construction of the original typology see DIVSI (2012, pp. 19-34).

Digital natives.

- **Immersed natives / Digital Souveräne** (16 percent of Internet users in Germany):

  - Age: below 40 (youngest milieu of all)

- Education: highest level of education of all groups

- Income: high level of income

- Occupation: often in media and creative industries, often self-employed

- Elevated postmodern milieu, pronounced performance ethos and elite consciousness

- High technology enthusiasm, high Internet use intensity, broad spectrum of online activities, high level of computer and Internet skills

- **Selective natives / Effizienzorientierte Performer** (16 percent of Internet users in Germany):

  - Age: below 50 (On average: 40 years old)

  - Education: high level of education

  - Income: highest level of income of all groups

  - Occupation: many self-employed, large part of medium/skilled employed and upper public administration professionals

  - Performance-oriented milieu, success-driven, optimistic performance stance and life stance, let's do it approach, self-confidence as modern top performers

  - High technology enthusiasm, high Internet use intensity, broad spectrum of online activities, high level of computer and Internet skills

- **Entertainment-oriented natives / Unbekümmerte Hedonisten** (12 percent of Internet users in Germany):

  - Age: younger and middle-aged group (On average: 42 years old)

  - Education: predominantly low level of education

  - Income: intermediate level of income

  - Education: less skilled to medium-skilled service employees, workers and crafts(wo)men

  - Hedonistic milieu, orientation towards enjoyment, experience and excitement, underdog mentality

  - Quite high technology enthusiasm, high Internet use intensity, rather broad spectrum of online activities, average/intermediate level of computer and Internet skills

  Digital immigrants.

- **Detached immigrants / Verantwortungsbedachte Etablierte** (10 percent of Internet users in Germany):

 - Age: broad age spectrum, centering on 30 to 50 years old

- Education: high level of education

- Income: intermediate to high level of income

- Occupation: mostly high-level service employed and upper public administration

- Conservative and established milieu, liberal intellectual attitudes, elite consciousness, optimistic performance stance and life stance

- Intermediate technology enthusiasm, rather high Internet use intensity, rather broad spectrum of uses, rather high level of computer and Internet skills

- **Skeptical immigrants / Postmaterielle Skeptiker** (9 percent of Internet users in Germany):

  - Age: very broad spectrum from 20 to 60 (On average: 45 years old)

  - Education: primarily low level of education

  - Income: intermediate level of income

  - Occupation: qualified employees, workers and skilled workers, self-employed

  - Social-ecological milieu, ecologically ambitious middle of society, sustainable lifestyle, high willingness to refrain from luxury

  - Low technology enthusiasm, rather high Internet use intensity, rather broad spectrum of online activities, rather high level of computer and Internet skills

Digital Outsiders.

- **Law-and-order outsiders / Ordnungsfordernde Internetlaien** (10 percent of Internet users in Germany):

  - Age: predominantly between 40 and 70 (On average: 51 years old)

  - Education: lower to intermediate level of education

  - Income: low to intermediate level of income

  - Occupation: predominantly part-time employed, housewifes/homemakers, retirees, unemployed, and low/intermediate skilled employees and workers

  - Conservative-established milieu, civic middle class, harmony orientation, preference for safety and protection

  - Low technology enthusiasm, intermediate Internet use intensity, intermediate spectrum of online activities, low level of computer and Internet skills

- **Internet-distanced outsiders / Internetferne Verunsicherte** (27 percent of Internet users in Germany):

  - Age: highest age of all groups (On average: 62 years old)

  - Education: low level of education

- Income: low level of income

- Occupation: high proportion of retirees, basic professions, workers and skilled workers

- Traditional and precarious milieu, need for straightforwardness, clarity and security, resignation and pessimism towards the future

