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Digital Activists

The networking society as a democratic reality

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From the very beginning, the spread of the internet brought high hopes for progress in society and politics. Low-threshold participation and networking opportunities would allow under-represented citizens to get involved, optimists argued (Coleman, 2005; van Deth, 2010). However, research so far showed that the ongoing trend of declining participation (Putnam, 1995), which had been observed offline, continued online (Vissers & Stolle, 2014), and the forms of interaction and collaboration on the internet were not able to fulfil optimistic visions. The internet does not gather people to participate per se. Moreover, anti-democratic developments, such as "dark participation" in social networks, were becoming more and more apparent (Quandt, 2018; Swart et al., 2018).

On the other hand, recent developments suggest a turning point of political online mobilization. Movements such as 'Fridays for Future' use the internet to grow and, therefore, manage to bring people onto the streets, who were previously considered apolitical (Sommer et al., 2019). Right-wing parties such as the German AfD can successfully mobilize non-voters by relying heavily on social media communication, especially on Facebook (Böhmer & Weissenbach, 2019). Apparently, means of digital mobilization form a context factor for renewed participation of only specific groups of citizens – digital activists (Theocharis et al., 2019).

Recently, scholars on digital activism have focused on the concept of digital activism (Joyce, 2010), the technological environment as a context for digital activism (Kaun & Uldam, 2018) or organizational dynamics around digital activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Others have studied ideologies of digital activism (Gerbaudo, 2017) or the digital activism divide (Schradie, 2018). Concerning political parties, questions about the changing nature of membership were addressed (Gibson et al., 2017). However, only little is known about the characteristics of digital activists on a micro-level (exception: Schradie, 2018).

With our article, we add insights on digitally active citizens in the case of Germany. We take the internet and democracy as two interconnected social realities (Floridi, 2015). The democratic society is digital, so are most of its citizens. As a result, we see a vastly growing number of services offered by civic tech firms, non-governmental organizations, and governments. Young people, in particular, are making increasing use of these opportunities, even though, from the perspective of society in general, political participation remains mostly offline (Schaetz et al., 2020). We treat the digital society as a context factor that supports new participatory movements. However, this digitality does not mean a total online democracy.

By finding out more about how politically active citizens get politically involved and how much of their political actions happen online, the article contributes to the question of why established political organizations are not able to attract supporters online, while some new movements and organizations do.

Based on the Civic-Voluntarism-Model, we add an exploration of the concerns, motivations and expectations of online political activists (Schlozman et al., 2010). Even though issues of the digital and participatory divide are addressed, the focus will be on the motivational dimension of the model. We aim to shed light on their perception of citizenship in general and of their role in society.

For this purpose, we draw on survey data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) 2018. Taking population representative data allow us to better understand the interaction of offline and online modes of participation and to carve out broad patterns.

We aim to describe how digital activists differ from 'traditional' activists with reference to the following aspects:

i. their political mindsets, such as political self-efficacy, satisfaction with democracy and trust in political/democratic institutions,
ii. their sets of participation modes (online only/online additionally to offline/partial replacement),
iii. their socioeconomic characteristics.

We apply a broad definition of digital activism. Survey respondents were classified as digital activists if they reported having participated digitally in at least one way in the past. In contrast, we refer to traditional activists as those who have participated politically but have done so exclusively offline. Three key findings emerge from our analyses. Firstly, digital activism seems to expand the offline participation repertoire instead of replacing it. Secondly, personal motivation (in the sense of the Civic-Voluntarism-Model) appears to be more important than attitudes toward the political system. And third, the digital activists seem to be profiteers of the digital divide. The results show that online activism, as assessed here, is very demanding and requires both resources and particular motivation. However, with reference to the survey data, no statements can be made about the role of internet-based mobilization for participation. Moreover, the operationalization applied does not take into account that online participation is a multidimensional phenomenon (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013).

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