THE DARK SIDE OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION: EXPLORING NON- AND NEGATIVE PARTICIPATION

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Introduction

Social media facilitate the publication and sharing of content by lay audiences and have been described as participatory media (Correa, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Schradie, 2011). Increasingly, research is differentiating forms of "online participation" in social domains as diverse as business, politics, culture or education (Lutz et al., 2014). At the same time, research into the social stratification of Internet use ("digital divide") has triggered a lively debate on causes for non-participatory Internet uses (Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). Authors disagree on the importance of socio-economic characteristics as a cause of non-participatory Internet uses (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012; Correa, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2015; Schradie, 2011).

The participation divide literature tends to apply normatively affirmative frames to online participation: online participation, thereby, is held to contribute to the success and prosperity both of individuals and communities (Lutz et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2006). Despite some critical voices (e.g, Fuchs, 2014, chapter 2) challenging such affirmative views, the current discourse on online participation tends to neglect the negative aspects or "dark side" of online participation.

Recently, Casemajor and colleagues (2015) have argued that both the forms and valence of online non-participation require closer scrutiny. Non-participation, thereby, may signify either an active or a passive stance and user intention. Active forms of non-participation include acts of boycotts and obfuscation, such as the use of anonymization techniques (cf., Coleman, 2014). Such non-participation based on user agency can be

considered beneficial, while, by contrast, passive non-participation occurs when individuals do not participate for a lack of skills, interest, or time.

Similarly, online participation can be associated with significant individual- and social-level disadvantages. In the case of passive participation, users "are participated" against their knowledge or will, for example by means of surveillance. Accordingly, online participation can occur despite a lack of agency. Finally, individuals may choose to participate online for causes generally deemed detrimental to either themselves or the larger community (e.g., engagement in anorexia support forums, radical political groups, etc.). In such cases, online non-participation might be considered preferable to participation.

To explore the differentiation between beneficial and detrimental forms of online (non-)participation, we conducted a qualitative study based on focus groups with a diverse selection of German Internet users.

Methods

The study combines data from focus groups and online communities, conducted in fall of 2014 with 96 participants. Twelve focus groups were carried out in September 2014 in Frankfurt and Berlin with eight participants per group. The focus groups were based on a milieu typology of German Internet users derived from the "Sinus-Milieus®" (DIVSI, 2012; and Otte, 2004 for an overview of the Sinus approach). The milieu typology represents the German Internet populace. Basing the group composition on this typology thereby should ensure a broad representation of a diverse set of Internet users. For more specific information on the methods, please consult Lutz (2016).

Findings

The analysis revealed a differentiated terminology across user groups. On the one hand, the distinction of online participation from non-participation differed among users, with some considering a mere Internet connection as a form of participation. Many, instead, focused on the publication and sharing of content and some stressed the purpose of and social interaction enabled by different Internet uses. Given these distinctions, users were quick to differentiate passive from active participation:

> „If I just sign up for a service, because I want to read something, then I am a completely passive participant. But if I sign up and write something myself, then I'm active."

> "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."

Furthermore, users distinguish voluntary from involuntary forms of online participation.

> *"As an active Facebook user, I am regularly drawn into participation anew by receiving messages (…), by receiving advertisements. I can try to turn that off, but I will be participated nonetheless."*

Another distinction emerging from the focus group discussions differentiated positive/constructive from negative/destructive forms of online participation.

> *"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."*

> *„Participation can lead to recruitment. Iraq, Syria, etc. – how many Germans are now fighting for IS? Those people have been recruited somehow."*

When focusing on the causes of non-participation, we find a variety of important influences, including resource availability (above all, time constraints), motivation (such as lack of interest), awareness (or lack thereof), insecurity or concerns (regarding both online privacy and security but also fear of confrontation or cyber mobbing).

> *"All these processes for registering. (…) I thought it was a great initiative, but the online registration and the account details, laziness and lack of time…"*

> *"I am not engaged online because I haven't found the right cause for me yet."*

> *"If I participate online, I reveal a lot about myself, whether I want to or not. (…) But there are so many connections online and all our data are whirring about, it's very disconcerting."*

We also find indications of more active forms of non-participation, for example when online campaigns are considered ineffective or even counterproductive. In these instances, users can be motivated not to participate despite principal awareness, interest and opportunity to do so.

> *"Just because I change my profile picture have I done anything yet? That really doesn't help anyone."*

To summarize, this paper explores challenges the affirmative framing of online participation by differentiating the notion of participation versus non-participation and by exploring questionable or outright detrimental forms of online participation. The following table presents a fine-grained typology of online (non-)participation.

Type Social Valence	Passive Non-Participation	Active Non-Participation	Passive Participation	Active Participation
Positive	Lack of necessity or advantage	Abstention as agency	Low-involvement constructive engagement	Informed and intentional constructive engagement
Negative	Exclusion	Silencing, self-censoring	Involuntary engagement	Informed and intentional destructive engagement

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