- Low technology enthusiasm, low Internet use intensity, small spectrum of online activities, low level of computer and Internet skills
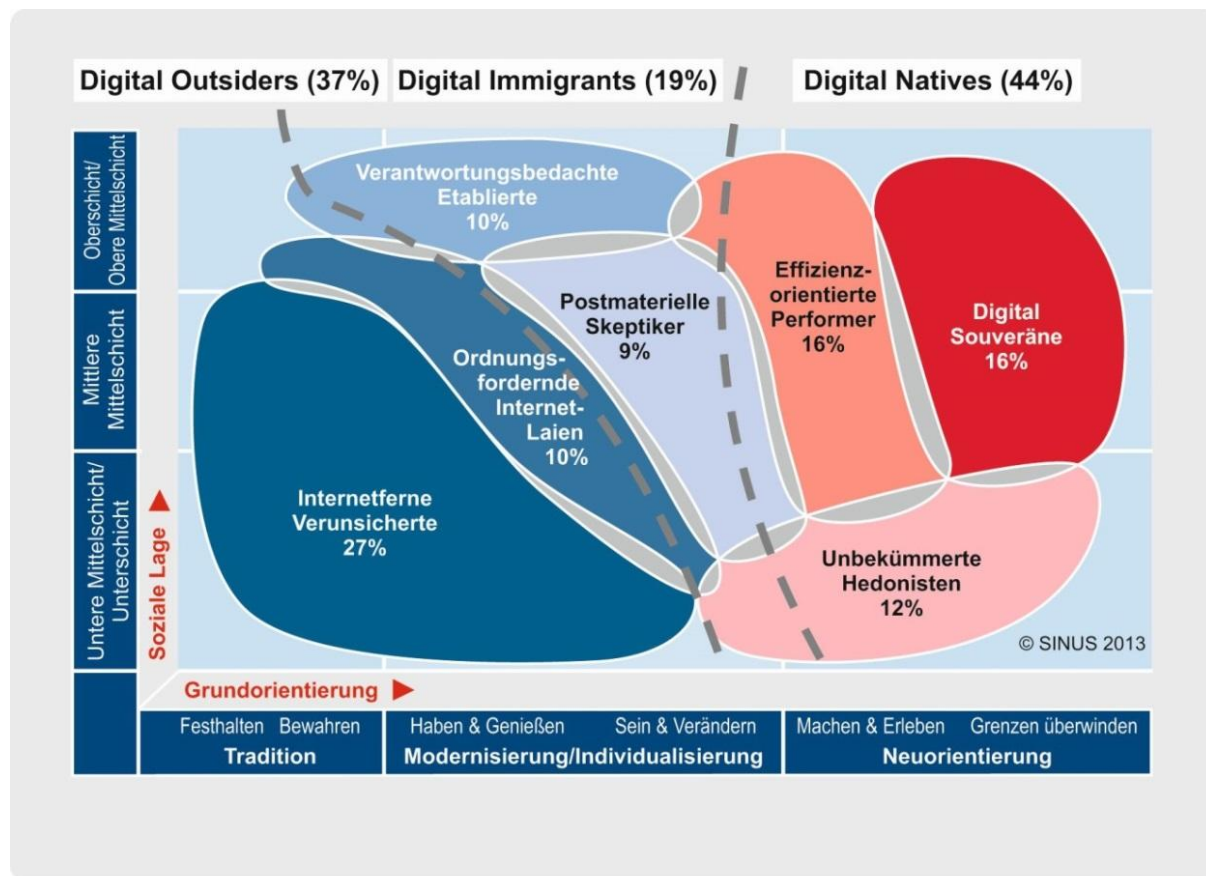
The vertical axis describes individuals' SES, ranging from working class to middle class, to upper class. The

horizontal axis describes attitudes and orientations, ranging from traditional and conserving on the left, to

modernization/individualization in the middle, to re-orientation and realignment on the right.

Figure 1: Overview of the seven Internet Milieus (DIVSI, 2013)

Appendix B: Focus Group Guideline

This is a summarized version of the guideline. A more detailed version is available upon request.

- **Introduction: General attitude towards the Internet**
  - o   What does the Internet mean to you?
  - o   What are the major advantages and disadvantages of the Internet?

- **Internet use**
  - o   Since when do you use the Internet?
  - o   How often do you use the Internet?
  - o   How much time per day do you spend using the Internet?
  - o   Which devices do you use to access the Internet?
  - o   What do you do when you are online? Which platforms do you use?
  - o   For which purposes do you use the Internet? (Also: Do you sometimes go online without a concrete purpose in mind?)
  - o   Do you find using the Internet easy? Where are your limits?
  - o   How do people in your social environment use the Internet?
  - o   Do you have friends who use the Internet very actively? How does that show?
  - ⇨   *Collection on Flipchart: forms of Internet use and activities*

- **Social Internet use/Self-Disclosure**

- o How important is the exchange with others for your Internet use?

- o Are you active in online communities? (If not: why not?)

- o How often do you post texts, videos and photos online? What kind of texts, videos and photos?

- o Who do you post texts, videos and photos to (which audience)?

- o Do you know the people you communicate with online (from the offline world)?

- o Are there things you only do on the Internet, and nowhere else?

- o What things would you not do on the Internet? / Are there things you would only do offline?

- ⇨ *Collection on Flipchart: social forms and activities of Internet use*

- **Online participation**

  - o What does „participation", in general, mean to you?

  - o What does online participation mean to you?

    Assocation spaces / Semantic fields of online participation

- **Areas/Domains of online participation**

  - ⇨ *Carefully support the areas emerging from the addition to be able to assess not mentioned but existing aspects (education, business, sports, cultural participation…)*

  - o Which other areas/domains/fields of participation can you think of?

  o Where do you participate online?

  o Who is the public/recipient of your online participation activities?

  o Where are your friends and colleagues participating?

  ⇨ *Sorting forms of participation on a continuum according to the depth/quality of participation*

  o Which are the most important areas of participation on the Internet? (ca. 3)

- **Chances and risks of online participation**

  o What are advantages, positive aspects and chances of online participation?

  o What's the concrete benefit of online participation: for you personally? For others? For society?

  ⇨ *Laddering to assess and understand the „higher end states" (motivation and expectations)*

  o What are the disadvantages, negative aspects and risks of online participation?